

# Wild Wolf

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**Author:** Vimesenthusiast

**Authorlink:** <https://www.fanfiction.net/u/4785338/>

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**Summary:** Fed up with life in Nerima, Ranma runs away, only to be followed by Happosai, who has a magic scroll he want to try out. It works but Ranma suddenly finds himself in Westeros replacing the champion chosen by the old gods in a time of great peril for humanity. How will the world change with the Wild Wolf raised in the den of wolves? A lot. Thanks to Naj. P. Jackson for the picture.

## \*Chapter 1\*: Chapter 1

I don't own ASolaF or Ranma 1/2. If I did the first would have come out much more quickly and the second would have much less Akane.

This is the intro/chapter 1 of my Ranma/A Song of Ice and Fire crossover. It is in both that crossover section and the A Game of Thrones section for now. The section that gets the most views will be the one I continue to use going forward, if I do. The pairing is as it says in the summary, and I will give more information about that in my ending author notes as well as explaining more about the 'if I do' part, but for now...

This version has been given the *Jessolt* touch, and is so much better it isn't even funny. Please reread it, with the amount of changes he made it really reads so much better.

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### Wild Wolf:

#### Prologue: New Life, New Family, New World

If there was ever another straw that broke someone else's back that had the weight of that damned wedding behind it for anyone else, Ranma never wanted to hear about it. Not only had everyone attacked and turned the entire thing into a battle royal, but Akane had once again proven that she didn't really care for Ranma so much as winning the competition for him.

At first Ranma had thought that Akane was marrying him to help Ranma get the cask of Water of Drowned Man from Jusenkyou, which would've been okay. Not the greatest thing, but okay. Ranma had hoped that by this point that she might have had actual feelings for him, but that didn't seem to be the case.

No, she cared about the winning as she had told Ranma after the wedding when she blamed him for everything that had happened. She hadn't even listened to his apology (When had she ever?) before attacking him, causing even more damage to the Tendo house when she smashed him through the wall across from her room.

But that would've been par for the course, and he would possibly have been able to deal with that with only a bit of anger, if not for his parents and the other Tendos. Nabiki of course blamed him for everything, despite the fact that Ranma **knew** she was the one who had sent out the invitations to all of his other so-called fiancées and rivals, hoping to milk some money from them. What money she made however was probably going to be taken away to go to the repairs of the house and dojo, which was probably the real reason Nabiki was angry at him. Of course, Genma and Soun both agreed about how it had all been his fault, which was again situation normal.

No, it had been his mother and Kasumi that were the final blows. Kasumi was for the first time ever angry and sad about the damage their house had taken. The damage to the dojo and to her mother's shrine got through her aura of imperturbability and peacefulness. She didn't blame Ranma, hell that would have been easier for Ranma to bear, he was used to **that**. No, it had been Kasumi's sighing look of utter defeat and sadness that had gotten to him. Kasumi should never have worn that expression, she was the only one in the entire house who he felt was a good person, and she put up with too much as it was.

His mother was in a way, even worse. Ranma used to have dreams about what his mother would be like; a kind, gentle woman who would talk to him, tend his wounds, hold him when he had nightmares, or talk to him gently and ruffle his hair. He thought his mother would be someone who would be proud of him, who would encourage Ranma and help him along in life. Sort of like a father was supposed to be, only good with mushy stuff and better smelling.

Nodoka was anything but. Ever since she had learned of the curse, she had been almost as bad as Genma. Always judgmental, always pushing him to be more manly (her definition seemed to change daily), and always dragging the family blade around as if to remind him what could happen to him if Ranma didn't live up to her standards. When she agreed with Genma about the fact that Ranma would have to do something about his rivals and other fiancées (including Ukyo who was completely Genma's fault) and did not even hint at helping Ranma in any way, that was it for him.

So Ranma ran. It wasn't the most honorable thing to, but at this point it was about the only thing he could do without utterly snapping and killing someone. Better to run away than have that on his conscience. He couldn't stay in that house anymore, not with people he was slowly coming to truly hate, save for Kasumi, and he couldn't look Kasumi in the eye anymore, not with that look she had after seeing her mother's shrine destroyed.

He left, leaving behind a note saying he was leaving and why, as well as leaving all the money he had saved up, which wasn't much, about ¥20,000, on Kasumi's desk in her room. He sure as hell was not going to leave it anywhere else with Nabiki in the house.

Since this wasn't the first time Ranma had run off, he knew he would be pursued and not only by his family and the Tendos. Their coming after would probably take a while once it became clear he wasn't coming back. After all they had been the ones to tell him to handle all of his different engagements before continuing with another attempt to marry Akane.

Ukyo seemed a little guilty about her part in the fiasco once it was all over, so maybe it would take a while for her to realize he was gone, and the Kunos were a nonentity as far as he was concerned, neither of them had enough intelligence to trail him or skill to bother him. Now if Ukyo was smart enough to send Kotatsu after him that could be pretty bad. Surprisingly, it was the quiet, unassuming male kunoichi who was the closest to Ranma's level among Ranma's rivals/acquaintances that lived in the district.

The Amazons however were the most dangerous and they were the ones who would be after him the quickest, and Ranma knew it. Cologne was an old crone, but despite her age there was nothing wrong with her mind. She was easily one of the most dangerous individuals in the district and one of the most capable as well. She, Shampoo, and Mousse would be after him probably within a day, and Ranma knew that his skills were not going to be enough to throw them off. *All I can do is keep going, maybe head to Europe someplace. I doubt that the Europeans would be very welcoming of the Amazons and their belief their own laws are the only ones that matter. Or maybe America, yeah that's probably the better bet since I can already speak English.* (Ranma could indeed speak English, with a horrible southern accent but still...) *Heh, they all have guns don't they, maybe Shampoo would get her ass shot and beaten by a random American with a gun. That'd be hilarious, probably wouldn't happen, but still, heh.*

Ranma traveled for several weeks, backtracking, looping around, and doing everything he could to throw off anyone on his trail. He did not stop, save to take very quick naps a time or two to keep his energy up until he was in Hokkaido, and there he finally allowed himself a full nights rest before trying to find a ship heading to America.

OOOOOO

Ranma had neglected to think of Happosai. After all Happosai wouldn't normally care if Ranma ran off. The pigtailed marital artist had, after all, destroyed the old man's silky darlings several times before and had kicked his butt a time or two dozen as well. Happosai would get angry, come back, fight, and then leave.

Happosai, however, did know how to keep a grudge. This time on top destroying his silky darlings, Ranma had run, something that in the school of Anything Goes was the act of a true coward. The moment the old man had sensed his chosen punching bag er apprentice running, he had gone after him swiftly, using all his skills to track the boy.

"Hehhehe, Ranma," Happosai cackled to himself as he watched the young man rent a room in a cheap hotel for the evening. "You were good, but not good enough. But I'll just stay here for a bit, no need to wake you up for this after all."

He cackled again, looking down at a scroll that he had forgotten he even had. He had found it in some old temple in the UK when he was there very briefly a century or so ago, and while he didn't understand everything about it, the monk or whoever it had been that he stole it from, had sobbed about how it was a scroll of spell of absolute binding or something, which seemed perfect to his purposes.

Happosai wasn't certain about that, since the writing on the scroll wasn't in a language he knew and he could read and speak fluent English, even old English. *Still, it could've been a Celtic place, that was a language as well as a religion wasn't it? They were the ones who had to do with trees and stuff right?* That was what most of the church or whatever it had been was, just trees, with one huge central tree that had some kind of face carved on it.

Ranma fell asleep quickly, exhausted by his run over the last few days, and Happosai nodded. Stealthily, he slipped inside Ranma's room, lit a bit of incense then wafted the smoke over to Ranma for a few minutes, which would keep the boy asleep.

For a moment, watching Ranma continue to sleep, his body sprawled out on top of the bed, not even covered with a blanket and wearing just boxers and a tee-shirt, Happosai was tempted to just splash the boy to get a good grope in. But he had learned that Ranma's sleep-fu was a fantastic defense because, while asleep, the boy didn't hold back. Happosai had attacked him once before while he was sleeping, and a single punch from Ranma left Happosai feeling like he had been hit by a thousand Amiguriken speed punches. *Besides, why try to get in a grope now, when I can put a spell on him that will have him follow my every whim! Hah, at least four hours a day in female form, all of it*

wearing some of my silky darlings! Heeheehe!

So instead, Happosai simply stood at the foot of the bed, and began to declaim aloud, trying to get his mouth to work on the odd words on the scroll, which was written with English letters at least. Yet after a second, he didn't have any further trouble. It was almost as if the words were helping him say them correctly. Happosai didn't question this, simply moving on, and finished the spell quickly.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a deep heavy thrum began to build in the air. A bright speck of light appeared right above Ranma, a globe of multicolored varied light made of colors Happosai had never seen in nature before. He jumped back quickly, moving towards the window again just in case, but he kept watching.

The pulse began to put out even more light, the light flashing and waving over Ranma's still form. Then suddenly, it descended to right above his chest, enveloping him in its aura before disappearing into his body. The light now came from Ranma's body and it continued to pulse for a few more seconds, putting out even more light. Then suddenly, Ranma was gone. One moment his body was there enveloped by the odd light, the next, he was simply gone without a trace.

Happosai's eyes widened in shock. *That wasn't supposed to happen!* He quickly opened his notebook, a notebook that none of his students would ever see, filled with notes in his own made-up language. Swiftly he began to look through the notes on that scroll. "Here it is, the Spell of Absolute Binding. What happened?" he muttered. "That wasn't supposed to..."

"What 'wasn't supposed to', Happy?" asked an old and very angry voice behind him.

OOOOOOO

Ranma had been correct in that the Amazons would be after him, but he had been incorrect about how quickly. Within four hours of his leaving Nerima, they were on the trail, unable to keep up with him but not exactly falling behind either.

Cologne had long felt that Ranma was the best martial artist/warrior of his generation, possibly by a very wide margin and that made him an almost perfect husband for Shampoo. When he defeated Saffron however, that rocketed the young Saotome's importance to a whole new level. The blood of the God-Slayer would make the tribe strong again, strong enough to crush their enemies, and dominate the entire region, possibly enough to stand against the growing strength and technology of the lowlanders.

When Ranma had run she had been ecstatic. A late-night trip like this, coupled with the length of the trip, his attempts to throw them off his trail, and the fact that he kept on going for so long? That meant he was leaving behind his family, everything that had happened in Nerima, and all the people there, which meant that only the Amazons would be in the game from now on.

Oh, she knew it would be tough for love to blossom between Ranma and Shampoo at this late juncture, but the offer of training and the idea of traveling with them without pressure, going for a soft sell rather than forcing them together right away? That would probably have worked very well on the lonely, rather bitter young man. Ranma was very good at hiding it, but ever since Nodoka had found out about his curse, Ranma's mask had slipped occasionally when he thought he was alone and Cologne could see the feelings going through the young man.

So it was with quite a lot of righteous anger that Cologne stared down at Happosai. "What the hell did you do, Happy?"

For once Happosai didn't run, hide, or anything like that, he didn't even try to fight. He simply flipped open his notebook and pointed inside, staring at the scroll that he had dropped at the foot of the bed. "Scroll of Absolute Binding!" he exclaimed shaking his notebook angrily. "That's what it was supposed to be! I double checked it!"

"And what was the scroll supposed to do?" asked Cologne, scornfully opening the window and heading inside quickly. Shampoo crowded in behind her while Mousse stayed outside looking around and making certain they weren't being observed. This wasn't Nerima after all, maybe the local police force was brave/naive enough to try and stop them.

The master of the hidden weapons technique shook his head however, knowing somehow that Ranma was gone for good. Magic was finicky at best, old magic even worse, and Ranma always seemed to have this Murphy's Law aura going on at the best of times. Mousse lowered his head, muttering a brief Buddhist prayer for his frenemy.

"It was supposed to bind him to my orders so that he couldn't disobey me, what the hell do you think 'absolute

binding' means, after all?" Haposai whispered angrily, reentering the room with great reluctance.

"Stay there girl!" said Cologne sharply and Shampoo backed away back out of the window while Cologne and Haposai made their way towards the scroll. "Well obviously it didn't work that way, Happy." She muttered, then hissed, still several feet away from the scroll.

She backed away quickly, motioning Haposai to do the same as she stared at it. "Mousse, quickly get me a blunt pole-arm, something long." she ordered then turned back to stare at the scroll. "You've never developed mage sight have you, Happy?"

Haposai shrugged. "Never found someone to teach me, and I didn't pick it up anywhere either. I can tell the difference between magic and ki, obviously, but actually seeing magic itself? No, I'm not that much of a magic user."

"Well I have." She muttered, cursing all dabblers under her breath. There were very few among the Amazon elders that could use magic without the aid of items, scrolls or anything else, but all of them could use mage sight and anyone who wanted to dabble in magic had to have it. "And what my mage sight is telling me is that I have never seen anything this powerful before. Whatever you called up, Happy, is beyond anything that should ever have been stored in a simple scroll."

"I didn't call anything up!" Haposai insisted, thrusting his precious notebook into her face though keeping a hold of it so she couldn't steal it away. "See, Scroll of Absolute Binding, that's what the man said!"

Cologne looked at the chicken scratching Haposai called writing, something she had learned to decipher in their youth. She read quickly through the description and then she frowned angrily. "Did you even ask anyone what it was, or did you just simply assume it was, because I know for one thing that these words, the original words you've copied out, it isn't Celtic! Celts didn't use English lettering, you ass!"

"Well what else could they be? That was the only religion that deals with trees wasn't it?"

Cologne groaned and palmed her face angrily. "No, that would be druids you stupid old man!" She was so angry that she couldn't even think up a good curse. "Now, tell me everything you can remember about wherever you found this scroll."

Haposai did so and Cologne frowned faintly. The description of the woods did sound like a druid temple of some kind, but she didn't know enough about that religion to be certain. She was also wondering why an ancient scroll of a dead religion would have writing on it that used English lettering.

They waited for over an hour until she felt that the magic had faded enough to be safe, and then used the pole-arm Mousse handed Cologne to turn the scroll over to see the other side. It was utterly blank when they turned it over. For a moment, Cologne simply stood staring at the blank parchment, then jumped back again as it crumbled into dust, blowing away on a wind that came through the window behind her.

"Aiyahh, what this mean, grandmother?" asked Shampoo in that cutesy version of Japanese she used for some reason. She claimed it made her sound cute. Cologne felt it made her sound like a bimbo, but she didn't care enough to make her granddaughter change it.

The two ancient martial artists exchanged a glance then backed away. "It means, granddaughter, that whatever happened was possibly the will of a god somewhere and I'm afraid your would-be husband is gone. I'll try some things when we get back to the village to see if I can retrieve him but I'm not holding out much hope."

"Aiyahh!" Shampoo exclaimed one hand rising to her mouth. "But Ranma always survive, yes?"

"Survive maybe," said Haposai grimly shaking his head at his monumental fuck up, "return to this plan of existence, I don't think so."

The two martial artists exchanged another glance, then Cologne shook her head. "I don't think so either."

Without another word Haposai left quickly, followed by the others who split off and went their own way.

Not one of them even thought about telling the people back in Nerima what happened. It would be many months before the Tendos and Saotomes would find out how thoroughly Ranma had disappeared. And when they did, it would be from an off chance comment from Haposai telling Genma that he was once again Haposai's heir, and he was going to train him into the ground. When the fat man, as per normal, tried to defend himself by saying Haposai should hunt down Ranma and train him, the fact that Ranma was no longer on this plane of existence came out, and

reactions were varied.

Nabiki was happy that the (literal) home-wrecker wasn't going to be around but also sad because that meant her business took a hit since she couldn't sell photos of him in his different bodies anymore. Akane was angry because this meant she had lost a contest that she saw as a way of bolstering her personal ego and she didn't have her resident punching bag anymore.

Soun and Genma were angry, wondering what they were going to do now that they wouldn't have Ranma around to carry on the schools and live off when they grew old. Nodoka was angry at Rama's running away, calling it a dishonorable act, and disowning him.

Only Kasumi was sad to hear the news and she somehow knew that she had been partly to blame for him running away, at last, and deeply regretted it. She sent a prayer his way, praying for his safety and happiness wherever he wound up. Then, appalled by the way her family responded to this tragedy, Kasumi began to slowly but surely take control of her own life. Even then, she would never return to the dojo, allowing those who remained there to wallow in their willful stupidity and blindness.

Soon, she moved out on her own, cutting all ties with her family. Kasumi went to college, paying her way through by working as a chef. She would graduate at the top of her class and go on to become one of Japan's best doctors, regardless of gender. And every Saturday without fail she would say a prayer for the soul of the young man who she dearly wished she had the courage to get to know, whose passing had given her the courage to at last grasp her dreams.

OOOOOO

In a place that was so far beyond what mortals could discern as to not really feel the passage of time or be bound by the concept of place, several beings waited. They waited for a champion that could change the fate of the world they were tied to.

The one the humans that worshiped it called The Seven, had found its champions and they had turned into part of the problem, indeed their whole religion had become corrupt, becoming less than useless. R'hllor had found its champion for the crucial time frame and he too had turned into part of the problem. The drowned God did not take part in the discussion, uncaring of the future and unwilling to take champions, so long as its worshipers fed it the souls and blood it demanded. None of the other gods were strong enough to matter in the nation where the crucial battle occurred. Finally, the champion of the old gods had fallen, unable to withstand betrayal or the calls of his human heart.

This all occurred in the future of course, but to gods the future, past, and present were all like beads on a string, easily discernible in their separate natures. Humans could change the present yet those effects could be predicted after a certain time. Now the future was a blank wall, a wall of cold and ice as the forces of the Others, lords of death and cold conquered all.

This could not be allowed. The Others did not believe in the balance, did not believe in the surety of nature, or the cycle of life. All they cared about was expanding the reach of the cold, the cold of the grave and un-life, to wipe out the realm of men. Westeros would fall first but soon the whole world would be engulfed in ice and snow.

Of course this would take millennia to the humans, but to gods that was a very short time indeed. All their calculations told them this, yet with the pieces on the board they could not change it. They could not change human nature. That was the one factor that made the humans fight one another rather than prepare for the coming of winter and the forces of the Others. But if they could not change the future with the pieces on the board, then they needed to introduce a new one.

So it was agreed between them, discussed in a way that no human could follow, that they would send out bits and pieces of themselves to search for new pieces to add to the game. There were strict rules involved, of course. They all already had their chosen champions for the most important time period, after all, and no god could have more than one true champion at a time. If they found a piece, they would have to replace their champion. And of course, only one such replacement could be allowed. More than one would change too much, possibly being even worse than doing nothing. This was a new thing they were attempting and all of them were leery about what could happen.

So they all sent out bits and pieces of themselves, melding into religions of other worlds, and adding on a bit of their own power to them. Whoever found a champion first would be the one to be able to take the soul of the new champion into their own world and thereby, hopefully, change the fate of the world. For millennia uncounted this effort failed and the cleft point, the time where the world would teeter on the balance of Cold or life, came closer on the world they were all bound to with the slow yet certain pace of a glacier.

Then came the call, one of their scrolls had been used at last!

In Ranma, the old gods, for it was their scroll and their religion that Happosai had stolen from, found a champion. This drew the attention of the other gods and as the old gods examined Ranma's soul, the others watched as well. There was strength there, massive power and indomitable will yet a mind that was almost unformed outside the realm of combat. There was a kindness there and a strange amount of gentleness for one who had been through so much. Plus, there was an ability to change fate, even in his old universe, that drew their attention like a lodestone. Eventually, it was agreed that this one would be the new piece added to the game. As such, he would retain much of his skills and knowledge, the better to change the fate of the world, although much of what he could do would be lost from one world to another as what Ranma called ki acted differently in the world of Essos than it did on Earth.

Because it was the old god's scroll Happosai had found, it was the old god's champion who would be replaced.

As a baby was born to a mother of the Riverlands in the land of the North where the old gods still held sway, a mother whose new husband was not the one she had been prepared to marry. The old gods gently reached out and they took the soul of the baby, returning it to where souls dwelled, awaiting their chance to live. It would return at a later time, hopefully when the world was a better place and its trusting, loving nature would be able to bloom without the threat of betrayal or the unyielding laws of duty.

That done the old gods gently stripped Ranma's body of his soul, the body swiftly dissolving into the ethereal nothingness, and gently placed Ranma's soul into the body of the baby. Their task accomplished, the old gods receded, returning to the ethereal plane, watching and waiting, yet already they could see the future was changing...

OOOOOO

Catelyn Stark stared out the window at the snowfall. It snowed often here in Winterfell, despite it still being summer, or at least in comparison to her former home in Riverrun. She stared down at her baby, lost in joy once again at the fact that she had brought a life into this world. Even if her husband wasn't the man she had long thought she would be marrying, even if it was not a love marriage, right now holding her baby, she was content.

The view could've been better though and she felt her lips quirk a little at the thought, but then those lips turned down into a frown. She was **not** at home in Winterfell, and every time she saw one of the locals she was reminded of it. They saw her as a newcomer, not quite an interloper but certainly new, unusual, and not quite fitting in. And of course, her husband wasn't here to help her settle in.

She had known that he wouldn't be even before their marriage. They barely had a few days together before Eddard Stark had to ride off to join his friend, Robert Baratheon, in his attempt to overthrow the Targaryen dynasty and its allies. The Targaryens, descendants of the dragon riders of Valyria, had ruled for years. However, with no dragons to their name any longer, the awe men felt for the Targaryens had faded and the world had moved on.

*Yet for all the madness of the King, for all the people he has put to death by fire, it is the love of a woman that is at the core of this rebellion.* Catelyn often wondered how many other people knew that, knew that it was because of Rhaegar Targaryen's kidnapping of Lyanna Stark that the war truly began.

Or at least her kidnapping was the catalyst. Then Bran, the man Catelyn was set to marry and heir of Winterfell, had gone to the Kings Landing to demand her return and been thrown into the dungeons awaiting torture and death. Then his father Rickard had gone south to plea with the king for his son's life only for both to die horribly. Rickard was burned alive in his armor, while Bran was placed in a device that choked him if he moved. Forced to watch his father die horribly Bran choked himself to death trying to break free and save him. Those unjust deaths, along with the deaths of the other highborn men who had traveled with the two Starks, was the spark to the tinder.

That was a little over ten months ago and since then the rebellion had begun, led by Robert Baratheon. It had been bloody and brutal from the outset. Through it all, Eddard had been beside his friend, helping, leading, and often times in the thick of the fight. She had heard the war was all but over now, yet still Eddard had not returned home.

Catelyn wondered what sort of man he would be when he did, changed by war and strife. She wondered if she would ever come to love him as she had started to love Bran, and dismissed it from her mind. In the long scheme of things, this was a political marriage. All that really mattered was that it bound their families together and that she would get him children to continue his line. Love might blossom between them but in the end wasn't really important in comparison to her duty. That was part of her family's motto after all: 'Family, Duty, Honor'.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the baby in her arms opening his eyes and looking around, beginning to wail. Catelyn took a moment to look into his eyes, eyes of a slightly deeper, darker blue than was normal for her family's

eyes yet closer to that than her husband's dark brown eyes, despite the black hair that was a Stark trait. The baby started to move his arms, flailing around and she shushed him gently. "There, there baby, momma's here."

Catelyn had decided not to name the boy until her Lord husband came home, so simply had to call him 'baby'. "Is baby hungry, hold on a moment..." With that she began to unbutton her blouse.

OOOOOO

Ranma woke up, and immediately knew that something was wrong. His thoughts were jumbled in a way that he had never run into before. He couldn't, he couldn't think, couldn't understand, hunger was dominating his thoughts in a way that had never occurred before, even in times vaguely remembered now, his mind couldn't quite grasp the memories, when he went hungry due to his old man's gluttony. He forced a thought through that something was odd physically as well, his hands and feet were not moving as they should.

He opened his eyes and found even that hard. He stared up at a face that he had never seen before. The face was beautiful, with dark red hair, blue eyes, and striking features. The woman was smiling down at him in a way that made his insides go gooey in a way that he had never experienced, save for those few times when he was playing the part of Ranko-chan and Nodoka smiled approvingly at him. Those smiles had gone away the moment she found out about the curse and the way Genma and he had been tricking her.

The woman opened her mouth and spoke. Ranma tried to think, tried to understand the words. *Baby, wha?*

But thinking was **so** hard, he couldn't quite form the thoughts, he was hungry, so hungry, and his thoughts were everywhere at once, unable to form. He felt the woman move him around for a second, then watched, the corner of his mind appalled and embarrassed beyond belief when she opened her blouse to reveal a large (at least to his perspective) breast. That little part of his mind, the part that had been able to think despite the fact that a baby's mind was simply not developed enough to take the mind of a 19-year-old man began to think. *Wait, wait, I'm hungry, but wait, I'm a baby, wha.. but...*

The woman brought him closer and the body's instincts took over. His mouth began searching, latching on to a nipple even as that bit of Ranma he had barely begun to construct died of embarrassment. It was so bad, he nearly lost concentration, almost letting his thoughts be washed away again by his baby body's instincts and lack of development.

The hunger began to recede, however, and his thoughts became slightly easier to grab onto. The phrase '*What the hell happened?*' ran through his mind but he had no answers and no way to even ask them aloud. Almost as soon as his hunger faded, a tremendous exhaustion came to him. It was all he could do to stare up at the woman whose eyes were bright blue for a few more moments before succumbing once more to sleep.

OOOOOO

Eddard Stark, new Lord of Winterfell, shook the reins of his horse, slowing it down slightly to let him stare at the town and castle that was his home. It had been his home for his entire life of course, but this was the first view of it that he had had since becoming its lord.

He had never anticipated he would become Lord of Winterfell. He was the second son, a full three years younger than Bran. Now because of Aerys, the mad king, and Bran's own impetuous nature both he and their father were dead, leaving him the Lord of Winterfell with his younger sister Lyanna having passed as well. His younger brother Benjen had been ruling here in his stead up till now but Eddard well knew he wanted to take the black and join the Night-Watch. In fact, he would probably leave soon after Eddard entered the castle, so great was his desire. It would be hard to see the last member of his family leave home, but at least he would be relatively close as well as alive. As a Stark, Eddard knew the importance of the Wall and maintaining a strong presence there.

It had had been as Lord Stark that he had married Catelyn, his older brother's fiancée. Eddard wondered what the woman thought of him now, having left her here for over a year as he campaigned in the south against the Targaryen forces alongside his friend Robert.

He also wondered what she would think of the little bundle that a young maid following behind them carried, and hoped that she would not press him too hard on it. Regardless, Eddard had a duty, and if they did not come to love one another or if she took it badly Eddard was prepared to deal with the consequences. He might not have wanted any of this thrust on him, but he was a Stark, and he would do what was right.

After passing through the town of smallfolk around Winterfell, Eddard passed underneath the portcullis of the main



castle into the clear area beyond it and saw the castles servants, his wife, and brother waiting for him.

*The lady Catelyn is indeed most beautiful* he thought, and he hoped once again that the two of them would come to love one another. This thought was reinforced as he saw the little bundle she held.

Wordlessly, Eddard swung off his horse and walked forward, his face, which had been carved from granite for so long, cracking at last. He reached them and pressed a gentle kiss on Catelyn's forehead, not commenting on the slight flinch at his cold lips or possibly something else this inspired in her.

"My lord, welcome home. May I present our son?" Catelyn said her formal words and tone belying her happiness at the bundle in her arms, and her lord's return.

Eddard peeled back the bundle of blankets to look at the baby and smiled, a small but infinitely warm smile that stilled Catelyn's heart for a moment. Seeing that smile, her worries about how the youngest Stark was all about ice and duty receded greatly. She thought to herself that maybe, just maybe love could be possible between them.

The baby's eyes opened, showing eyes the color of the bright blue sky, and the baby began to move around his arms waving around. The eyes looked like Tully eyes, but the rest looked pure Stark and the baby already had a head of black hair. The sight caused Eddard's smile to widen slightly. "He's so full of life and energy, a perfect mix of our families my lady. Does he have a name?"

"I thought to wait until you were home to name him, my lord." Catelyn smiled down at the bundle in her arms and the baby wordlessly giggled at the sight, causing her smile to become a grin.

Benjen chuckled, reaching forward to grasp his older brother's forearm. "He's already crawling all over the place, a right terror he'll be when he grows up." His smile faded as he caught sight of a single small wagon carrying a closed casket at the back of the procession of soldiers with Eddard. "Is that Lyanna?"

Eddard nodded, broken out of his happiness for a moment. "Yes, I brought her home as she would have wanted. She'll go down in the crypts and join the rest of the family." He looked over at Benjen. "I know you want to leave for the Wall as soon as possible to join the Night-Watch, but you'll stay for the service at least? And I would like the chance to exchange news with you."

Benjen nodded, his eyes still on the casket, his face now lined with suppressed grief. "I'll stay for another few days, Ned, then I'll head north to the Wall. Now if you'll excuse me..." With that he walked off towards the casket, intending to pay his respects to his dead sister.

Eddard, or Ned to his friends sighed sadly, then very visibly turned back to the much happier subject of picking his firstborn son's name. "Now, where were we?" He thought for a moment. He was tempted to name him Robb, a strong, good family name, but at the last moment was reminded of a name from the language of the First Men he was descended from. In their language, names often had special meanings, and looking at the vitality and life in the young baby he knew the name to use. "Ranma."

Catelyn looked up at him quizzically and he elaborated. "It is a name from the First Men, it means Wild Storm. With his eyes and energy I think it fits."

His wife looked down at their baby and nodded. "It does indeed my lord. Especially," she rolled her eyes as the newly named Ranma began to move in her grip. "Since as your brother said, he's already taken to crawling around. A little bundle of energy this one, he seems to never be still."

Eddard chuckled lightly, then sobered. "I have something to show you milady." At a nod from him the maid holding the baby he'd brought back with him, a girl he had hired to care for the baby on his northern trek, came forward.

O O O O O O O

As Catelyn began to freeze at the sight of her new husband's bastard child, Ranma's eyes locked onto the other baby. It had been a few days, and he had started to think slightly clearer, not a lot, most of his previous life was still a dream to him. But he knew his name and could understand some of what was said. He wondered if it was fate or something that he was given the same name in this new life. That didn't matter now, and he stared at the other little baby, whose eyes opened to show brown eyes in a rather serious face.

Above him he could hear the man's voice, the man who was apparently his father in this world, say in a calm but caring way, "This is your brother Ranma, his name is Jon. I hope you two get along."

Ranma felt a rush of feeling through him, this time coming entirely from his old life, just like every time Catelyn smiled at him. 'Brother', that word, much like the word 'mother', meant a lot to him signifying things he had never had before all tied into another word that he had never truly had either. Ranma looked up giggling happily in the manner of all babies as he stared at his parents waving his hands wildly. *Brother, mother, father, family. I have a real family!*

OOOOOO

The years passed, and as they passed Ranma began to be able to think more clearly with each passing month. Motor control came back to Ranma first of course, which would have surprised no one who had known him in his previous life. By the time he was eight months old, he was walking easily under his own power. By the time he was two, he was running. By the time he was four, he had the speed and dexterity (body not finger dexterity) of a ten-year-old, as well as the strength and durability, although no one was aware of those last two.

Ranma also started to train himself in secret in his room at night (jumping up to the handle of his door was irritating but doable) and during the mornings when he could get away from his watchers. He was so good at getting away from his minders that they had nicknamed him the 'Wild Wolf' for his ability to run away and get into trouble.

As he grew, he determined a few things about his new life. First, he was definitely not in the world he had been born into in his previous life or whatever you wanted to call it. He had seen a map in his father's room one time. They had been playing together in one of his father's few free moments, and Ranma had been looking around avidly at this room he had never been in before. The map had been up on a wall and not a bit of it could he recognize. The continent of Westeros had a look to it a little like the United Kingdom all mashed together into one with more bits added on, but that was all. Ranma determined from that that he was not in his old reality, that he had been sent here somehow and he wondered why.

For the most part, however, Ranma was content to simply be a little boy again, having fun running around and of course having a loving family. His mother, the Lady Catelyn was an utter joy to him, for he had no memories of Nodoka from this time of his previous life, having been taken away on the training trip at two. A part of him loved her all the more because he knew what it was like to not have a mother or one who didn't care for you. He wasn't certain why she was so nasty to Jon sometimes, so aloof and uncaring when Jon was around, or why he lived in a separate part of the castle, but he hoped to find out the reason one day when he was older.

His father too, was fantastic. Ned was a stern man yet warm despite that, and he always made time for his sons, playing with them and simply spending time with them in a way that wasn't martial arts related. Genma had never been one to bestow hugs, kisses, or pick him up and simply carry him around laughing in the safety (and isolation) of his bedroom or office. His earliest memory of Genma was of being taught the martial arts, almost literally before he could walk.

Jon too, was great. It was fun having another kid around. Even if they couldn't do much yet, their playtime was fun, even to someone who had a 19-year-old mind inside him. Especially to a 19-year-old who couldn't remember ever having played around like a normal child.

Then when he was four, his mother suddenly began to balloon. The 19-year-old in him knew that this was meant he had a little sibling was on the way and he looked on proudly as his parents announced it to the family and to the retainers. Months passed, which Ranma spent getting stronger and training himself even harder, pushing his little body to the limit in a way that even his self in his previous life would've been surprised by.

After all, the younger Ranma back then had never really realized why he was doing this, only that his father was telling him to. This Ranma was getting stronger to get stronger for a reason. Ranma felt he had to be here for a reason, to do something. Some kind of quest, some kind of enemy, he didn't know yet what, but he would be ready for it.

Soon Sansa arrived, and he looked down at the little pink baby that was his sister and he looked up at his mother with wide eyes. "Was I that small?" he asked in a loud voice, a question fueled by both his lives, having never been around babies when he was back in his old body.

Catelyn laughed. "All babies are that small, my dear." She said leaning down to kiss him gently, being careful not to dislodge Sansa in her blanket.

"Indeed," said his father pulling Catelyn into a hug from around the waist from one side of the bed. "You and Jon were both that small. I could pick either one of you up in one hand."

Ranma pouted and they chuckled, then Jon and Ranma, who Ranma had insisted come in with him looked down at

the baby and up at his parents.

*It doesn't matter, he realized suddenly. The reasons I'm here do not matter a damn. I have a new life, a new family: a brother, a sister, a new mother and father. I will, by all that is holy, do all I can to protect them and make them proud of me as a brother, as an heir, and as a son.*

### Chapter 1 Normalcy and Ranma are a Contradiction in Terms

"Ranma! Get back here!" shouted a voice from down in the courtyard and Ned looked up from where he was working with his chief seneschal. The two men chuckled and moved over to the window to stare out into the courtyard below.

Sure enough there was Ranma, once more running away from his lessons, showing far more dexterity and energy than a five-year-old boy should have. His hair, which was rather long for a boy at present, whipped behind him as he dodged the grabbing motion of Maester Luwin. "I don't want to!" he exclaimed, "It's a lovely day, why do I have to spend it inside!?"

With that he ducked under the man's reaching hand and ran far faster than a five-year-old should be able to move, dodging around some of the guards who were there practicing in the courtyard.

The seneschal chuckled. He was an older man, who had served Eddard's father before him and his grandfather before that. His rheumy eyes were staring at a memory as much as the world around him. "He reminds me so much of your older brother, my Lord, a wild little thing Bran was, always running around getting into trouble."

"Yes," said Ned, though his own voice was more thoughtful as he watched Ranma dodge a wild swing from a swordsman who hadn't heard Ranma coming, ducking underneath the blow with a dexterity, speed, and body control well beyond his years. "In many ways he is, in many ways, not."

He excused himself, and he went downstairs to corral his wayward son. Almost as soon as he stepped out into the courtyard, Ranma ran up to him smiling happily. "Hi dad!" He didn't even look behind him as he dodged another last gasping grab from the maester. "Have you come out to have fun, too?"

Eddard smiled faintly but went to his knees and said seriously as he pulled his son to him, "What have I told you about running away from your lessons? You need to learn how to read and write and you need to learn our history. The subjects you learn now will stand you in good stead later on. You are my heir Ranma, you need to know these things to be a lord worthy of our house."

Ranma looked down, kicking the ground. "I know, it's just a such a nice day out I wanted to get out and have fun."

"I know," Ned said, smiling his small smile that he only showed to his family. "Perhaps you could take your lessons outside? Do you promise to try and concentrate if Luwin does that?"

Ranma nodded eagerly. "I promise."

Behind him he heard a giggle, and he turned to see his wife leading their daughter out by the hand. Sansa was now two years old and thought that her big brother was very funny. Maybe that was just because he would make faces at her in an attempt to get her to laugh, yet even when he wasn't trying to be funny she would giggle at him.

"You spoil him so." Catelyn said a little disapprovingly. "He can't always have his lessons outside, after all, and he does need to learn how to pay attention to Maester Luwin and sit still."

Ned shrugged unrepentantly. "He is a five-year-old boy who has more energy than any grown man. It's a wonder that he can sit still at all."

Catelyn was about to respond rather sharply, saying that he needed to learn now or else he would never learn later on, but the maester spoke up quickly. "If, if I may?" he said gasping a little still. He was a middle-aged man, but he was never very athletic, and keeping up with Ranma was enough to drive even a trained soldier into the ground. "I think, I think I have a suggestion. If I can start giving him things to do with his body while he listens to me it may help. You're right, Lord Stark, it's obvious he has too much energy to sit still for very long. That's not an unheard of occurrence after all."

"Hi mom!" said Ranma looking around his father and dancing to one side before rushing forward to envelop her legs in a hug.

Catelyn looked down at him smiling, her former irritation disappearing. Her son was a sweet boy, always happy and

handing out hugs to his family like this. And it never failed to calm her down or make her irritation fade.

Her face stilled the moment Jon came out, moving quickly to join Ranma at his side. The two were constant companions, though Ranma had much more energy and dexterity than Jon. Still, Jon was trying to keep up with him and it was fun to watch despite her dislike for the young bastard, the constant sign of her husband's infidelity.

"Still, I'm afraid your mother is correct" said Eddard, "You need to learn how to pay attention now, so I'm afraid no lessons outside for you. Maester Luwin, if you can put his body to work at the same time that will probably help." He looked at his son. "Keep up with your lessons in the mornings and you will have the afternoons free."

Ranma thought about it with a thoughtful frown on his face as if he was trying to copy Eddard and both his parents chuckled. "Fine," he said, "I'll go back in, so long as I can do something while I'm listening to the lessons."

"Then we have an accord," said Ned gravely then spoiled it by smiling that small, warm smile of his before reaching forward to rub Ranma's hair affectionately, nodding at Jon next to him.

OOOOOOO

Ranma grinned to himself as he snuck back to his room with his burden. *They aren't that heavy, but I can start training with them anyway, and replace the bits later on.*

"What are you doing?" said a soft voice, a whisper on the wind as he snuck down the hallway towards his room. Ranma turned swiftly, staring at the doorway where Jon stood, having opened the door of his own room to peer out sleepily.

"Are you doing something you shouldn't?" said Jon, a serious little boy who Ranma had taken to making certain lightened up. It was having quite a bit of success, but when he was startled or tired Jon reverted to his serious nature. Ranma still wasn't certain why his mother didn't like Jon, why he was his father's son but not hers, or why he had quarters away from the rest of the family. But that didn't really matter. To Ranma, he was simply his brother, something he would've cheerfully killed for in his old life.

Ranma raised a finger to his lips for quiet, then motioned Jon to follow. They moved up several stairs from where Jon had a room, surrounded by a few of the servant's families, and up to the private quarters of the lord's family. They moved through the darkened castle quietly, even past a few guards who patrolled the keep at night. Soon enough they arrived at their destination. Ranma silently opened the door to his room, motioning Jon inside.

Once inside his room, Ranma opened the bag he had been carrying, which held several leather armguards that he had taken from a guardsmen's supply room. They were ones the guardsmen had several on hand at all times, so they weren't going to be missed. "We can cut these down to fit us and use them to carry these."

The other things he carried were four iron bars the length of his forearm. Ranma gestured at them. "Weight training." he said simply. "You get stronger if you lift weights a lot, I think a few exercises at night wearing these and maybe wearing them underneath our clothing at times would be good." Ranma had intended to wear them on his arms and legs, but was willing to share his leg weights with Jon.

"Training." said Jon thoughtfully, then his eyes lit up. "You mean like sword training!?" And he made gestures with his arms as if he was holding a sword. "Chop, chop, chop!"

The 19-year-old mind that was in Ranma six-year-old head shook his head, but physically Ranma simply chuckled. "Yep, this will help you when we start learning how to use swords."

"Can I do it too?" said Jon pointing at himself.

Ranma nodded and the two conspirators began to talk about what they would be doing with them. Jon couldn't really follow everything Ranma said, but Ranma didn't try to explain everything either, simply stating that working with weights would make them stronger later on and moving with them would make them faster when they took them off, which was enough for Jon.

About three months later, Catelyn was once again pregnant. A month after that, Ned was called away to war. The Greyjoys, Lords of the Iron islands, had rebelled against the king, taking to raiding the coastline up and down all Westeros.

OOOOOOO

With Eddard gone, Ranma stepped up his training times even more, not noticing that he was now being watched by several people of the castle, maids, soldiers, and workers. They saw him training to build up his strength by carrying around rocks and building up speed by racing the dogs or catching the chickens in their coop. They all whispered that it was because Ranma felt he was the man of the Castle and had to protect everyone. To the maids, it was sweet. To the soldiers and the other men, it was amusing, but they only saw the tip of the iceberg. None of them realized how much other training Ranma was putting himself through.

With Catelyn busy with her duties as lady of the castle, Jon, Ranma, and Sansa spent more time together although the girl was not really old enough yet to run around with the boys. She didn't seem as interested in outdoor excursions, either. Seeing as Ranma couldn't remember a time of his life where he spent any time at all around little girls, he didn't know if that was just the difference between boys and girls or what. It was also at this point that Ranma found the godswood.

Maester Luwin and Catelyn both worshiped the Seven, but the predominant religion in the North, by a wide margin, was the worship of the old ones. This wasn't an organized religion like worship of the Seven was, with a set hierarchy and priests. It was a very personal religion, passed down from father to son. Rather than worshipping in a sept with seven statues, it was based on worship of nature spirits represented by the godswood, ancient woods that were built around ancient trees that had been here long before the First Men. One tree in particular was larger and older by far. It was a different kind of wood called weirwood and in its solid trunk was carved the face of an old man.

Ranma moved around the woods, looking around in awe at the amount of energy he felt. It was old and it was, like the energy of a tree itself only everywhere, in the air, slow, ponderous but alive and strong flowing all around him like a solid fog of power. The peace of this place was something that he had never felt before and he sighed as he let it fill him.

As he moved in deeper, he felt a sense of welcome fill him and Ranma smiled. Not the wide, friendly, and oftentimes mischievous smile of his current age, but a smile of peace and serenity that would have looked at home on his old body, if he had ever felt those feelings in his old life.

Soon Ranma found himself standing in front of the weirwood tree, or heart tree as it was called, its wood smooth and bone white. Its leaves, which grew from every branch of the massive tree, were five-pointed leaves and blood-red, which, according to what he had heard, was also the case of the sap. The face of the old man, carved there by the children of the forest long before Winterfell was even built, looked down at him. Near its base was a small, dark pool of water around seven feet across.

Ranma stared up at the heart tree, then knelt down, getting into the lotus position, looking back up at it silently. All around him he felt that wave of welcome intensify for a moment and he smiled, then spoke. "You were the ones who brought me here, weren't you?" The feeling of welcome intensified again at his words and he nodded. "I have to thank you then. I, I never knew what a real family was like until I came here. My old man, Genma, he wasn't a real father to me, just a trainer. And the less said about Nodoka, the better. Even with how serious dad is, he's better than Genma ever was. I can tell he loves me and my siblings. He's a fantastic role model and my mom is great. But I have to ask, why? I don't think there was anyone who worshiped you in my world. I certainly didn't so it couldn't be because of what I did in my old life. So why am I here?"

The feeling of welcome faded as if it had never been and then images came to him: Images of war, of strife, of blood, betrayal, treachery, and death. The images were nothing permanent, flashes of emotions of a bleak future, nothing concrete until right at the end, when two eyes of pitiless ice looked back at him, accompanied by a cold so intense Ranma gasped.

Then it was gone and Ranma shook his head, gasping again, and trying to regain control of himself. After a moment he stood up and nodded, his five year old face firm. "I see. My family's motto is 'Winter is Coming', I didn't realize how true those words could be. But it isn't just the winter we need to fear, but other men, huh? I was brought here to change that fate?" A warm feeling filled him and he nodded again. "I will be ready."

OOOOOO

"Why do I have to learn this stuff?" Ranma complained while continuing to perform jumping jacks in place. "It's boring and it's not as important as reading and writing, is it?"

Maester Luwin rubbed his forehead, knowing this was level one of his charge's progression toward running off. Luwin had become quite adept at seeing the signals in Ranma. The question would come first, then would come even faster exercises, and then, suddenly, he would bolt for the door. And as fast as Ranma was, despite being only five years old, there was no way that Maester Luwin was going to catch them. Despite the fact that chasing after Ranma had

forced Luwin to get some exercise, he was not anywhere near what anyone would call fast. And of course even grown soldiers had trouble catching Ranma these days.

So he needed to figure out a way to convince Ranma that learning about the history of all of the different houses and the differences between them was important. Luckily, however, Maester Luwin knew exactly what would get his charge's attention, the same thing that got his attention talking about mathematics, geography, and everything else: war and combat.

He looked over at Jon and winked at the other boy, who grinned back at him. Jon too knew the signs and had become somewhat of a co-conspirator with Maester Luwin in trying to keep Ranma from bolting during his classes. Not so much because Jon didn't understand why Ranma was doing so, but because he didn't like the way that the Lady Catelyn looked at him when he joined Ranma in his escapades. Ranma would get blamed a little, but the look in Catelyn's eyes made it clear that she would dearly like to blame Jon, for some reason.

"Now Ranma," Maester Luwin began, "while you may not think this is important, manners and how you carry yourself can be very important when meeting other people. It could mean the difference between insulting someone and having a fight to the death or making new friends." That didn't seem to interest Ranma but Luwin went on quickly. "And learning all of the different major houses can tell you a lot about how the kingdom is run and everything else, including how the house might pursue personal combat or a war."

Ranma frowned a little seeing this as a rather blatant attempt to convince him that this stuff was interesting, but he sighed and nodded. "I guess I can see that, still seems boring to me though."

"But useful. Now, let's start with something simple, house Tully. What is their motto, and what do you think it means for the people themselves, both in relation to how they rule and how they would fight?"

Ranma frowned, then replied "It's 'family, honor, duty', I think, or 'family, duty, honor'."

"Jon which one is it, do you think?"

"The second one, Sir." Jon was always courteous.

"That is correct, now what do you think that means in terms of leadership?"

An hour later the boys vacated the premises quickly and Maester Luwin leaned back with a sigh, massaging his forehead again. Once you got Ranma interested in something, he would bring a focus to it that was that was beyond surprising in a barely five-year-old boy. Ranma was incredibly intelligent for his age, but his attention span worked against him. Yet, since he had promised his father he would concentrate more on his lessons Ranma's abilities had gone up by leaps and bounds in every test Luwin gave him. It was almost bizarre how much focus he could bring to learning.

"You just have to know how to get his attention.", he muttered to himself, chuckling a little. For Ranma, he obviously wanted to make his parents proud of him. He was eager to please, and once he truly realized that he needed to learn to read and write to become a better leader and lord, and thus make his father happy, he took to it quickly. Math had been harder of course, until Luwin connected it to logistics.

Luwin was not the only one astonished by Ranma. Ser Rodrick, the castle's master at arms and leader of the guard while Eddard was away, was as well. He stood outside now watching Ranma and Jon play a game that looked silly on the face of it, a slap game based on trying to catch one another's hands with a slap. However, Ser Rodrick had been around for a long time and knew what it really was; a game to teach hand-eye coordination and speed.

Ranma was simply fast! Rodrick had known that the boy was fast on his feet but this was the first time he had seen him practicing something like this. Jon was nowhere near as fast as Ranma but he was quite a bit faster than normal and had better hand-eye coordination than a boy twice his age. "I think I need to talk to Lord Stark when he gets back." he muttered. "We might want to put these two into real sword training earlier than normal."

OOOOOO

Later that evening Ranma stole up to the maester's room in the tower where the ravens that were used as messenger birds stayed, knocking on the door gently. Ranma had just spent dinner with his mother, younger sister, and Jon, and had finally decided that enough was enough. Throughout the dinner his mother had ignored Jon, who just seemed resigned to it. When he asked Jon what was up, Jon didn't answer.

The maester opened his door and looked at Ranma in surprise. "Ranma, what can I do for you? Shouldn't you be

preparing for bed?"

"Maester Luwin, why is Jon named Jon Snow if he's my brother and why does my mother hate him?"

Maester Luwin winced a little at the innocent questions. Everyone had basically hoped that Ranma would figure out the answer to those questions by simply observing everyone around him, but it looked as if he hadn't or maybe wanted clarification to the point. "Come inside, Ranma. I could wish you had waited to ask your father this question, but I understand that he would probably not be as happy about that." He chuckled a little sadly.

When the explanation was over, Ranma was a little angry at his father, at first, for betraying his mom like that. *But it isn't as if they had been married for all that long and maybe he had had a lover before they were married. But Jon's a little younger than me isn't he? So that means he was born after me, which means dad was with this other woman after marrying mom. But that goes against everything he's taught us about keeping your word and honoring your vows.* So instead Ranma asked a simple question to himself: would a man like Eddard, who preached about honor and dignity and duty, go behind his mother's back, even if he wasn't in love with her at the time, to have another baby with another woman?

The answer to that, he knew almost immediately, was no. So, he thought to himself, looking around at Jon at the next day as they sat in their lessons, *there's something else going on here. He looks like dad, but that doesn't mean much does it? I mean, surely dad had some siblings or something.*

The questions festered for a few days, then when they were discussing the history of the great families, Ranma asked, "Maester Luwin, did my father have any siblings? I've heard people comparing me to someone named Bran?"

Maester Luwin chuckled a little. "Yes indeed, I never knew Bran Stark. I wasn't assigned here at the time, but he was supposed to be a little wild creature when he was younger, much like you today. But he wasn't their only sibling, there was Lyanna as well, your father's slightly older sister, and, of course, Benjen, who is now commander of the Night Watch."

He briefly detailed the revolution of Robert the Usurper against the Targaryen dynasty and then said briskly, "But we will cover that in more detail in later lessons, now let us return to the First Men and discuss how they were able to push the children of the woods out of most of Westeros, and why the First Men took up their religion."

Ranma nodded and went along with it, but inside his mind was already racing ahead. He made certain not to look at Jon as he kept thinking, while a wild surmise came to him.

OOOOOOO

Catelyn looked out of her window, patting her now bulging stomach, sighing a little sadly as the sun went down. Eddard had not returned, though the news they were getting said Stannis Baratheon had crushed the Iron Born fleet. They had been pushed off of most of their islands and back to Pyke, where they were now besieged. Hopefully, that meant that he would be coming home soon. But that wasn't all that was bothering her and she knew it.

*Why has Ranma been so cold to me?* Catelyn thought disconsolately. Her son was affectionate, warm, and loving to his family, despite being almost entirely Stark in his body he had a Tully soul or, at least, that was how she thought of it. But for the past few days he had been distant with her during the few times she could spend with him and Sansa. Where before she would always exchange hugs with him before sending him off to bed or even going up to read to him before he fell asleep, now Ranma didn't even try to kiss her or come close to her, and when she went up to read to him, Ranma was already asleep with his lights out.

She wanted to put it down to worry for Ned or one of those odd humors that children go through at times. Maybe something he had heard in their history lessons had bothered him and he was trying to think through it alone. But somehow she knew that wasn't it. Her musings were interrupted by a knock on the door, well below the height a grown man would knock on, and a young voice saying, "Mama, can I talk to you?"

Catelyn smiled happily, hoping that this meant that whatever had bothered her son he had thought through it or come to her for advice at least. She responded instantly. "Of course Ranma, come in."

Ranma came in, moving to her swiftly and hugging her around the waist before leaning back and sitting down the footrest opposite her. "Mama," he said slowly, "I... I found out why Jon isn't really my brother."

Catelyn tried to stop it but she could feel her face closing down. Despite the fact that they had not been in love when they married, despite her love for her family and her husband, the fact that Ned insisted on keeping the visible sign of

his infidelity around almost like he was a regular family member stuck in her craw and was just the one wound that would never heal. It had been over five years now and she still couldn't get over it. What woman could? Now her own son was asking and his father was nowhere in sight to explain it to him!

Ranma went on before she could say anything. "I asked Maester Luwin, and he explained things, but I don't think he's right!"

Catelyn frowned, trying to keep her expression and voice calm as she asked softly "What do you mean, you don't think he's right?"

"Well, dad always told us about holding to honor and duty, and how important family is right? Sort of like your family's motto? He's..." Ranma paused before going on, laying it on a bit thick for now. "He's kind of hard at times I guess, is that a right way to put it?"

Catelyn found herself smiling slightly and she nodded. "That is exactly the correct way to put it yes. Your father can be a hard, harsh man."

"Yeah, but what I mean is, he's not the kind to... you know to just do that..." he stammered, blushing hotly, "with someone when he's already married to you."

Catelyn's small smile disappeared and she said, "Yes, it's not an act you would normally ascribe to a man like Ned, but sometimes a man's desires catch them in a weak moment. Your father has never explained to me what happened, but I can imagine and it isn't exactly unusual for Lords to have..."

"But it is for dad isn't it?! I mean it's so weird coming from him."

"The phrase is 'out of character' and yes it is. But sometimes people act like that when they are in a war or having just finished a war. Their emotions run high and override their sense of honor."

"Maybe," Ranma frowned, but then said excitedly, now sharing his own idea about what happened, though he was still acting like a child. "I had a better idea, what if Jon isn't dad's son, but someone else's in his family?"

Catelyn had never thought about it, simply taking Eddard's word at face value but now she frowned, wondering why it hadn't occurred to her before.

She frowned further, thinking it through. *If it was his father's son gotten on some whore or other in Kings Landing thanks to a final night of pleasure before his murder at the Aery's hand that could explain it, but then Rickard's wife had passed well before then. So why wouldn't he just tell me that? Why does he insist on telling me that Jon is his bastard? Though he could be covering for Bran, but that makes no sense. And of course Benjen never went south.*

"It's a nice theory," she said, still calm, "but I don't think it holds much weight, Ranma. I'm afraid you're just going to have to accept that there was one moment in his life were your father wasn't the perfectly honorable man. If it had been his brother's or his father's after all then he would have been within his rights to legitimize Jon, though he would never be in line for the succession."

"But there was another older sibling, wasn't there? That's what Maester Luwin told us when I asked. Lyanna was her name right, the one that was supposed to marry Robert Baratheon before the rebellion?"

That thought struck like a lightning bolt, and Catelyn reared back nearly pushing her chair off the ground as if the thought had hit her with physical force. Lyanna Stark had been betrothed to Robert Baratheon but she had been instead stolen away by Rhaegar Targaryen. That marked the start of the downward spiral that eventually led to the death of so many people in Kings Landing, including Rickard and Bran Stark. *If Rhaegar had put a child in Lyanna, then what would Robert do?*

She knew the answer to that, the news of the sack and massacre of the Targaryen dynasty, their children hacked to pieces by Lannister men had spread throughout the nations of Westeros. *And Ned would never have killed a child, or blame the child for the sins of the father even if he was a child of rape. Though if Jon is a child of rape from Lyanna, Ned's a better person than I am,* Catelyn thought guiltily, recalling all the times she had been cold or stiff or simply dismissive of Jon.

*Calm down,* she thought to herself, *calm down, we don't know if that is the case. And Jon has nothing of the Targaryen features about him, he's pure Stark, more so even than Ranma!* Still, the idea refused to leave her, as well as the fact that the consequences if it ever came out that he shared blood with the Targaryen dynasty. Robert, close friend and boyhood companion of Eddard, would turn on him the moment it came out to so as to slake his thirst for



Targaryen blood.

Catelyn leaned forward earnestly grabbing Ranma by his shoulders, a little surprised at how firm they felt under her hands. Her young son was a wiry little thing and surprisingly strong for his size. "Ranma," Catelyn said earnestly, "you must not share this wild theory of yours with anyone else, do you understand?"

Ranma shook his head, this time not acting at all. "No mama, I don't."

"You'll understand when you're older, but right now it is important for you to promise me, **promise me**, Ranma, that you won't share this idea with anyone, not even Jon himself!" She frowned a little then pulled him into a hug. "I'll try to act better toward Jon, but you have to promise not to share this theory with anyone."

"If you promise to treat him good then I'll promise to keep quiet about it," said Ranma resolutely. "I won't even ask dad when he comes back, if it's that important."

"Good," said Catelyn sighing in relief and kissing his forehead. "Very good, my little man," she said ruffling his hair fondly. "Now, do you want me to read to you before you go to bed?"

Ranma grinned impishly and pulled her to her feet "I think Sansa's still awake, let's read to her instead."

Catelyn chuckled and let Ranma pull her along putting the entire conversation to the back of her mind for now.

OOOOOOO

Two months passed since that conversation. Jon was ecstatic that the distance between him and Catelyn seems to have shrunk dramatically. She still wasn't as kind to him as she was to her own children, but it was much better.

It was at this point that Ser Rodrick began to train both boys, trying to build up their muscles and reaction times in anticipation of sword training, something that would normally start at age eight and go on for two years. As he had expected, their reaction times and strength were twice that what it should have been for boys of five, not just Ranma, but Jon too. He was a little leery of starting them on practice swords without talking to lord Stark in person, first, but bows and arrows at least were safe enough.

After a single day, he could tell that neither Jon nor Ranma had a true archer's eye, but they were fast, strong, and could handle the pull of the practice bows without any strain. Afterwards, Rodrick called them over to him and he shook his head, looking down at the two. "I don't understand, it's as if you've both been training for years, but I've never seen any sign of you taking the weapons or sneaking away somewhere. Care to share why that is?"

The two young boys shared a conspiratorial grin but didn't reply and he laughed. "Away with you then, I can hear Maester Luwin calling you in for extra lessons." Rodrick watched as they both ran off, shaking his head. He had heard of natural talents before, Jaime Lannister was supposed to have been one such, the youngest person to ever be elected to the Kingsguard, who had killed four men in the kingswood. And Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning was another, one of the trio that had fallen against Lord Stark and his companions at the Tower of Joy taking all but Lord Stark and Lord Reed into death with them when Eddard went there to retrieve Lyanna's body. Yet even so... *I have to speak to Lord Stark when he returns, there's just something strange about how good Ranma is at anything to do with fighting.*

OOOOOOO

Three weeks later, Ranma was in the godswood. He normally came here to practice early in the mornings before anyone else was up as well as deep into the night after everyone else had gone to sleep. Today however, he hadn't done much more than his starting routine of upside down sit-ups (dangling from a tree limb) when he heard a voice shouting for him near the edge of the woods.

He flipped out of the tree, landing lightly and racing towards the voice to find one of the servants looking for them. "There you are, young master." The maid said, looking relieved. "Your father has returned from the war. He is within an hour's ride from here, already. Your lady mother wants you and your siblings to bath and prepare for him."

Ranma nodded with a smile on his face, then shot off like an arrow from a bow. The maid stared after the small child racing faster than a grown man through the trees, maybe even faster than a horse, and she chuckled. "Little wild wolf," she said affectionately following after him at a much more sedate pace.

OOOOOOO

Ranma soon found himself standing with his mother beside him, one hand on his shoulder while Catelyn's other hand held Sansa's little one. Sansa was dressed in a very good dress and looked the perfect image of a pretty little lady. Jon stood to one side, dressed in some clothing cut to his size that had been Ranma's. Both his and Ranma's hair was combed and they both stood to attention as their father cantered into the castle's courtyard.

Ned Stark was bone weary, but the sight of his family waiting for him made Ned raise his head and smile faintly before dismounting easily and moving forward. He looked at his pregnant wife, his dark eyes warm as he kissed her forehead with his arms going around her gently. "My lady, I hope you are well?"

"I am very well, my lord husband. Your castle has had no problems while you were gone, though I hope that it will be a long time before we need to supervise it without your presence again."

"You and I both, my love." Ned's arms tightened for a moment before he turned to Sansa, kneeling down to her level. "Hello my daughter, how are you?"

Sansa smiled tremulously, then wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him fiercely. "Missed you daddy!"

Ned smiled his faint, warm smile then stood up, lifting Sansa in his arms. He looked over at Ranma and Jon, who both smiled up at him, happy to have him back home where he belonged.

Ranma however, had also noticed that among the returning soldiers with his father was a small, wiry boy who was now scowling around at Winterfell.

Eddard noticed where his son was looking and waved his hand at the boy. He came forward, rather sullenly Ranma thought, and Eddard nodded his head gravely. "This is Theon Greyjoy of house Greyjoy...."

OOOOOOO

Catelyn waited, wrapping herself in calm until late that evening when the servants and everyone else were all-a-bed save for the guards on the walls and roaming the castle, a constant here in Winterfell. She waited, still calm as her husband joined her in bed before beginning. "While you were gone Ranma came up with a very shocking idea one I am astonished never occurred to me," she murmured, snuggling into his side and holding him tightly.

"And what is that?" he murmured.

"He wondered whether or not Jon isn't your son, but your sister's." She said looking at his face, waiting for his reaction.

Eddard turned to her sharply, his eyes wide and he made to stand up but her grip on him kept him where he was in their bed. "It is the truth?"

"I..." he shook his head, looking a little pole-axed at the suddenness of the questioning. "That is, I made a promise. I cannot ..."

"So Jon is Lyanna's," Catelyn said slowly, "I understand, though you are a far better man even than I thought, Ned Stark. I'll keep your secret and I'm sorry for doubting you for so long." She leaned in and kissed him gently on the lips. She was much too far along in her pregnancy to let them do anything serious, but cuddling was safe enough.

*She doesn't know the full truth*, Ned thought to himself after Catelyn fell asleep, sighing almost sadly. Robert and all the other who had suffered under the edicts of the Mad King would try to put Jon to the death again if they knew even that much. It would be nice to share his burden with someone else, someone else who had heard his sister's final confession, but that could not be allowed. If Robert found out that Lyanna ran away willingly with Rhaegar, then his hatred would possibly be turned to all of the Starks, his friendship with Ned would not be enough to stay his wrath.

Ned all too easily remembered those dark days right after the sacking of the Red Keep and Kings Landing. When Tywin and the other Lannisters were so proud of themselves for their bloody work, for the way they slaughtered children and the way Robert agreed with them, saying that the only good Targaryen was a dead one. How enraged Robert was by the fact that even two young children had escaped.

No, Eddard thought as he snuggled down next to his wife, kissing her neck gently, there were some secrets that he would take to the grave, even if both Ranma and Catelyn already knew that Jon was not his own.

OOOOOOO

Theon, Ranma decided, was a bit of an enigma. He seemed courteous enough, if a little sullen, which was to be expected given the reasons behind his wardship in Winterfell. In the week since his arrival he had also proven quick to anger, quick to insult, and quick to fire back at any perceived insult directed at him.

Still, Ranma at last got him to play some games with him and Jon. Theon came upon them in the courtyard one day, standing up and trying to slap one another's hands. Jon was quick and had an excellent eye, but Ranma was simply faster and better. He still let Jon win sometimes of course, he didn't want to crush his brother's enthusiasm for training.

Theon looked on for a moment and then sneered. "Don't you know any better games? That's kids stuff."

"Well, that would make sense, wouldn't it," Jon replied drolly, sounding far older than his years would suggest. "We are kids, after all."

"Speak for yourself, I'm an Ironborn warrior!" Theon replied. "If I was still among my people, I'd already be training with knives."

"Yeah, but you're not." Ranma broke in, slapping Jon's hands at the same time, then trying to slap his face but Jon ducked aside. "And besides, what if you were playing this game and your hands were holding those knives of yours?"

Theon paused thoughtfully for a moment then asked hesitantly "Er, I don't suppose I could play?"

Thus began the tentative friendship between the three boys.

Above them Ser Rodrick and Ned stood in his office, looking down on them, speculatively.

OOOOOOO

Soon enough the Stark family had a new addition and to Ned looking at his second daughter it was like Lyanna had come back to life.

Ranma was a mix between the Stark and Tully blood. He was stern at times, forthright and blunt spoken, yet warm and friendly with the Stark features of dark hair and high cheekbones, yet he had eyes of Tully blue. Sansa was a near perfect copy of her mother. Tully auburn hair and blue eyes coupled with the building mannerisms and attitude of a proper little lady, all quiet and earnest. Arya however was all Stark in her features, with the same gray eyes of his line and dark brown hair.

Catelyn smiled down at her new daughter, her little face scrunched up in sleep, then up at the rest of the family crowding around her bed. Ranma, for one, was smiling brightly, his arms holding Sansa back from climbing onto the bed to see the little baby, while Jon and Ned stood behind them. "My dears, this is your new sister. Her name is Arya."

OOOOOOO

The next five years passed peacefully, with little of the rest of the world making itself known in Winterfell and several more additions coming along.

Ranma, Jon and Theon began to learn swordplay, which Ranma took to like a duck to water. At least that was the way it appeared to Ser Rodrick, who had talked Lord Stark into testing the boys. Ned had been astonished by how strong and coordinated they both were already, and reluctantly agreed to let them start actual sword training. The sooner you started, after all, the better your instincts would become.

Theon was stuck still doing exercises to bring his strength and coordination up, although he had already learned how to use a bow. He was a better marksman than either Jon or Ranma, though nowhere near as good as he thought he was.

Wrestling, fisticuffs, sword work, all these Ranma dominated easily. Sword work seemed to come less easily to him, as if he was fighting himself, but still he took to it far faster than any youth Ser Rodrick had ever trained before. Despite his skills, there was no arrogance in him. He simply kept on pushing himself even more and always encouraged Jon and Theon to become better, pushing them ever on. Jon responded positively to this, while Theon seemed to resent the way Ranma outclassed him. Nor was that the only thing that put a strain on their relationship.

One day, Ranma bested both Theon and Jon in a mock wrestling match, controlling the match so they got in one another's way, then rushing forward to push them both down in a heap, with him sitting on top of them. "I think that's

my victory!"

Jon grumbled good-naturedly before pushing Theon off him, poking what he thought was gentle fun at the Iron Born boy. "It would seem that working together is something they don't teach on those ships of yours."

The other boy, however, responded with a surprising amount of vitriol. "I don't need to hear that from you **Snow!** It was your own clumsiness that cost us the match. Are all bastards this clumsy or is it just you?"

Theon had learned of Jon's status early on, but hadn't really understood it until he had overheard Septa Mordane, who had taken over Sansa's lessons in embroidery and etiquette from Catelyn, telling the girl how she shouldn't be so friendly with the bastard born boy. Once he had figured it out, the fact that Jon was welcomed into house Stark despite his status rankled on Theon. Despite having lived here for years, he was still seen as an outsider by most of the staff, as well as Lady Catelyn, who never quite seemed to warm to him. That and the fact that Ranma and Jon were so close rankled. **He** wanted to be Ranma's best friend, not this bastard born. He wanted to be getting the sword lessons and the attention that Jon got just from hanging out with Ranma.

Jon flushed angrily, never liking having his dubious birth rubbed in his face. He stood up angrily, about to take a swing at Theon which was what the other boy wanted. Ranma stepped in quickly however, pushing them both back and standing between them. "Hey, that's enough you guys. If you can't work together that's fine, but I don't want any of this stupid name-calling or anything else!"

The other two boys glared at one another angrily, but subsided. Ranma sighed, knowing this was probably not the last time the two would clash. He was proven right the very next day. Over the next few years Ranma would find himself in the very odd position of peace maker countless times.

Nor was the fact that Jon had already claimed the place of Ranma's best friend the only thing that stood between them. Several months after that first incident, Jon and Ranma were training again with their swords, this time under Ser Rodrick's watchful eyes. They wore heavy padding on practically every part of their body and the swords were training blades, slightly heavier than normal ones and with no edge. Yet for all that, the two were still able to move around easily enough and the clangor of their blades slamming against one another was loud in the training ground. To one side, Theon waited for his turn, having at last proven that he was strong and dexterous enough to start training under Ser Rodrick.

Ranma's sword swept up and the two blades locked above the boys' heads for just a moment before Ranma twisting his blade, catching his opponent's and pulling it out of his hand.

Before the blade could fall to the ground, however, Jon's other hand shot out catching it in midair and bringing it back into play swiftly, forcing Ranma to guard himself. He slashed at Ranma several times and Ranma's eyebrows rose as Jon made no move to switch hands. He also didn't seem to have lost any of his dexterity or strength, which was astonishing, and he was pushing Ranma.

"Hold!" Ser Rodrick bellowed, and immediately the two boys stopped and stood back. Rodrick strode across the training ground until he stood before them, looking down at Jon. "Why didn't you switch back to your other hand, boy?"

"I felt no need sir, and I thought that maybe using my other hand would throw Ranma of his stride." Jon replied, wondering if he had done the wrong thing

"It did, I was so surprised you were able to take the initiative from me." Ranma laughed, slapping his brother's shoulder. "If the bout had continued who knows, you might have won." *Of course I was holding back a heck of a lot, but still...*

Ser Rodrick stroked his beard thoughtfully. "It seems that you might have been born with the gift to have two dominant hands instead of one, Jon. I'll need to think of some training exercises for you to take advantage of that." He stood there for a moment thinking then shook his head and moved away. "You have another ten minutes, then its Theon's turn." The two boys nodded, put on their protective helmets again and waited until the master at arms exited the training area, never noticing how Theon was scowling jealously.

Despite this and other moments, the three boys continued to learn together, both in the training ground and in the classroom. Ranma spent far more time in the classroom than the other two now, learning about statecraft, tactics, strategy and law, all things he needed to learn as his father's heir. The lessons right now were easy ones, but with each year they became more in depth and much harder. One such lesson was history, and Ranma learning about the rebellion, began to have a good idea why Jon's birth was kept such a secret.

"Wait!", Ranma interrupted that lesson, staring hard at Maester Luwin. "The Lannisters betrayed the king? And then massacred his family? That's not right!"

"Many things happen in wars that aren't right, Ranma," Luwin replied sadly. "Although the deeds on that day were particularly bloody, they are not an exception, but merely an example of a general rule of warfare."

"Not that, I understood that part." Ranma scoffed, though he had some ideas of his own about what was right in warfare, what wasn't, and ways to enforce those rules, as well. But that wasn't what he concentrated on. "But isn't Queen Cersei a Lannister?"

"Yes she is. Besides being one of the most beautiful women in the kingdom, she is also the daughter of Tywin Lannister who is the lord of Casterly Rock, as well as Warden of the West."

"But isn't that like he rewarded them for their butchery? That's just wrong!" *Besides*, Ranma thought, remembering that day several years back in the godswood. *That puts way too much power into one family's hands.*

"Perhaps it does sound that way," Luwin replied diplomatically. He knew Lord Stark had his own misgivings in that area, and had argued vociferously with his friend about it. "But at the time, the Lannister forces were rested, and they had control of the city. Robert had to do something to appease them, and to connect them to his reign in as strong a manner as he could."

Ranma's eyes narrowed angrily. "That doesn't make it the right thing to do. At least he should've demanded this Gregor Clegane's head, the children at least were utterly innocent!"

"Robert didn't think that way and he is the king," Luwin reminded Ranma. "He was there and you were not. Any child of the Targaryen line would have served as a rallying point for those still loyal to them, and the war may well have continued for years. As vile as the way of their deaths were, they were necessary."

"Using the word necessary like this is the way people try to explain away actions they know are wrong! It doesn't mean it was the right or honorable thing to do." Ranma replied fervently, with all the experience of a life lived in another time, another place, where he lived his life by the martial artists code. It was a code remarkably similar to that a knight was supposed to hold to, but if this Ser Clegane was a knight, then Ranma wanted nothing to do with the title.

"Enough!" Luwin barked. "You were not there, you did not live through the war, and Robert is the king. That is the end of it."

Ranma subsided, but his eyes told Luwin he didn't agree. Thankfully however, the rest of the lesson passed without further incident.

Ranma and Jon also did their best to stray friends with Sansa, yet this was made much harder by their great enemy: Septa Mordane. She was an elderly woman who had very certain and hard rules about propriety and the way a woman of standing should act. She had arrived a few months after Arya was born to take over teaching the womanly skills to Sansa, who had taken to them like a duck to water, almost like Ranma had to combat but not nearly at as high a level.

The Septa also had views about bastard born children thinking above their place and made no bones about it. That had caused her to have words with Catelyn, who had eventually ordered her to keep her opinions to herself.

She also felt that all boys, even brothers couldn't be trusted. After one incident involving Sansa sleeping in Ranma's bed with him during a thunderstorm, she refused to let Sansa spend anymore time then she possibly had to with the two boys.

To Jon and Ranma this just wouldn't do and a sort of low key war began. They did everything in their power to get Sansa away from her lessons or time with the Septa, making significant headway in some way, not so much in others. Sansa's opinion on her big brother was unchanged, he was still the best and funniest boy she knew, but in other ways Sansa was moving in a different direction.

The boys routinely convinced Sansa to come out and play with them during their free time, which was something Septa Mordane hated. She wanted to keep her charge inside learning how to sew, paint, or other things, not running around like a wild thing like the two boys did. It took Catelyn putting her foot down and Sansa actually telling them that she enjoyed sewing and other 'girly things' to stop the duo. She promised she would remain friends with them, but this was something she wanted to do.

So the two boys reluctantly stopped trying to convince Sansa to join them for their games, but they realized soon enough that not all girls were created the same.

OOOOOOO

Eddard shook his head, looking down from a second story window at his youngest playing with his oldest, the same type of slap game he had taught Jon and Theon, which seemed to be building up Arya's hand-eye coordination very quickly. The two had been playing tag for a while. Now they were sitting there simply playing with their hands and Arya's bright merry giggle rose to the window.

"I don't like it," Catelyn said, looking down at them as well from next to him, her belly now visibly pregnant again. Next to her a maid played with young Bran, now four years old. Normally he would be trying to keep up with his older siblings, but he had caught a cold the morning before, so Catelyn decided to keep him close for a few days until he was better.

"I don't like it one bit! I think it's wrong to fill her mind with such nonsense." Arya was absolutely nothing like Sansa. At eight Sansa was a proper little lady, always willing to listen to others, always wearing a dress, perfectly willing to stay inside and learn to sew, paint, or other things all day; the epitome of what a highborn girl should be.

Arya on the other hand... At six years old Arya was a right little hellion. She was completely uninterested in sitting down for long and loved running and playing outdoors with her older brothers, even Theon when he made time for her. "He shouldn't be encouraging her like that. Septa Mordane and I have enough trouble keeping her in her lessons without Ranma encouraging her in this wild idea of being able to learn how to fight eventually."

"And Jon," said Eddard looking at over where Septa Mordane had just come out of the keep, having been led a wild goose chase through the castle by Jon trying to keep her from finding out where Arya was. Jon had actually volunteered for this duty, saying the Septa already hated him, so she couldn't hate him more regardless. "I'll talk to them, though I don't think he'll agree."

"We can but try," his wife said sighing a little sadly. While Ranma was mostly a biddable young boy and eager to make his parents proud, when he got his teeth in the bit he tended to pull you along rather than the other way around.

In many ways, they were both extremely proud of their oldest son, not only because his moment of insight sealed a rift that had infested the bedrock of their family in healing the distance between Catelyn and Jon (who despite this they couldn't formerly recognize for safety's sake). Ranma was a very intelligent young boy. Once Maester Luwin got into his head a little, figured out what interested him, and how to make their lessons interesting, the maester hadn't had a word to say against him. Septa Mordane was another matter entirely of course, but thankfully Ranma didn't actually have lessons with her. Jon, too, was extremely intelligent, but it was pretty obvious which of them was the leader and which of them the follower.

Such was the way it should be of course, though without Ranma around Jon would probably have taken the leadership role himself. They occasionally fought, but their friendship was deep and the brotherhood strong, and they had extended that to Theon (to a lesser extent admittedly), Sansa, now Arya, and even Bran, young as he was. Despite the fact that Sansa didn't enjoy their games or do a lot of the activities they found so fascinating such as exploring the woods, climbing trees, or swimming; they still took time out of their day to hang out with her and she had fallen in love with Ranma's ability to spin tales for her.

As they watched the Septa tried to drag Arya back inside, but Ranma wouldn't let his sister go, holding her around the middle and then racing off with her in his arms faster than even a grown man could run despite the weight of his sister. Arya in turn was screaming out gleefully, "Faster, faster!"

Later that night Eddard did call Ranma into his office and set him down for a talk. He tried to explain Catelyn's position; that young women of their station needed to act in a certain way, that acting otherwise would cause them to have a reputation, or not to be able to be married off to good families.

Ranma stared up at him with that serious expression he sometimes had as if he was a much older boy and shook his head. "I understand that marriages are important father and that as your heir, even I will have to marry someone of a certain station. But Arya will do what Arya will want to do, the more you try to change her the more she'll fight back. Why not try to control what she's becoming rather than trying to change her?"

Eddard sat back, wondering about another young woman, and wondered if Lyanna would've run off if their family had been able to bend enough to let her be who she wanted to be. "I, I'll talk to your mother about it, though I can't agree right away. Possibly she can start having some exercises with you during the afternoons if she promises to pay

attention to her lessons in the mornings." That would switch out the lessons that Arya hated most (decorum at the moment) with something that she would enjoy and hopefully she would also learn in a controlled environment. Who knows, maybe after she realized how serious she had to be to be any good at it, she would lose interest. It could happen right?

Catelyn was not happy with this decision, and they argued about it for days, but in the end Arya was allowed to learn from Ranma in their spare time and under the supervision of Ser Rodrick so long as she didn't make a fuss during her lessons with Septa Mordane. To Catelyn's shock Arya continued to take to her training with Ranma very well, and actually concentrated on her lesson with the Septa as well. She was nowhere near good, and you could always tell there was something she'd rather be doing, but with the carrot in front of her, she was able to concentrate well enough. And to further her shock, this seemed to help Sansa and Arya's relationship somehow. They still didn't understand one another very well, but they got along much more peaceably now that Arya wasn't trying to always act up in Sansa's favorite lessons.

OOOOOOO

A year and a bit past that conversation, and this idyllic time was broken. Nearly a month after Catelyn had given birth to another little boy they named Ricon, word had come that one of Eddard's vassal lords had been caught engaging in slavery. Slavery was something that had been outlawed in Westeros for centuries, one of the most heinous crimes ever: a crime against the laws of the old gods, the Seven and man, in the opinion of those in Westeros at least. In Essos, slavery was very well known and, in fact, was a core of the continent's economy, but not in Westeros.

"I must go, Catelyn," he said, kissing his wife on the cheek. "I am the one who passed the sentence, I will be the man to wield the sword. That is the way of the North, the way of my family.

"I understand," she said sadly. "I just wish you didn't have to go. But I well understand duty."

"Can I come with you father?" said Ranma waving his hand in the air.

Eddard and Catelyn shared a glance and Eddard nodded faintly. "It will be good to get him out of the castle, see a bit of the Northern lands beyond what he can in a single days trip. He'll be perfectly safe with my guards and me."

"He's an 11-year-old boy, he shouldn't have to see what you're going to do."

"I was younger when I first saw my father carry out a sentence," Eddard replied grimly. "Now is as good a time as any. I won't force any of the others to come along though, but Ranma and Jon yes." After a moment's thought, he added, "And Theon." Despite being with them for over six years, Theon was still a sort of outsider. Ranma and Jon had warmed to him at first but his own attitude and his continued needling of Jon had driven a wedge between them, cooling their budding friendship. Now they were close, but not that close, and it was obvious that Ranma and Jon were simply brothers and that was all there was to it to them. Many of the guards and servants (and Septa Mordane) saw it differently, but made little headway in changing Ranma's mind seeing as the rest of the family was happy treating him so.

Not ten minutes later, the trio joined a group of sixteen guardsmen, Eddard's personal guard as well as ten more men added to help guard the boys. Eddard leaned down briefly to kiss his wife again on the forehead and then said softly "We'll be back."

She nodded, and stood there watching the trio as they rode out of the castle's portcullis.

The ride continued for several hours and soon Ranma was getting bored. With a grin, he pulled his legs out of the stirrups on both sides of the horse and then pulled his legs underneath his body until he was actually standing on the horse's back. Then he pushed off quickly, leaping over the horse's head to land in the road a full five paces in front of it.

The guards all around him goggled, but he kept on running, now pulling the horse along easily. Eddard stared down at him in astonishment, so astonished he didn't even think of pulling up and asking his son what the hell Ranma thought he was doing or where he had learned had to do that.

Ranma grinned up cheekily at his father and said, "I was bored."

Theon and Jon broke out into laughter and Eddard shook his head. "If you want to tire yourself out trying to keep up with us on foot that is fine, my son. It'll simply mean you'll sleep better when you stop at night."

All around him his guards laughed as well. One of them asked, "Where'd you learn to leap like that, boy?"

Ranma chuckled. "Taught myself," he said, racing along easily.

The men looked at one another and shrugged then continued on their way at a canter. The hours passed but Ranma didn't seem to feel them, simply running on with a wide grin on his face as he looked around, seeing more land and areas that he had never seen before. He wished they could stop and explore, but for now simply running along was good enough.

Eddard looked down at his son from time to time, more and more astonished at his endurance and speed as the hours dropped away.

The master-at-arms who had come with them pulled his horse up and alongside his lord's muttering, "You see what I mean, my liege? Physically he is simply beyond anything I've ever seen before. And I've spotted him training in the early mornings and deep at night in the godswood."

"In the godswood?" Eddard said sharply, turning his head to stare at Ser Rodrick.

"Yes, Lord, he always hides in there."

"Interesting," said Eddard, looking down at his son who smiled up at him. Eddard smiled faintly then shook his head before leaning over to talk to whisper to Ser Rodrick. "I'll talk to him about it, there is something special about Ranma, not only his physical skills but everything else."

The ride continued. They exchanged horses twice along the way to keep going at a high speed. They stopped that night, camping out under the stars, before starting out early the next day. While Jon and Theon were weary and rather sore in their saddles, Ranma again seemed to be almost chipper. Jon wasn't nearly in as much pain as Theon was, which made sense given that Theon had spent his early years on an island and boats, so had never ridden a horse before he came to live as a ward of the Starks.

Ned noticed this, watching Jon pull himself up into the saddle easily despite his small size and the soreness from the day before, then looked over at Ser Rodrick.

The man shrugged. "He's trained with Ranma several times that I know of and I think they've been doing some kind of weight training as well. They're both past ready to switch to real blades in terms of strength, skill not so much just yet."

Eddard shook his head. "Well, if Ranma can teach someone else to be that much better than a normal boy his age, then it's obviously not some kind of magic or anything like that," he said just loud enough for the man behind him to hear and pass on. That would stop any rumors that his son was abnormal, though gods-touched, that would be harder to combat. It would also be nowhere near as easy for others to spin tales about and be believed however. *Even if it might be the truth...*

As fast as they went however, moving from Winterfell to the Mormont clan's island in three weeks (a very fast time considering the terrain of this area of the North was even worse than elsewhere in the hard land), they arrived too late. Ser Jorah of house Mormont had already left, running away with his wife to the free cities of Essos.

While his father was dealing with this, Ranma went around exploring. Jon and Theon, with nothing better to do, followed him. Theon looked around, snorting in contempt. "This place is supposed to be a noble house? HAH!"

"There is more to nobility than the castle they live in or the clothes on their back." Jon retorted, though even he was surprised at house Mormont's seat. It wasn't a castle or anything like that; it was simply a massive longhouse made of timber and rock.

Yet despite that Ranma, with the mind of a 19 year old who had absorbed every lesson he could about tactics and defense, could tell this place would be incredibly difficult for any normal force to take. It was deep in woods that were rife with rocks and scrub trees, providing little cover for attackers while breaking up any kind of cavalry charge or infantry formation. The hall itself was on a hill that allowed archers stationed on it's roof to shoot down with deadly accuracy. Of course, to get here the Mormonts and the smallfolk they ruled would have to be pushed back from the rest of the island, a tall order considering what Ranma knew about the house, which was surprisingly little considering Maester Luwin's lectures. He knew they routinely battled pirates and always answered the call to arms from the Lord Paramount of the North readily enough, but that was all.

"Hah, what would you know about nobility, **Snow**?" Theon sneered.



"Enough," Ranma said, not loudly, but definitely, looking ahead of them. After a moment, both of the other boys looked that way as well. Around the back of the hill the longhouse stood on was a large cleared area and there were several people working out there. What surprised Ranma however, was that some of them were women. That didn't match with what he had learned about warfare in this dimension. *Although the carving of a woman in a bearskin with a child in one arm suckling at her breast and a battleaxe in the other on the entrance to the longhouse should've told me that this clan is different.*

"What're you doing?" Ranma asked, looking at the young woman, who looked about 20 years old and who was practicing alone with a sword at the moment.

She was a stern looking woman, whose features were more striking than pretty. She had curves denoting largish breasts, but her overall body was toned and trimmed for war. She was also taller than most women, with broader shoulders to boot. "Practicing, what does it look like boy?" She said not even looking up.

"Can I join?"

The woman looked up at him, finally registering that voice as one she hadn't heard before. She stared at the little boy who had come with Lord Stark. "I don't think you're allowed, young master. Besides it wouldn't be a fair contest." she said smiling faintly.

"You want to bet?" Ranma asked, leaping easily from a standing position over the fence and into the training area. Jon and Theon immediately raced to the fence, smiling. This looked like it would be interesting. "What's your name by the way, I'm Ranma Stark." His smile widened as it always did when he said his name like that.

The woman sighed and put her sword down. "I am Dacey Mormont, heir to the clan after this business with my uncle, I'm afraid. And I suppose I can show you why no one dares to wrestle with the bear clan."

Ranma smirked. "Yeah well, there's a first time for everything."

The woman smiled a little wider at his confidence then charged forward, intending to give this boy a richly deserved thumping.

Ranma dodged to one side, tucking one foot between hers as he did tripping her to land in the grass. But Dacey rolled with this, coming up to her feet and turning swiftly, jumping forward to try and catch him.

But Ranma dodged to one side, grabbing her arm and pulling her forward off balance, then flipping her to land in the dirt.

Dacey's eyes narrowed then her free hand reached forward as fast as she could move while the hand he still held twisted, grabbing his wrist. Ranma moved with her, grabbing her other hand and, as she tried to get to her feet, flipped her a second time.

She kicked out but he broke her grips on his arms and dodged back, still smirking. With a growl Dacey turned, pushing herself up. This time she moved forward more cautiously, then backpedaled as Ranma went on the attack.

In the background, Theon and Jon began to hoot and holler, cheering their friend on. Several clansmen and women appeared at this point, drawn by the noise.

Five minutes later, Dacey was down on the ground with Ranma behind her holding her arms behind her with one knee on her back, pushing her down into the ground with all his weight behind it. "Give up?" he asked, grinning.

"Yes, now get off me," she muttered, embarrassed beyond belief that this young pup had beaten her like this. Yet, she was also in awe of the boy's strength, speed and skill. Dacey had rarely been beaten in wrestling since she was but a child and this young pup had beaten her soundly. A stirring of interest rose in her as Ranma let go and stepped back sharply, and she resolved to keep an eye on Ranma Stark from now on.

Maege Mormont, new lady of house Mormont, and Ned had finished their meeting quickly, thanks to there being little to do about Jorah now that he was gone. The fact he had fled with his wife had proven his guilt and he was banished from the clan. Maege was his older aunt and had never wanted to be the lady of the clan, but with her brother, Jorah's father, a commander in the Nights-watch, there was no other choice.

Drawn by the commotion, they had both come out of the longhouse in time to see the final few minutes of the match. Maege shook her head, never having expected her daughter to lose, and rather decisively too. "What have you been feeding that boy, Eddard?" House Mormont was notorious even among Northmen for their contempt for titles, even

those of men they respected.

Eddard chuckled a little, though inside he was rather astonished. Despite his physical skills, he had not expected Ranma to be skilled enough to take on a trained warrior like Dacey, even weaponless. Despite her young age, she was a blooded warrior, and had seen some action against pirates and a few wandering bandit groups, even a boarding action against a rogue Greyjoy ship. Yet in hand-to-hand at least, Ranma had handed Dacey her head, not something most men could say considering the fact she was larger and stronger than most men, let alone other women even in her clan. *I will have to talk to him soon won't I? There is something very odd about my son.*

OOOOOO

That night, Ranma was surprised when his father told him to follow him after dinner. Normally he, Jon and Theon would be chased up to bed swiftly, especially on this trip. Still, Ranma wordlessly followed his father through the longhouse then out into the wildness of the land around it, and soon enough the two were passing from the normal woods into the local godswood. Like most Northerners, the Mormons believed in the old gods, which was good since Ranma didn't think much of the Seven. *A schizophrenic God, I don't think so* was the way he thought of it, and of course, in his past life he was a follower of Confucianism if anything, so the idea of an organized religion was rather bizarre to him.

The two walked on in silence, the silence of the night and the peace of the godswood enfolding them until they stood in front of the weirwood tree at its center. Once they reached the massive white tree, Eddard sat down in front of his son, somehow solemn despite the fact that no adult could ever look natural sitting on the ground with their knees up like that. Ranma sat down at his father's gesture, sinking into a lotus position easily, which made Eddard's eyebrow rise again at the odd seating arrangement, but it looked comfortable enough if you were limber.

They sat for a few moments of silence, then Eddard spoke. "I saw your fight with Dacey earlier. And I've been told by Ser Rodrick, you have taken to lessons about arms-training like a duck to water, sometimes so well it's almost as if you already knew the movements. I've also been told that you sneak out of your room at night to go training in the godswood alone, and that you and Jon get up every morning to exercise together."

"Yet most of the exercises you do and many of the moves I saw you use against Dacey earlier are not taught locally. A few of them look as if they come from Braavosi water dancers, but there has never been one of them in Winterfell as far as I know. Moreover, you're stronger and faster than anyone your age should be and have enough endurance for ten grown men. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Ranma nodded a little worried.

Eddard kept his voice level and firm, making certain that nothing he said came out angrily or with even a hint of condemnation. "So I have to ask, how did you learn to fight the way you do?"

Ranma paused for a moment wondering how to answer then he said "I know it isn't part of our religion, father," he said gesturing at the weirwood tree, "but do you know about reincarnation?"

Eddard nodded slowly, making a gesture for Ranma to continue. With a sigh Ranma said slowly, "I, I dream of another life." It wasn't so much that he dreamed about it obviously. Ranma knew this was a second chance and remembered practically everything that happened to him in his previous life. But he wasn't about to tell his father that he had gone to sleep as a 19-year-old on the run from his family only to wake up in the body of a baby with an entirely new family on an entirely new world. The reincarnation story at least would be enough especially since in a way, it was true.

"And what do you see in this life?" Eddard asked, keeping his tone neutral.

"In that life I wasn't a lord or anything, I was what was called a martial artist. Someone devoted to training in hand-to-hand combat." Eddard nodded, that made sense at least.

"I wasn't happy," Ranma went on. "I mean I was and I wasn't. I was good, really good at the martial arts, possibly the best of my generation, but my home life was..." He shook his head. "My father wasn't really my father. He...."

Ranma paused, "he wasn't very nice or kind or anything. And I don't think he was very honorable either, I have memories of him grabbing me and running away, being chased after we didn't pay for things. And another memory," he shivered a little, completely unfeigned. Since this was a mental issue rather than physical this too had carried over to his new body. "There's a pit, I'm young, I think I was six maybe a little younger, and he fills this pit with something, something I can't see in my dreams, and then he tosses me in."

"There are other dreams that stick out, most of them have to do with, well with pain," Ranma said looking down. "My

mother was even worse, though I can't tell why, she just didn't like me. Most of my dreams though, concentrate on the martial arts."

"And is that why you have to push yourself so hard in learning how to fight?"

Ranma nodded trying to keep his apprehension off his face.

Eddard leaned back, gently reaching out and touching the weirwood tree for a moment. A sense of serenity and purpose filled him and he knew that whatever this previous life was, Ranma had his skills for a reason, and it was one the gods of old agreed with. That was enough for Ned. More, Ranma was his son.

With that in mind Ned reached out with gentle arms pulling Ranma into a hug. "Whatever you were in this old life of yours, in this one you are my son, and nothing you learn from your past life will change that."

Ranma sniffled a little, but pulled back and nodded fiercely smiling up at him. Eddard chuckled and stood up. "Now, I believe it's past your bedtime."

OOOOOOO

A few days later they returned to Winterfell and life continued apace. Ranma began to learn more and more about the duties as his father's heir while devoting as much time as he could getting into what he thought of as fighting trim. At last he was able to begin to control his ki, the life energy of his body, although there were severe differences from how it reacted now to what he remembered he could do with it in his last life. Of course when he was eleven going on twelve in his last life he couldn't consciously use ki at all but still, the differences were very odd indeed.

For one thing, projecting ki, even a little bit, was impossible. Even when Ranma tried using emotion based ki he couldn't do it, not even a little bit. Ranma wasn't certain if that was because he didn't have enough (unlikely, given the fact he knew his current reservoir was about the size it had been when he first learned the Moko Takabashi), there was some mental wall he had unconsciously broken through in his last life that he didn't remember, or that ki just didn't work that way on this world for some reason. Ranma didn't know the answer to that one.

For another, healing his body went slightly slower than it should have been, though that might be because this body didn't have the experience his old one had built up of letting him control its healing via ki. His strength and speed enhancements however, were coming back much faster and he had found that he could channel ki into a weapon for a short amount of time.

At this point, that was as much as he was willing to test out in terms of ki. Ranma wanted to get his base stats, as it were, up much further before he tried anything more.

In terms of Ranma's relationship with other people during this time, the relationship between him, Theon and Jon remained much the same. Jon and Ranma were close like true brothers, while Theon was Ranma's friend but not Jon's, and the tension there was made worse because Ranma made no secret as to who he would back. Jon and Ranma came even closer one day, after Jon had realized his brother was holding back.

That day Jon had just scored a touch on Ranma in the training area, and the two were putting their gear away when Jon stopped and looked at his brother. "You're holding back," he said bluntly, "how much?"

Ranma grimaced, looking around to make certain no-one else was within hearing range. "A lot," he admitted. "Not as much against you as you might think, but I'm not showing all I can do to anyone."

"I can understand that, I guess," Jon admitted, then went on more grimly, "What I don't understand is where your skills are coming from. I know you exercise alone at night and in the mornings, but that alone wouldn't account for it. And where in the world did you learn about using weight training from so young an age or all the odd exercises you've come up with. And don't say you just heard about all of them somewhere. That didn't make sense when I was five. It doesn't make sense now."

Ranma frowned a little then nodded, again looking around. "Meet me in the godswood after everyone else has gone to bed, we'll talk there."

Jon nodded, and that ended the conversation for the moment. Later that evening Jon exited the keep easily enough, then made his way to the godswood, finding Ranma waiting for him near the edge, up in a tree of course. Not saying anything, Ranma motioned Jon to follow him deeper into the woods and the two boys silently made their way through the woods without speaking. It should have been terrifying, all alone in the woods at night, but for some reason Jon merely felt welcome somehow, as if there was nothing here that would harm him.

He had always felt that way about the godswood, it was simply more welcoming, more personal and somehow more elemental than the sept where Lady Catelyn worshiped the Seven. There was something strangely ostentatious about the whole process there when compared to the simple and natural edifice of the godswood.

Soon enough the two boys had made it through the woods and stopped in front of the heart tree. The two sat facing one another directly before it and after waiting a few minutes, Ranma hesitantly began. He told Jon the same story/half-truth he had told Eddard.

After however, Jon didn't immediately rush to reassure Ranma that he still thought of him as a brother. Instead he said, "Why though? Why are you here then? Why do you have these memories? What purpose were you allowed to keep them to fulfill, what enemy were you brought here to fight?" At Ranma's expression he laughed. "Oh, don't get me wrong, I think its amazing and all, but there must be some purpose behind you being here."

"I don't know.", Ranma admitted. "I tried to ask the heart tree, but all the old gods would send me was a very jumbled, distorted vision of what might have been or what might be coming or something like that, I'm not certain. Men are a part of it, that much I'm certain of, but who and how, no idea." He glanced at his brother sharply, looking over to the North and the months-distant Wall. "But the other thing, is something cold, something that's hates all warm things."

Jon looked in the same direction and shivered. He thought for a minute then clasped Ranma's forearm in a warriors grip. "I'm with you." He snorted a laugh at Ranma's face. "Did you think I'd respond any differently? You're my brother Ranma, regardless of this past life of yours. I'll admit it makes me happy to know you're so much better than me because you cheated from the very beginning but..."

"HEY, I didn't cheat!" Ranma exclaimed.

"Of course you did. What would you call having an entire other life to call upon when outperforming someone? In fact, the fact I can keep up with you anyway probably means I'm better than you were at my age, doesn't it?"

Ranma tackled him to the ground and the two wrestled around laughing for a time, ending the serious discussion.

Ranma's relationship with Sansa also remained close despite how different they were, as well as with his other siblings. Ranma made certain to spend time with her, regaling her with 'made-up' stories, tales he had taken from his past life. Ranma was a very good story-teller, and all his younger siblings and even other children in the castle (and some of their parents) loved to hear them, even if they were all very silly. Arya, Sansa and her friend of course liked them the most, though Arya liked the combat while Sansa and Jeyne Poole liked the 'romance' in them, the brave pigtailed warrior fighting to protect the one he cared about from his enemies and their weird, bizarre magics and plots.

Ranma's relationship with Arya, however, became even closer because, despite their mother's disapproval the young girl loved to learn about how to fight, and she saw herself more as one of the boys than anything else. Ranma had a few clashes with his mother about that but with Arya reminding Eddard of his sister so much, their father always took Ranma's side. "And besides," Ranma was fond of saying, "since she's the second daughter, Arya might be able to marry for love rather than for politics, and if that's the case, whoever she marries will love her the way she is, rather than some kind of perfect little girl image of her."

Arya's relationship with her sister faded slightly as they grew up to be two very different people, and oftentimes when they were in the same room they would have issues, but neither of them sought out conflict with the other, and Ranma made certain to not pick sides. Arya also became close to Jon, who encouraged her just as much as Ranma did.

Bran was young of course, but Ranma made time to play with him as he had all his other siblings, though Bran didn't show the aptitude to any of the more martial games that Ranma taught him like Arya had. Of course, Rickon was still very young at this point but still, Jon and Ranma made sure to spend time watching and playing with him.

As part of his ongoing training in lordship, Ranma spent three hours every day with his father on top of his lesson with Maester Luwin. From his father, Ranma began to learn more about the personalities of the Northern houses, as well as the importance of land and estate management, and of course the history of their family, some of which he had already begun to learn from Maester Luwin. Ned, however, covered the family history more than Westeros history, making it come alive in a way the Maester could not.

Ned also started to take Ranma out alone to survey the North and meet the vassal lords that all owed him fealty as Lord Paramount of the North, and it was on one of these, two years after their journey to Bear island, that Ranma's next adventure took place.

OOOOOOO

"I know you're trying to show Ranma as much of the North as you can, but must you always ride out to arbitrate these disputes? Frankly I think it makes you look more like a supplicant than their lord." Catelyn grumbled.

Eddard looked down at his wife, smiling faintly. "Possibly it might," he allowed, "but that's why I switch it up of course." She opened her mouth and he shook his head. "I know you think I shouldn't, but this is the North, the nobles here are much more independent minded than in the South and very few of them have as capable a lady as I do." He went on much more grimly after that bit of flattery, "Besides it's not as if I'm bothered by small disputes, am I?"

Catelyn frowned irritably. The current issue that they were talking about was a dispute between the Lord of Dread Fort Roose Bolton and one of his neighbors, Lord Hornwood. It was a land dispute naturally. Both Lords claimed a plot of land that was actually one of the better farming areas in the north. It was technically part of Lord Hornwood's territory, but he had let it fall fallow, and several farmers under Roose's allegiance had moved in, then been kicked out, come back again, been kicked out, etc. for several weeks now. It was getting to the point where the local lords were threatening to call up their men, in order to go out and enforce their ownership.

Eddard did not like Roose Bolton. This was putting it mildly, frankly. He could never truly like or even trust a lord whose ancestors warred with your own for ownership of the North and who enjoyed flaying people alive and hanging their skins up. Especially those of your ancestors. There were still tales of Starks being flayed alive and hung up to dry in the halls of the Dread Fort. Yet for all of that, the man had served him well and loyally during the Greyjoy rebellion.

And in this case, at least, Roose was in the right. Farmland was a scarce resource here in the North and any along the edge of one noble's territory with another's could be taken and put under plow, if it was not already in use. In fact, that was one of the issues of the case. According to Lord Hornwood, his people had been using the land and had been ejected by Bolton's. But that didn't match with reports he had gotten from some of his factors in the area and Roose was far too clever to simply try to oust his neighbor's people from their land like that.

This issue was made worse by a report from Roose saying that his heir Domenic had disappeared while on an inspection of that portion of his territory. Roose was loudly declaring that if Domenic was not found soon, he would have no choice but to assume it was Lord Hornwood's men who had killed him, something that if proven correct (or if simply not disproven) would spark conflict between the two, an armed conflict that could spiral out to include the rest of the North.

This was why he and Ranma were leaving Winterfell again. He would've brought Jon and Theon as well, but they were grounded this week for fighting. No outdoor time at all until they could learn to get along. Eddard had not been told what had started the fight but he could guess. The fight had been broken up by Ranma smashing their heads together. When he heard that, Ned had actually laughed aloud in public for the first time in years, because he could picture that moment in his head, and it was hilarious. While he would've preferred Ranma to think more with his mind and use his voice to stop conflicts like that, there was something to be said for a direct application of violence at times.

Ned looked down at his son, who was once again on his feet alongside a horse rather than on top of it. Over the past few years since that first trip everyone had gotten used to the fact that he could run any horse into the ground. Catelyn had been appalled at first, but even she had learned to accept it, though she still thought it most unbecoming. People called him the Young Wolf in truth, since it was well known that wolves could run down horses over a long period of time and house Stark's totem animal was a direwolf.

He smiled up at his father and Eddard's turned his small warm smile down to his son. "Ready to go?"

Ranma nodded resolutely, and the group turned and set off with a final wave of farewell to Catelyn.

OOOOOOO

After a week's swift travel, the group had reached Hornwood land. They passed through it and arrived at the disputed land in another three days. Despite the distance being almost similar to that between the Glover's clan's castle and Winterfell, it was much easier territory to traverse, being rocky windswept plains and scattered forests rather than near constant forests.

They were soon met on the trail by Lord Halys Hornwood, who spoke quietly for several hours with Eddard, while the group watered their horses.

During this time Ranma wandered off. It should surprise no one who knew his personality, but surprisingly the young armsman who had been assigned to watch him during this break, had gone off. The Lord had brought his lady and one of her retainers along, who was a very comely wench. After several days of hard riding with only men around, she was a bit of fresh air to this group especially, the younger set.

Ranma looked around at the farmland that was stretching everywhere in this small little dale around a single river, surrounded on all sides by rocky hills, the vegetation fading into heavy scrubland in places and heavy, untouched forests in others. He counted at least six large farms in the area, with large two story houses made of stone, most of them looking like they had taken some damage in the past few days. He kept wandering, moving out and away from his father and their men as well as the Lord Hornwood's, until he was well out of sight. Not a one of the armsmen noticed him leave.

About twenty minutes later, Ranma had passed another ten large farms and had just crested a small hill when he suddenly heard a noise in the near distance, a whimper of pain from something nearby. It sounded almost feminine but he couldn't tell.

Ranma rushed toward the sound, speeding down the small hill and finding another separate house set a little ways away from the farmstead. Two men were holding down a woman, while the third was trying to rip off her dress while going down to his knees between her legs. It did not take a rocket scientist to figure out what was going on and Ranma saw red.

Without any warning, he rushed forward and before the three even knew he was there a kick to the kneeling man's crotch sent him catapulting over the heads of his two fellows. The yowl of the man whose crotch he had just shattered resounded in the air and Ranma rushed the other two before they could recover. One man crumbled under a small fist that slammed into his diaphragm with all the force of a drop hammer, gasping out blood as his insides were smashed.

Ranma then whipped out his small knife (he wasn't allowed a real sword yet, not until he was fourteen by motherly decree), blocking the blow from the other man who had recovered enough to bring out a huge axe from behind him. The man grunted in shock as Ranma blocked his huge axe with a small knife and forced him backwards away from the woman who scrambled away, rushing into the house with a cry of "Sylvia!" on her lips.

Ranma couldn't pay her any attention however, because two men had come out of the woods behind the farm and were rushing to help their fellow. He disengaged from his locked block with the man's battleaxe, ducking away and trying to get in with a stab. The man jumped backwards leaving his axe in the ground to avoid Ranma's knife to his guts. By this time, his two friends had come up and now were ranged against Ranma.

Despite all of his training Ranma had still not regained the situational awareness that he had developed in his old body, which was why he was **almost** hit from behind by a blow from a mace that would've smashed in the back of his head. He dodged at the last minute, rolling and ducking again as another man came at him with a sword.

He suddenly jumped up, surprising them all with his speed and landing a kick to one man's face sending the brigand flying backwards his nose and jaw broken.

"The little brat has fangs," said the survivor of the first three Ranma had attacked, reaching forward to grab the battle ax from where he had dropped it. "Watch out."

"Don't matter," said another man, as two more men came out of the woods, allowing the group to completely encircle Ranma.

"Idiots!" said another voice coming out of the farmhouse. Ranma turned swiftly, trying to keep them all in sight and saw another man, holding the woman he had just saved. He was an ugly fucker, with sloped shoulders, pink and blotchy skin, a broad nose, a small mouth with wide lips, and small, close set, nearly white, dead looking eyes. "We can't stay here that long."

Another shorter man with the look of a rat about him, who even from where he stood Ranma could smell for some reason, held a younger girl by an arm around her throat. Her clothing was ripped off and even though she was sobbing brokenly, her eyes were wide and unseeing, as if she couldn't quite comprehend the horror that had happened to her.

The man, who was obviously the leader, pressed his blade against the woman's throat snarling at Ranma. "Drop the blade little hero, or the pretty girl gets it."

Ranma snarled, but despite his training, he knew he wouldn't be able to cross the ground before the man could slit the woman's throat. The man was also holding the woman directly in front of him. That left no place for Ranma to throw his knife that wouldn't hit her instead. "Damn it!" he muttered and dropped his knife.

The man with the mace came forward and cracked him a good one across the back of the head. Ranma fell to his knees, shaking his head groggily, but that was all. While he wasn't up to the durability he had achieved in his last life, Ranma was still tougher by far than any normal man in Essos.

The man looked at his mace quizzically wondering what the hell happened there. The leader shook his head. "You hit like a woman, Gorka." He smiled evilly. "Get a rope around him, bind him tight."

The men did so, while Ranma continued to shake his head, trying to clear it. The rope tightened around his neck, and he pulled forward, pulling the man off his feet and throwing him over his head to the ground. A scream from the woman, however, made him stop struggling. He ground his teeth, yet docilely waited while the men bound him. "When my father hears about this," he muttered almost in a conversational tone, "he's going to put you all to death so fast it will make your heads spin."

"Oh, the little hero thinks he's a Lord too," the leader cackled, not having seen that the Lord of Winterfell had arrived in the area. On top of that, while the news of Ranma's endurance and physical abilities had spread throughout the North, they hadn't included a description besides looking like a Stark with blue eyes, which wasn't exactly a good description.

Ranma grinned up at him fiercely. "Winter is coming, bastard." Another blow from the mace to the back of his head sent him down to the ground, but even then he was pushing off his feet before the other men finished tying them up.

"Don't hurt him too much, I think I just found a new favorite little toy," the leader said, smiling sadistically, despite the anger he felt at Ranma's chosen insult. He waited until Ranma was completely tied up, his hands behind his back, his legs tied together, and was being pulled to his feet by the men around him before looking down at the woman he was holding.

"Pity," he muttered, "I would've liked to take my time with you and your daughter, but needs must." In front of Ranma's horrified eyes, the man slit the woman's throat quickly and efficiently, letting her fall to the ground, her hands going to her throat in an automatic and vain attempt to stop the bleeding. The young girl next to her began to scream, but her voice was muffled by the smelly man's hand. At a nod from the leader, the smelly man snapped her neck quickly before letting the body flop to the ground.

Ranma had never felt as much anger or rage ever before as he did at that moment. He realized then that despite everything they had done to him, despite the fact that they were his rivals or his enemies, Ranma had never met someone in his previous life who was truly evil. This man and his followers were evil, vile, and disgusting; dishonorable and cruel in a way that he had never encountered in his past life. And the sight of that woman's body falling to the ground, falling to the ground dead after Ranma couldn't protect her, shattered his self-control.

He surged to his feet, head slamming back with enough force to shatter bone against one of his captors then rushed the leader, snarling. But he was held fast by the men behind them, six of them now holding the ropes trying to control him while a seventh raced up and slammed two more hard blows to the back of his head with the mace.

A third blow landed and Ranma finally lost the battle with his pain, falling forward, his eyes closing as he succumbed to unconsciousness. His last image was of the leader cackling happily, saying, "Oh, my new toy has such fight in him! I hope he can keep it up. My present toy doesn't have much fight in him at all."

OOOOOO

It was only after he was finished talking with Halys Hornwood that Eddard noticed his son wasn't around. He looked over at the guard who had been assigned 'Ranma watch' as it was called due to his inability to stand still for very long and was displeased to see that the man was trying to flirt with Lady Donella's maid.

He marched up, waiting until the man noticed him and the man paled visibly. "Where is my son?" said Eddard coldly.

"I, um, he was just here, my l-lord," the man stammered.

Eddard nodded over to Sir Jory, who was the head of his personal bodyguards. "Find him." Jory nodded, quickly moving off in the direction that he had last seen Ranma, cursing himself for not noticing that the boy's minder had decided not to mind him.

"We will speak of this later," Lord Stark said rather coldly to his man. The man gulped but realized that he had screwed up badly. Yet who would've thought the idiot boy would've just wandered off? He thought about that for a moment then groaned. "Anyone who knew him you idiot," the man muttered to himself, and then joined the search.

They spread out and eventually found the homestead where Ranma had been captured. The two dead women and the three dead men scattered around told what had happened here and Eddard cursed. Inside the house were another two bodies, both of them very dead as well, an older man and a boy of fourteen or so.

The dead men outside had all been stripped of their clothing and anything that could have identified them, and he frowned angrily. That alone was not something bandits would normally do and he wondered if Bolton might be behind this in some way, despite his earlier dismissal of that idea, but dismissed it again after a moment's thought. There was no way that the Lord of Dread Fort would be stupid enough to continue to push things here with Eddard arriving and there was no chance of him being idiotic enough to take Eddard's son.

He turned swiftly to the Lord Hornwood and ordered, "Get your best trackers here, now. They have my son and I will not rest until I find them." Ned just hoped his son was still alive when he did.

Not five hours later, the men arrived, having used several remounts to keep moving at a gallop. They spread out searching for a trail. These were men who were very good at their job. Some of them had even hunted deserters from the Nights-Watch, who were all cunning and desperate men. They soon found the barest hint of a trail and one of them raced backward to tell Lord Stark and Lord Hornwood the news.

Finding the trail led directly deeper into Bolton lands, Ned grimaced but decided to plan for the worst. "Send ravens to Lord Umber and Lord Manderly as well as Winterfell. I want your and Lord Manderly's ready men-at-arms here within a week, all on horse. I'll... I'll write the message to Winterfell myself. We march on the Dread Fort directly."

The one hundred men from Hornwood arrived within three days with the men of Winterfell on their heels. With scouts around in the nearby woods, their movement was kept a secret, but once they started to ride into Bolton land they would lose that advantage swiftly.

OOOOOOO

Ned stared down at Jon, who had somehow managed to talk his way into the troop of four hundred men from Winterfell. Winterfell could have called up more men if given time, but the lands of his house could only afford six-hundred permanent men-at-arms and of course some had to be left behind. That wasn't what Ned was thinking about now, however. "Jon...."

"I know what you are going to say, sir," Jon said. He always called Ned sir or Lord Stark in public, knowing that he shouldn't wave his bastard's status in front of other people. "But Ranma's my **friend**, sir." The word meant more here outside of Winterfell where he couldn't call Ranma the brother he was in truth. "I need to be here, whatever happens. I should have been with you all anyway; it's my own fault I fought with Theon." Theon had tried to come along as well, but he had been caught by Maester Luwin. Jon hadn't been caught until the troop was three days out and had talked Ser Rodrick, who was leading them, into letting him come. "I promised him that I would stand with him and I wasn't! I, I need to be here, sir, please."

Ned frowned but nodded. "Very well, but if there is any fighting, I will want you at the back of the army. Do you understand?" Jon nodded, but Ned somehow knew his orders were in vain. Yet at the moment, he was simply happy that his lady wife had not tried to come along to be too angry about Jon being there.

A day later, the two hundred men-at-arms of Lord Manderly arrived, each with three remounts, led by Ser Wyllis, Wyman's firstborn son, a rather obese man in his thirties with a large walrus mustache and bald head. Despite their following the Seven rather than the old gods, House Manderly was among the most loyal vassals of house Stark. They were also among the most powerful in terms of men and riches, controlling many silver mines and the city of White Harbor, the only true city the North boasted. They practiced a cavalry tradition, unlike most of the North, and their stables were among the largest as well.

Ned smiled, seeing that his orders had been obeyed. *Wyman may be obese, but there is nothing wrong with that man's mind. He thought almost cheerfully, despite the circumstances. The old Pufferfish probably knew what I had planned the moment he read my missive. I must invite him to Winterfell when this is all over, I haven't introduced Ranma to him yet, and I think he could learn a lot from another example of good governance, and how not to judge a book by its cover.*

That thought, however, turned his thoughts to his missing son and he turned to Lord Hornwood, a tall fit man with



wide shoulders and a luxuriant brown beard despite being completely grey up top. "Let us ride."

Within minutes, the small army, only about seven hundred strong yet all on horseback despite mostly being trained as infantry, set off into Bolton territory. A raven winged its way to the other side of the flayed man's land and another force of three hundred began their own trek from the other side, Lord Umber at their head personally. The Lord of the Last Hearth had never gotten on well with his southern neighbor and if there was a chance to end the Bolton line, he would grab it with both his massive hands.

Around Lord Stark's army was a massive screen of two hundred scouts/rangers loaned to them from Lord Hornwood, who searched out any spies and scouts, bows at the ready to shoot down any ravens on the wing. Lord Umber's force was mainly infantry and was making no attempt to hide their coming in the hopes of pulling Bolton's attention that way just in case.

OOOOOOO

Ranma was barely aware of his surroundings for a time as his ki healing began to work on the damage his head had taken. His endurance and durability was nowhere near where it had been when he died or whatever in his old world, although it was actually slightly higher than it had been when he had been his current age there. He had practiced over the last two years to get his healing back to the level it was when he ran away from Nerima. It wasn't anywhere close yet, unfortunately.

"I tell you, Ramsay," said one of the men around him, also on horse, "I hit him with all the strength of my arm. I don't know what that boy is made of, but it isn't normal flesh and blood. Besides, have you ever heard of a boy his age able to kill three grown men with nothing but his fists and a belt knife?"

"That just makes it all the more amusing," said the leader, who Ranma took to be Ramsay, in a psychotic tone. "Besides, if his flesh is that strong, then wearing it will empower me as well."

Ranma manfully suppressed a shudder at that as well as vowing that the first chance he got, that man was going to die. The memory of what Ramsay did to the girl and her daughter would stay with Ranma for the rest of his life. He kept his eyes closed, however, keeping his body loose and acting as if he was still unconscious, trying to figure out everything he could about his captors.

The group made great time, using the horses of their dead fellows as well as several remounts they had prepared. Ranma was constantly shifted from one horse to another, though there was always a rider with him as well. The one called Reek also used some kind of chloroform equivalent or something on him every few hours and after every stop.

They needn't have bothered though. While Ranma was strong for even a full grown man at this point, he wasn't strong enough to break the chains that now bound him without leverage and he was completely covered with chains, both his arms and his legs. *I'll have to bide my time*, he thought, *these bastards are taking me somewhere, maybe when we get there I'll be able to break out.*

Despite making great time, the group swung wide of their true destination, trying to throw off anyone trailing them, taking a week and a half what would have taken three days otherwise. Of course for some, this had a major upside to it.

Every time they stopped for the evening or to change horses Ramsay would make time to play with his new toy. This time ranged from taunting, punching, and kicking to, one time, running a knife from Ranma's shoulder down to his crotch, pressing it into him at times through his clothing, which had of course become rumpled, dirty, and marked with blood stains and cuts. Ranma however refused to cry out or give him any satisfaction and the man went away displeased only to come back the next time and try again, with each time doing more to Ranma in an effort to get a scream out of him.

All Ramsay got however, was twin blue eyes of chipped sapphire looking back at him, promising death. It was a look that Ramsay despised and it didn't go away whatever he did. He even broke Ranma's fingers on one hand, nothing. He snarled, but refrained from doing anything more as they were on the move. "Don't worry little toy, soon we'll reach home, then we can see what noises you can make when I have the time and tools to make you sing properly." His response was nothing, simply those sapphire eyes staring at him, and Ramsay finally nodded convulsively at Reek, who once more used whatever concoction he had created that was like chloroform to put Ranma out again.

Worse than Reek's concoction or Ramsay's torture was the fact they starved Ranma, giving him only water to drink and a meager bite or two of gruel every other day. Ranma could feel himself weakening and he was forced to shut his body down, falling into a deep trance as often as he could to conserve energy on the trek.

Ranma was startled out of one such trance two days after Ramsay had broken his fingers (which had already healed, though his captors hadn't noticed) when the sound of the horses' hoofs on the ground changed from hitting grass and dirt to hitting cobblestone. He didn't chance looking around, simply keeping his ruse going. The chloroform had worked well, at first, but like everything else he ran into, Ranma's body built up a defense against it. Now it barely worked for five minutes but he wanted to make damn certain he kept that a secret, as he had all along. It would make his eventual escape that much easier.

He felt himself carried inside by two men holding his shoulders but the chains they had put around him were still there, giving him no chance to escape. The sound of the chains around his legs rattling against the stone of the floor was loud in his ears but he strained himself to hear any hint of where the hell he could be or who his captors were.

OOOOOOO

Roose Bolton, a thin middle aged man with lank black hair and white, almost bloodless skin and white eyes, looked up from some paperwork he was working on at his desk when his bastard son Ramsay came in. The man was smiling that evil smile of his and Roose sighed. His so-called heir, Dominic, had been a massive disappointment, far too kind to be a proper lord, and despite skill with sword and lance not having anywhere near the amount of ruthlessness or guile that the Lord of Dread Fort required. His bastard son was much stronger, had a very quick and nasty mind, and a flair for the traditional tools of the Bolton house. Despite this, however, he was also a little too uncontrolled, too sadistic, and far too easy to read. He could not hide his sadism, but that at least could be taught, unlike guile or cunning.

He had given the task of riling up Lord Hornwood to Ramsay in an attempt to see if the boy could control himself. It was obvious he had failed however, and Roose was wondering if he should cut his losses and offer up the bastard's little group to Halys as recompense, dead of course so as to reveal nothing to him. But then he had heard that Eddard was actually coming here to arbitrate the dispute, and he decided against showing weakness in front of Stark. Reek, his son's putrid second-in-command would probably be sacrificed at the least, though the fact that his own son Dominic had 'disappeared' during this crisis gave him quite a bit of leverage.

"Why are you disturbing me?" he said in his soft, cold voice, which nonetheless carried very well. When the Lord of Dread Fort spoke people listened.

"I found a new toy, father," Ramsay said cackling a little. He moved to one side and two of his playmates as he called them, trooped in carrying a young boy of around twelve with black hair and wearing very good clothing of black leather lined with black and white fur on his shoulders.

Roose frowned then looked at the boy's belt buckle, on which was a rampant wolf with a small ruby eye. His eyes widened slightly before he turned to Ramsay. "You fool! This is Eddard Stark's firstborn son! Do you have any idea what could happen now?"

Ramsay looked down at his new toy in delight. "One of those weakling Starks is it?! That makes it even better, father."

"You fool..." said Roose again, slowly walking towards his son, smashing a hand across his face sending the boy to the ground. Not for the first time he thought about simply killing the younger man and somehow finding a way to convince Dominic that Roose had nothing to do with his captivity. That was a dream of course, but Roose had wished almost from the moment he backed Ramsay against his trueborn son that he hadn't. Still that was the past and Roose couldn't afford to look back now.

"This could ruin us. It turns a relatively minor act of brigandry, the sort of testing that noble houses can get away with between ourselves, to an act of war against the Lord Paramount of the North!" He turned to the two men who had dragged the boy in, one of whom he knew was one of the most levelheaded of Ramsay's little group. "Did you leave any evidence, could this be traced back to us in any way?"

The man actually thought for a moment, which was good. Roose would not have been pleased with a quick and simple answer. "I... do not think so my Lord, we covered our trail well, and we stripped the bodies of our dead of anything that could identify them. I have no doubt we could eventually be followed into your lands, but that is all, our destination would be impossible to find, I think. We may..." he paused looking at his Lord levelly, "have to cut a few of the men loose so to speak sir, but that should be enough."

Roose wondered about the dead men part, but figured that the little boy probably had a bodyguard with him when he ran into Ramsay. Ramsay was still on the floor, sniffling a little as he wiped at the blood coming from his nose, but he wasn't really hurt. Roose stared down at him coldly. "Get up, take the boy down to the dungeons." He stared down at

the little Stark, and couldn't help himself, smiling a little at the idea of his family once again being able to skin a Stark like his ancestors had. "Do it quickly," he said, not mentioning what it was as Ramsay well knew. "This time tomorrow I don't want him to be recognizable even by his closest friends."

Ramsay nodded but was a little sad that he wouldn't have more time to play with his new toy. Still, he would obey his father for now. Ramsay knew he wasn't strong enough to challenge the old man yet but his time would come.

The Lord of Dread Fort stared at his son, once again lamenting the fact that his trueborn heir hadn't had any of the mental or emotional strength necessary to take over for him. The way he had searched out Ramsay in an effort to befriend him and then been fooled by the bastard of the woman Roose had raped nineteen years ago proved that much. Roose had consigned the fool boy to Ramsay's tender mercies at the time, yet ever since then... Roose shook those thoughts off again, ignoring the small pang of guilt he felt.

Ramsay was closer to Roose's ideal, but in comparison to a true heir it wasn't even a contest. Still, he would put up with the boy for now until he could find another wife for himself and get a child on her. There always had to be a Bolton in Dread Fort and Roose knew that chance and luck could take him at any time, despite his best laid plans.

The two guards followed Ramsay down the hallway, then down several flights of stairs deep into Dread Fort's dungeons. Once there they moved towards the back of said dungeons to what Ramsay affectionately called his 'play area'.

OOOOOO

Ranma had been awake throughout this entire ordeal. He had heard the name Lord Bolton with some trepidation and then a lot of anger. Whatever game Lord Bolton was playing here, he was part of what had happened to those girls, what had doubtless happened to other people since this conflict between him and Hornwood began, and Ranma's own kidnapping, which meant he was going to die too when Ranma got loose.

Once inside the torture chamber, Ranma's chains were swiftly undone but before he could move, he was as swiftly chained to the wall. His arms were chained at an angle above his head and his legs were chained straight down. However, there was enough give in his chains, and he slumped forward still feigning unconsciousness, while his heart began to beat faster and readied his body for action.

He heard the door close, and then someone smashed him in the face with a hand and he jerked back, his blue eyes opening as a growl rumbled deep in his throat, his teeth bared like fangs.

"Snarl all you want, little Stark, little doggy.", said Ramsay, cackling now. He moved over to some of his instruments of torture, 'toys' as he called them, and pulled out a long skinning knife. "You know what men do to wolves? They skin them."

Ranma coughed a little, leaning forward letting his body slump as if overcome at last at the idea of what was going to happen to him.

The man started forward, ripping open Ranma's shirt and lovingly drawing the knife down one side, giggling as Ranma's blood appeared. "Nothing to say little doggy?" He stopped at his shoulder, and began to cut a slither of skin off there, reveling in the bright blood that began to stream down his toy's side.

Ranma grimaced, coughed again and muttered something under his breath. "What was that? I want to hear you scream little Wolf, not mumble." and he dug the knife deeper into Ranma's chest, but Ranma didn't even flinch, only muttering again under his breath. "That's no fun, I want to hear you scream!" As he had hoped Ramsay leaned forward.

"I said," said Ranma suddenly in a clear voice while his head rocketed forward from where it'd lolled back, smashing into the man's face causing him to reel back a few steps, "you hadn't come close enough!" With a single heave he ripped out the chain binding one of his legs to the wall, kicking up and catching Ramsay in the throat crushing his larynx. He let his leg fall back and he lolled there for a moment, gathering himself and healing what damage the knife had done to his body as well as he could.

Ramsay went to his knees, both hands going to his throat and his small close set eyes opened comically wide, gasping for air through his small fat lips. Ranma stared down at him coldly, and the last thing Ramsay saw was Ranma pulling his arm free from one of side of the change that held him. "It's all about leverage, asshole. You should have let me tied up the way you did on our trip here."

After Ramsay's eyes clouded over in death, Ranma turned back and pulled his other arm free as well. The chains fell to the ground making a clanking noise, having been pulled out from their places on the walls rather than Ranma breaking the cuffs around his wrists. He let them fall for a moment, then played with them in his hands for a bit, getting the feel of their weight. "These'll do."

The ones on his legs though, had to go. Ranma reached forward quickly grabbing Ramsay's head and snapping his neck just to be certain. "That was for that woman you killed," he muttered, "The kick to the throat, that was for me." Then Ranma began to search the body for the keys to his chains. He found them of course. Ramsay always kept the keys to his toy's chains on him so that he could rearrange them to his liking. With them, Ranma unlocked the chains around his ankles and his wrists, but kept his hold on the chains in his hands. They would make good weapons until he got something better. He wasn't about to touch any of the tools in here.

He walked over to the door, peering out of the small opening at head height. He smelt that foul man who had been Ramsay second-in-command coming closer before he saw him. He backed away quickly, waiting.

Reek had to stable the horses first before joining his master to have some fun with the young Stark boy. Now he made his way alone through the dungeons, thinking sadly of the fun he could have had with the pretty little boy's body if they had time, but with lord Bolton's orders that wasn't going to happen. He would have to take his fun now and be happy with it.

He was about to open the door to the torture chamber, finding it odd that he couldn't hear any screams when Ranma kicked open the door with such force that its hinges came out and the entire door slammed into Reek, throwing him with an echoing 'Crash!' against the far wall. Before Reek could recover or try to push the heavy oak door off him, Ranma leaped forward, landing on top of it, one chain whirling down to crush Reek's skull.

With that, Ranma stepped off the door, pulling it up with one hand, while using the other to grab the putrid man and toss him into the torture chamber to join his master's body. With that done Ranma put the door back gingerly.

Ranma then made his way down the dank and dark dungeon corridor. About halfway down the deserted corridor, he heard a cough from one of the dungeon cells and he looked inside. All the others had been empty as he passed them, but this one had a young man who had obviously been very badly tortured. One arm was bent at an angle that was completely unnatural, each portion of it bent in a different direction including his fingers, and that hand was wrapped in gauze up to its elbow. The gauze, from the faint light of the torches outside the dungeon cell, Ranma could tell was soaked through with blood and the man looked emaciated.

Ranma looked around, making certain there was no one to hear, and then reached forward, wrenching the door's lock off before opening it quickly. He raced forward to release the man, using the same keys he had had taken from Ramsay to unlock his chains. The man stared at him woosily, seeing bright blue eyes under black hair, not the lanky, unclean black hair or light gray, almost dead eyes that he was used to seeing, and he wondered if he was dreaming.

He actually spoke that part aloud, and Ranma answered him quickly. "No you're not dreaming and if this is the kind of thing you dream about, I don't want to see your nightmares."

That line actually caused the man to chuckle a little. "A nightmare, yes, that's what my life has been. Possibly for far longer than I knew. I am Dominic Bolton stranger, and you are?" He paused fuzzily, looking down at Ranma. "Aren't you a little short for a rescuer?"

Ranma chuckled, remembering a line like that from a movie he saw once back in his old life, but didn't dwell on it now. "Not so much a rescuer as a fellow escaped prisoner. Ranma Stark, at your service."

Dominick's eyes widened. "Stark? My father has gotten bold indeed, or possibly lost his wits."

"If by father you mean Roose Bolton, I think that's his first name, can't quite remember from my lessons about northern lords anyway, then no. He was very angry when Ramsay brought me in."

That name caused a shudder of fear and revulsion to go up Dominick's back. "And where is the bastard?" He said looking around fearfully. He had been down here for three weeks, and for much of that time every time Ramsay was not out doing his father's dirty work he was down here 'playing' with Dominic. Some scars would never heal, and not all of them were physical, not even most of them in fact.

"Dead," answered Ranma, and Dominick's eyes widened in shocked joy. "I killed him when he came too close as he was trying to torture me." Ranma touched the scar on his side, and then the bit of scar tissue that covered the sliver of flesh Ramsay had removed from his shoulder. While his ki healing was able to heal the damage, at Ranma's

current level with that particular skill, it wouldn't get rid of all the superficial scarring. Ranma would have a scar there for the rest of his life and that was the way it should be in his opinion. It would give him something to remember the day he finally saw an example of true evil.

"Anyway, I think we need to get out of here. I'll clear a path, follow behind when you can, but grab yourself a sword as soon as you're able. There's one down the hall with that smelly guy, I'll just keep using these," he said holding up his chains.

Dominic looked askance at the heavy chains, which Ranma was holding as if they weighed little to nothing. "You're not exactly a normal young boy, are you?"

"What was your first clue?" asked Ranma, chuckling a little. Then he became much more serious. "Seriously, we need to get out of here. If we're lucky, we can get out of here before they sound the alarm, but the longer we stand here the worse our chances get." Dominick nodded fervently and got to his feet unsteadily, moving towards the doorway after Ranma.

OOOOOOO

"Alright, we've come this far without being spotted and it is only by the luck of the forest folk that we have. But for this last stretch, we will be in the open almost immediately." Eddard Stark stared around at his officers, Lord Hornwood, Ser Wylis, and Jon, who stood next to him protectively. All of them nodded grimly and he went on. "Jory, you take your men and break off now. Remember to loop wide around the Dread Fort. The rest of us will try to keep the defender's attention on us, but your attack is the key. We can't afford to let this turn into a formal siege, we don't have the supplies, men or time. Hopefully, Roose will simply tell us he knows nothing and open his gates, allowing us to use Dread Fort as a position to search his land for the brigands that took my son. But if he's in anyway involved, he'll try to play for time. If anyone else answers anything from the wall but Bolton, that will be your signal to go in. I know you've heard him speak before, you'll be able to recognize if it isn't him."

Jory nodded grimly, one hand on his sword hilt. Beyond it being their duty, Ranma was well liked by every guard in Winterfell and the hazing the brat who hadn't watched him was going to go through when they got back to the barracks didn't bear thinking about. If it meant getting Ranma back, Jory and the rest of his lord's bodyguards would do their part.

"If it does come to a fight, and at this point my gut feeling is it will, stay out of my way, all of you." Ned went on even more grimly, his hands crossed on the pommel of his greatsword Ice as it stood point first in the ground. It was a Valyrian blade, its features smoky, a mix of shades of grey, and its edge was preternaturally sharp to go with the strength of its steel. It had been the Stark family blade for uncounted generations and this would not be the first time it tasted Bolton blood. *If my son is in that fort however, I mean for it to be the last*, Ned thought grimly.

"You all have a description of my son, when it comes to a fight watch out for him in there." He breathed in deeply, then nodded. "Let's get this done."

OOOOOOO

The first two guards died before they even realize their prisoners were escaping. Ranma was on them like a whirling dervish, his chains flashing out smashing into their faces and throwing them back.

Despite the fact that he could've stopped and taken their weapons, Ranma decided not to, the chains were good enough for now. That and the fact that neither of them actually carried swords, they both had knives on their belts but they carried spears. A spear inside the enclosed space of a castle was a rather stupid weapon in his opinion, but then again he was all about mobility and he brought his own stopping power to the game rather than relying on a weapon to keep his enemies at a distance.

Unfortunately this assault was seen by a few of the guards down the hallway, and one of them rushed off to sound the alarm while the other made his way forward confidently. That confidence died as he did, his spear smashed to the side by one swing of Ranma's left chain while the other swung in and took him in the chin with such force it snapped his neck and threw him backwards.

Four more guards stormed down, but Ranma ran to meet them before they could get set. Their spears thrust forward, but he jumped above them.

"By the Gods old and new!" One of them exclaimed before Ranma's chains slammed down with lethal force on the top of two of their heads crushing their skulls and their helmets in one blow. Then he was in among them pushing the

dead bodies to one side as his fists, now empty of chains flashed out catching both of the survivors of his first attack in the crotches bringing them down to where his elbows could slam into their faces shattering their skulls.

These two had both swords and shields, and Ranma smiled grimly, picking one sword up and testing its balance for a moment before grabbing a shield. The shield was actually a little over a third his own height and he decided against it, letting it fall. The sword was enough for now.

He chuckled quietly wondering what Genma (he never called the fat man his father anymore even in his own mind, not after so many years having a real father in Ned) would say if he saw his son wielding a blade. Not even a katana, the swords in this world were all styles more closely resembling European blades. This one was a common one-handed longsword. For a normal thirteen-year-old it would be too heavy to really use, but to Ranma it was actually a little light.

With Dominic following in Ranma's wake, the older man's face showing shock and a sort of slowly rising fear as Ranma continued his rampage, Ranma made his way up the stairs.

He ran into guards in several places, and the news of his escape and rampage spread before him as he forged up to the first floor of the keep.

OOOOOOO

"Damn it, why did they attack him!", said Roose angrily. "If the Stark boy had just broken out and you had surrendered or called out for him to halt this could possibly have been kept quiet." Now, however, with Ranma having killed some guards that were wearing Bolton livery there was no way he would be able to sweep it under the rug except by killing the boy. He might have even been able to wring some concessions for saving the boy from his captors, possibly storming down with a group of his own guards and killing a few of the other guards in front of him, then delivering him to his father personally?

But now the only way forward was to kill him. And that wasn't going to be very easy, apparently. Roose wondered what kind of training the young boy had to get this good, that he was mowing through his men like this.

"B-but sir, the other prisoner, the one who we weren't supposed to name anymore, he's following the Stark boy," stammered the sergeant in charge of the prison guards.

Roose's eyes widened, his heir was still alive down there after so long under his bastard's tender mercies? *Perhaps the boy had some steel in him after all, he thought, sadly. Other than the lack of a spine and his kind nature, Dominic could have been a better lord than Ramsay any day, but then he stupidly tried to befriend Ramsay. I thought... And now it's going to bite me in the ass just like letting Ramsay take control of poking Halys about those farms.*

Roose's day was about to become even worse because just then a runner came in from the walls of his fortress. "Sir, Lord Hornwood and Lord Stark are coming down the road, they're bringing at least 600 men maybe more."

Bolton cursed. "Alright, I want two thirds of the ready guard to the wall, the rest are to head down to the dungeons and kill that boy. Make certain his body is utterly unrecognizable, then when you're done take all the bodies and stow them down there, wall them in someplace. There must be no hint of what happened here."

He turned to his seneschal and nodded his head toward the door. "Eddard won't attack quickly, he'll try to get us to open the doors. Stall him as much as you can but order the men on the walls to prepare to defend the castle." The man, a small weaselly sort who was utterly terrified yet utterly devoted to Roose at the same time, nodded and rushed out.

For the fifth time that day alone, Roose lamented once again not having killed his bastard-born son when his mother turned up at the gates to his castle. Still, he hoped that this could still be gamed and he turned pulling out his own sword from where it was over his hearth in his office, then moving over to don his armor. The armor was dark grey plate armor over a quilted tunic of blood-red leather with rondels shaped like human heads, their mouths open in agony. Bolton and his house knew the value of fear. His armor was an extension of that belief. There was a reason, after all, why his banner was still that of a flayed man decades after flaying had been outlawed.

OOOOOOO

Ranma battled his way through the guards, tirelessly dodging this way and that, always attacking pushing his captors back, leaving a trail of dying and broken men in his wake. In an open battle, this number of men would have been able to kill or at least overcome him, but in an enclosed space, with only four of them able to come at him at a time

and with the ones behind them pushing them ahead and getting in their way? In a way, his smaller body actually helped, letting Ranma be more maneuverable and have enough room to swing his blade in much more cramped locations than the men in front of him while at the same time making him far harder to hit.

A time or two, he was almost taken by surprise from behind as he passed doors leading into cells and storage areas, but Dominic had taken a spear from a dead armsman and guarded his back well enough. Despite the fact that his one ruined hand didn't really lend any strength, Dominic still had one good hand and the bleeding and flayed hand was enough to help him at least direct his spear to stab his enemies. "If we get out of this, the bards will write a song of your heroism!" he shouted over the clangor of battle.

"Why the hell would I want that!?", asked Ranma, cutting one man from one side to the other as his fist smashed into another soldier's kneecap from the side sending him screaming to the floor. A kick to that man's face finished him off and Ranma brought his sword up and around flashing it out to catch another blade as it slashed forward pushing it to the side then shoulder ramming that man back into two of his fellows before bringing his sword around to rip into the man's chainmail slicing his chest open.

"What, why wouldn't you want to be remembered in song and story for all time?" Dominick asked almost whimsically. So far the battle had been relatively easy for him, and that was all to the good since he wasn't really up for much activity given his stay in the dungeons and his bastard brother's 'care'. Still even with that he could feel his body giving out around him, and it made his attitude very odd. "I wanted to be a bard you know, I never really wanted to be my father's heir, that was part of the reason why I sought out my half-brother."

"That's nice," Ranma said, not really having the attention to spare to hear the young man's sorry tale, "but if you make a song out of me you better be accurate, no flowing blonde locks or anything like the bits that are so popular in the songs and stories my little sister likes."

"Would you mind howling a bit then?" Dominic joked. "The 'Wolves of Winter' I feel would be a magnificent name for the tale."

Ranma laughed, and then began to howl "AWOOO! Winter's coming for you! AWOOO!" The phrase and the howling was enough to scare the guards in front of him even more than their normal (and very understandable) fear of their lord and they began to give ground.

Soon Ranma came to the stairs leading up to the first floor. Dominic slumped against the wall, weakly pointing upwards. "Up, up there it's going to be much harder. They won't be able to attack us from just one direction or hide in the cells and wait, they'll be, be able to, to attack us from every direction at once."

The dimensionally displaced martial artist nodded, looking at him closely. "Alright, you don't look like you're going to be good for much more. Find a room, barricade yourself in, and see if you can stop your bleeding." Above them he could hear shouts and curses as more men tried to psyche themselves up to come down and face the wild beast they had let into their castle, and he smirked. "I can watch my own back well enough, get yourself hidden and safe."

Dominic nodded weakly, his every movement taking far too much energy from him, and he turned back, entering the nearby guardroom, which only had one entrance, and whose door was heavier than the doors of the cells. He could see there was also a bit of food left on the table, and he fell on it ravenously.

Now alone, Ranma stormed up the stairs, his eyes alight with battle fever and a new longsword in his hand, the first having shattered moments before. "WINTER IS COMING! AWOOOOOOO!"

OOOOOOO

Normally, Roose would've been correct that Eddard would have tried to talk his way into the fort of one of the lords owing him fealty rather than simply bully his way in, but he was a worried father now not just a lord. He and twenty men raced ahead of the rest of the force, which was coming on at a canter toward the closed portcullis of the door. "Open in the name of Lord Stark, Lord Paramount of the North!" one of his men bellowed.

The seneschal had reached the wall above the gate, and he shouted down "What is the meaning of this? Even the Lord Paramount must send word ahead to his vassals if he expects to be welcomed."

"Open," said Eddard in his booming voice, staring up at the man with hard brown eyes. "I have business with lord Bolton."

While Eddard kept the attention of the men of Dread Fort himself and his forces, Jory led fifteen handpicked men

around the back of the Dread Fort, having split off before they were in sight of the fort and moving through the forest and scrub brush to the back of it. Now that all of the attention was on his Lord at the front, they began to repel up the wall of the fort at the back, moving swiftly.

Only three guards had not abandoned their post at the back to join their fellows at the front of the castle. Jory swiftly subdued all three one after another. He was one of the better blades of his lord's retinue, though he secretly wondered if Ranma was already his better in that area. Jory took a moment to stare down into the fort towards the main castle, a four story squat stone edifice that did not have anything in the way of grandeur or accoutrements to it. Instead it squatted here and the entire castle gave of the air of a man hunched against his surroundings, teeth bared in a snarl, an impression enhanced by the triangle shaped balustrades along the outer wall.

Behind him his men came up and Jory nodded. "Follow me, we'll open the door for our lord, and then he and the others can finish this." The men around Jory all grinned back at him fiercely and he nodded.

They raced down and around the wall to the gatehouse, barging in and swiftly subduing the men stationed there. They were under orders not to kill anyone, but their lord was too worried for his son to even try to tell the men to obey that one. If his son wasn't here he would probably have to pay Roose quite a bit of money for the dishonor and the probable loss of life his assault caused, but that was for later.

Even as Jory and a few of his men began to raise the portcullis to shouts of alarm from above them, a some of the rest began to barricade the door while two more looked out the window facing the entrance to the inner castle. Several dozen men had been in the courtyard but rather than racing towards the wall they had all been racing into the Castle. "I wonder what's going on?" one of them muttered.

Another, one of the ones who had recently taken to sparring with Ranma shook his head smiling faintly. "I think the Young Wolf is causing issues with for them."

At that moment Jory finally finished opening the portcullis, and the 700 men with Eddard stormed in.

Roose usually had about 400 men under arms at any given time in his fortress, a very large amount and the upper limit of what he could support without disrupting the economy of his territory. By the time the news had reached him of Ranma's attack, Ranma had killed about 80 men moving up from the dungeons. By the time Eddard arrived, that number had rocketed up to a little under 150, and more and more men were being thrown down into the dungeon to stop his advance.

That left a little over two-hundred or so to stop Eddard and the 700 men he led into battle today. Without Roose to command the defense and keep all the men at their posts, it had been easy for Jory to sneak in. Once the portcullis was opened the battle was, like many of the defenders already knew, practically over.

Among the shouts of 'Our Blades are Sharp', 'Winter is Coming', 'Stark!', and other shouts, Ned and a cadre of his best stormed through the battle towards the entrance to the keep. One of them dragged along the seneschal, who was still protesting this unilateral assault on his Lord's dignity, but Eddard was past hearing. The moment they entered the keep they could hear the howling and roaring of battle. Ned drew Ice with one hand, his other carrying a shield and he roared, charging toward it. Next to him, Jon raced along, his face pale but determined to help save his brother.

OOOOOO

Ranma had just broken out from the dungeon area up to the first floor, which contained kitchens, pantries, and other things of that nature, fighting his way through them. Here he got bogged down however, because many of these rooms connected to one another allowing the men to circle around behind him, much like Dominic had predicted.

He grunted taking a blow to the side as he twisted out of a doorway, pulling the man who had struck him with a mace forward by grabbing his hand, and bringing his sword around to cut the soldier's head off. He kicked the headless corpse back out of the doorway, dropping the now somewhat mangled sword and grabbing up the mace, slamming it into the chest of a man who had just tried to jump over the dead body, throwing him back.

Two more men came out from the kitchen behind him, but Ranma turned, leaping into the air over their questing blades, slamming a kick into one soldier's face, then bringing the mace down on the other. Both fell dead and he used the momentum of those blows to flip through the doorway slamming bodily into two more. His mace rose and fell swiftly, but then he had to roll to the side to dodge a sword thrust.

Another soldier came at his back, and even though Ranma dodged, the man's sword caught him along the back,



slicing a narrow cut down his side before Ranma's mace came back in a massive blow, caving in the man's head. A kick sent the man in front of him reeling backwards, his chest open for the returning swing of Ranma's stolen mace.

Ranma cocked his head, jumping up at the same time when someone tried to stab his legs from below bringing down his mace on the man's head almost absentmindedly as he heard the sounds of battle coming closer. "I think Bolton has other issues now!" He shouted, "Winter is coming, winter is coming!"

He was answered by a shout of someone else saying the same thing followed by "Hang on my son, we're coming!"

Another lighter voice shouted out, "Ranma, brother, we're here, stay strong!"

The men between Ranma and the attacking forces of his father melted away, trying desperately to regroup and get to a higher level of the keep, but most of them were too slow. Many of them were surrounded and ordered to surrender. If they did not obey that first shouted order, they were cut down without mercy and Eddard's men stormed forward. He was slowly losing control since half these men were from Lord Manderly and Lord Hornwood rather than Winterfell. They had long hated Bolton and wanted to put an end to the entire family, but Eddard was not a man anyone in the North would disobey lightly and he was able to keep the reins well enough to keep the servants at least, from being killed along the way.

Jon had trained with Ranma for practically his entire life. He was faster and far stronger than his age or size would suggest, by far, which stood him in good stead in this battle. He ducked under the sword of the first man who attacked him, burying his own blade into the man's chest, before kicking the new corpse in the chest, sending him back against one of his fellows, who lost a limb in a small economic blow before his sword returned to defend him from another soldier's blade, which he turned before shoulder charging the man, opening him up for a stab from the knife in his other hand.

Like Ser Rodrick had thought, Jon was truly ambidextrous and had learned to fight with both sword and knife. This wasn't unheard of in the North, but it was unusual in one so young. His speed with both blades coupled with his strength proved enough to see him through.

Yet even as he fought, he had to push back a feeling of awe as he watched his father cut his way through Bolton's men.

Eddard Stark had not survived against three of the best blades of Aerys's Kingsguard by chance alone. He wasn't one of **the** best blades in Westeros, but the difference was very narrow indeed, and he was both quick and strong for his size and in the prime of his life. Ice was a two handed weapon for most, but he wielded it with ease in one, taking three men in quick succession, using his shield to block blow after blow from others, though it began to falter under the continued pummeling.

He ducked under one slash, bringing Ice up to block another, ramming his shield forward throwing the man off his feet and bringing Ice around in a blow that took the man in the chest, throwing him backwards in a splash of blood. His shield intercepted another blow, finally cut through, but it was enough and Ice returned swiftly, taking the man in the head with a blow that clove his helmet open, spilling half his head onto the castle's stone floor.

Ned used his sword two-handed now, throwing off the battered remains of his shield, hacking and slicing his way forward, his face covered with the gore of his victims as he stalked forward. "I'm coming my son!"

He suddenly stopped however, seeing a group of nine men breaking from the doorway up to the higher levels of the keep, heading straight for the doors, cutting down the men in front of them. One of them was Roose Bolton. He could tell from the plate armor he wore, as well as his dead eyes. "Roose!" he yelled angrily, "To me! Face me traitor!"

Roose turned, and for a moment, Eddard could almost see the thoughts flashing over his face. He had been close to breaking out, if he could break out, he may rally the men of his land to him, possibly even force Eddard to back off, now that he had his son. Perhaps even be able to blame the whole thing on the fact that his bastard son had been acting out, but then he saw Ranma burst out from another doorway following three of the Stark men, including Ser Jory, who cut down two men as they forced their way through the bedlam of combat. And then suddenly the keep's door was filled with more men as Lord Hornwood led his own personal guard in.

With that, Roose knew that his time was up, and he decided that if he was going to go down, he was damn well going to go down swinging. "Our Blades Are Sharp!" he shouted and ran towards Eddard.

Ranma saw his father and Roose clashing, and darted forward, slamming his shoulder into one man's side, throwing him up into the air to catch him on the back swing with his mace whose haft shattered under the force of the blow.

The man's face completely disappeared and Ranma dropped to the ground, using the piece of the haft still in his hand to stab a man in his side, causing him to scream. Ranma grabbed the man's sword and brought it around to cut into his throat.

He let that body fall as Jon leapt in, taking up position at his brother's side. Jory tried to keep up, but Ranma didn't even notice him and he grinned wildly at Jon. "Together brother! AWOOOOOO!" The two boys charged forward, taking two of Bolton's personal bodyguard, driving them away from their lord, as Ser Jory danced forward blade flashing and taking another two.

The other four became embroiled against Lord Hornwood and his men. Halys shouted happily, "We've got your back Lord Stark, kill that undead leech!"

The two lords circled one another, their blades flashing out a time or two to test each other's defenses. "Why?" said Eddard. "Why did you take my son?"

"I didn't," said Roose, blocking a blow with the speed of a striking snake as Ice quested for his face. "My bastard son brought him here, I could say against my orders and it would be the truth, but would that matter now? Events have come too far to back out, much too far for me." Roose loosed a vicious thrust toward his enemy's chest.

"No," said Eddard, smashing his blade aside and moving swiftly forward, "it wouldn't." It became swiftly apparent that Roose did not have enough skill to truly hold Ned off for long. And he fell back, wincing as Ice sliced into his armor, cutting it away like butter.

He attempted a parry then a thrust, trying to catch Eddard off guard, but Ned danced back swiftly, and Ice flashed forward. Roose tried to dodge, tried to pull his hand back, but he was too slow. He gritted his teeth as Ice slashed into his wrist, cutting his hand off cleanly right behind the vambrace. He tried swiftly to pick his blade up with his other hand, but stilled as Ice came back, the tip pressing into his throat.

Behind him all of his guards had fallen, and Ranma dropped his liberated blade to the ground. All around, the clangor of battle slowly receded, as the few remaining Bolton guards either surrendered or died where they stood. Two men came forward grabbing Roose by the shoulders and pulling him up and away. Eddard slowly pulled his sword back, before kneeling down to wipe the blade off with a bit of cloth. Then he swiftly left it there and marched forwards towards his son pulling him into a hug, reaching out with one hand to ruffle Jon's hair. "I thought I lost you boy!"

Ranma fought back tears, once more realizing that his father in this life truly did love him, and his arms went around the older man with enough force to make his ribs creak. One hand then loosened enough to sneak out and grab Jon, pulling him into the hug for a moment before Ranma pulled back to look up at his father. "Sorry Father, I went off for a walk like normal but..." The whole story came out from Ranma's perspective, including what he had overheard when his kidnappers thought he was still unconscious when he first arrived.

After that, Dominic was quickly found and brought up from where he had forted up in the dungeon, the men whispering in awe at the droves of dead bodies from the men who had tried to fight Ranma. On unsteady feet while two healers worked on his arm Dominic told his own tale.

This took several minutes during which Eddard's face went from joyous at his son's survival to grim. He once more looked down at his son as the murmurs began at his survival and victory, and at how many soldiers he had killed this day among the men around him. *What do the old gods have planned for you my son?* He thought to himself as he ruffled the young boy's hair.

Ranma looked up at him with a smile, dim now as the memories of the battle hit him, but still warm and Ned smiled down at him with that small but warm smile he reserved for family. Jon too earned a smile, having fought hard and well, and the two boys stood side by side next to their father. *What do the old gods have planned for you that they would challenge you this way at so young an age, Ranma?*

For some reason, Eddard knew that answer to that question would terrify him, but he purposefully set it aside for now. Whatever would happen in the future, right now Ranma was a young boy who had just been through an experienced no man should ever face. *And until whatever comes, he will still be my son, as I told him two years ago,* he thought grimly, *and I will defend him with all the breath and all the power of my body.*

He moved away from his sons rather reluctantly, picking up Ice again from where it had lain on the floor. "You have heard the witnesses against you, Roose of the house of Bolton. Do you have anything to say in your own defense?"

Roose stared up at him angrily, cradling the bleeding stump where his right hand had once been. But then his eyes

went to Dominic and he sighed, all his anger leaving him. "Chance, fate, and one ill-chosen choice have brought me down. I backed the bastard born Ramsay against my own trueborn son because I thought him the better choice, closer to the ideals my house has used to rule this land. I was wrong and that has proven my downfall. I have nothing more to say. Do your duty, Stark."

"So be it." Ned looked over at his sons for a moment. "Our family has been the Lords of the North for thousands of years, my son, and throughout all that time there has been one unofficial law that we have adhered to: the man who passes the sentence must wield the sword."

He turned back to Roose. "Roose of house Bolton, you are condemned for your crimes of conspiracy to commit murder, murder, inciting war with your neighbors, and abetting torture. The sentence is death and it is to be carried out immediately." With that Ned raised Ice into the air and brought it crashing down. With a single blow, he decapitated Roose Bolton, the undead man, the Lord of Dread Fort of the flayed man banner.

After a moment's respectful silence, Eddard turned, wiping the blade off again, and pointed at Dominic with his free hand. "You will come with us, you are now a ward of Lord Hornwood, who now owns the land from this fort back to his former border with the former house of Bolton. By my decree, when you marry you will change your name to that of the lady you marry, or you can take the name of Snow after three years. There will be no more Boltons in this land. House Karstark and house Umber will be given the rest of the land to hold in faith, in this way no one lord will benefit too much from the fall of your former house."

Dominic smiled, tearing his eyes away from his father's body. "I would like nothing better my lord. I never wanted to be a lord anyway, I will become a bard, and bards cannot own land."

Eddard nodded then looked over at Halys Hornwood, looking the man in the eye. "Your first order of business," he said, waving his hand around, "is to tear this place down, root, and branch. Within a year I want not a single stone set on stone here. I want there to be nothing of house Bolton remaining but in the history books. Only the godswood is to remain untouched."

Halys smiled grimly and nodded. "I will see to it my Lord." Of course he probably wouldn't be able to keep all the Bolton land, Roose did after all have other neighbors but if he could keep even a portion of it he could enrich himself tremendously. Moreover, the idea of tearing this place down had been a dream of his family for generations. Plus while house Umber may be even gruffer and lacking in polish than house Mormont, they were good and friendly neighbors, and the Karstarks were old allies of his house.

With that, Eddard turned back to his son putting a light hand on his both his sons shoulders while Jory came forward with a cloak and shirt for the boy. "Now, we need to think about what we're going to tell your mother."

OOOOOOO

Of course it wasn't that simple. Ned needed to stay there and apportion the former Bolton land himself so that none of the three lords felt slighted. This took several weeks as both Lord Karstark and Lord Umber had to actually travel to (or in BigJon Umber's case finish traveling to) the Dread Fort. The men who had served lord Bolton had to be paroled, his minor lords and land owners needed to be told about the change of ownership and why, and any spurt of rebellion quelled before it could occur.

Yet Ned was smart enough to know that keeping Ranma with him for this part, while undoubtedly a good experience for him, would lead to Cat not speaking to him for months. Even with a raven being sent to Winterfell the moment the battle ended, Catelyn and the rest of the family were beside themselves with worry. So Ned sent a hundred of the men from Winterfell back with Ranma and Jon.

Of course by the time they set off the rumors of what Ranma had done had spread throughout the small army. For once, a tale did not grow in the retelling. After all, it was very difficult to add to the tale of a thirteen year old boy wiping out over 150 trained men-at-arms in close quarter combat and that after having been starved for over a week and tortured occasionally during that time, besides.

Jon's deeds, too, were a tale, though a far smaller one. He wasn't the first thirteen year old to fight a battle after all, but in that short battle he had accounted, according to rumor, for twenty dead. This was an astonishing number considering how short the battle had been and second only to Ned Stark.

Still, with the apportioning of the Bolton lands to think about and work beginning immediately on tearing down Dread Fort, the rumors slowly subsided, replaced by other ones as the secret rooms of the Dread Fort were aired out and their secrets found. It would still solidify the start of Ranma's legend however and the lords of the North would start to

send their heirs and sons to meet their future lord and learn from him. This would solidify the hold of the Stark family on the North, making vassals into allies and allies into friends. A cancer had been cut from the north before it had chance to bloom and the whole was stronger for it.

Yet for all the fact the tale spread over the North, it didn't make it south. It might have, if a certain spymaster had any of his little birds in Bolton land, but he didn't at this point in time. Tales of the sack of the Dread Fort did of course make it to King's Landing and beyond, but the news of Ranma's skill did not, save in fireside bards tales, heard but not believed. After all, there was no way a boy of thirteen could kill over a hundred and fifty men was there? No, the story was obviously made up.

That was for the future however. For now, Ser Jory and a hundred chosen traveled back to Winterfell with their young charges. During this time Ranma was almost constantly eating every time they stopped to water their horses, a reaction to having been starved for a week. Jon stayed close to him the entire time and on the third day finally blurting out, "I'm sorry! I should have been with you! If I hadn't fallen for Theon's stupid teasing, I would have been with you, and we could have beaten off that murderer Ramsay and his men."

Ranma took a moment out of his eating to look at Jon for a moment then replied, "It wasn't your fault. It was no one's fault but Ramsay. And Roose too, for letting him do whatever he wanted unchecked. Would I have liked for you to be with me, sure, but it wasn't your fault I was captured." He frowned, remembering how Ramsay had taken that woman hostage and used her as a shield, forcing Ranma to surrender.

Jon frowned, unwilling to let go of his guilt and Ranma sighed. "Jon, trust me, it wasn't your fault. Try not to let Theon's taunts get to you from now on and that'll be enough. You know he only needles you because he doesn't like the fact that a 'bastard'," Ranma rolled his eyes at the word, taking any sting out of it and actually making Jon chuckle, Ranma always did that when his birth status came up for some reason, "is so much stronger and better at him at everything but archery. It's been the same problem since the beginning."

That caused Jon's smile to widen slightly but that was all. "Alright, I'll agree it wasn't my fault, but I'm still not letting you out of my sight from now on. Who knows what kind of trouble you could get up to next time!"

"Hah, as if that's ever worked before!" Ranma laughed, pushing his brother in the shoulder. Then Jon responded in like kind and they broke out into laughter.

Soon enough however, they were back at Winterfell, and for the first time in either of his lives Ranma had to deal with being smothered in motherly worry. Catelyn actually pulled him off his horse into her arms, saying "Oh my baby, what did those animals do to you, I'm never letting you out of my sight again!"

Hearing Lady Catelyn say the same words he had used caused Jon to nearly fall off his horse laughing, while Catelyn kept hugging and smothering her son with love for a few minutes before pulling back and looking at him.

She could see he was still slightly gaunt from his time being starved, and while she could not see the wounds on his body, his eyes told a different tale. Despite the smile on his face and the warmth in his deep blue eyes, there was a new-found maturity and experience there. *My boy has become a man*, she thought sadly, *far too soon, and in a way no mother would ever wish for such to come to pass.*

After that little Arya and Sansa rushed forward to hug their wayward brother, followed by Bran and even a toddling Rickon. Ranma smiled happily, once more surrounded by his family again. The darkness of the memories of his time as captive and what he had done in the battle faded under their combined warmth like snow under warm rainfall.

Theon waited on the sidelines, looking uncomfortable both at the family reunion, and the fact he hadn't been with Ranma both at the start and at the finish, unable to escape as Jon had. He would have to wait to give his own apologies, and maybe, just maybe he'd promise to be nicer to Jon. He might even keep the promise, for a while at least.

OOOOOO

Thankfully for lady Catelyn's sanity, that was the only major upheaval for a time. The next three years fell back into a busy but somewhat more normal routine. Ranma and his siblings continued to grow and learn, each of the youngsters now forming their own distinct personalities.

Sansa continued on her way to becoming the perfect noble's daughter. Her sewing and her embroidery were top notch, her manners and bearing perfect, and her face and body began to blossom into what everyone could see would be a gorgeous womanhood. Despite this, and despite the fact she looked down her nose on some of the things

Ranma still did (climb trees, roughhouse with Jon, Theon, and others) Ranma still remained her 'favorite big brother'. He would take time out of his week to spend with her, either reading with her or telling Sansa a story, mostly made up at this point to make her laugh or smile.

Bran grew up enough to chase after the older boys and Jon and Ranma smoothly introduced him to their play, though he wasn't nearly interested enough in arms-training to be given their old weight set as Ranma had predicted early on. Theon sometimes resented their new follower but for the most part put up with the youngster easily. Rickon, too, was now able to at least follow the other boys around, and did so as often as he could get away from his nurse.

Just like Ranma predicted, Arya was a wild little thing. She learned hand to hand and weapons training from Ranma almost as well as Jon and made war against Septa Mordane and her mother's attempt to change her into a proper little lady. With Ranma and Jon's connivance, which didn't end no matter how many times Catelyn took them to task about it, she continued to learn what she wanted to rather than merely what she was forced to. Ned now kept clear of it, knowing his youngest daughter had him wrapped around her little finger and, unfortunately, also knowing that Catelyn had a point.

Ranma, now with Jon and, to a lesser extent, Theon continued to learn statecraft, strategy, logistics, and tactics from Lord Stark and Maester Luwin. Despite this and his ordeal under the Bolton's Ranma's personality largely remained the same; irreverent, easy-going, caring, and eager to please his parents. To this was added a new fierce protective streak and a certain amount of maturity when dealing with matters of his future lordship. Jon was a little more introspective, somewhat more brooding at times, but still a good friend and brother.

Theon had given up trying to match the other two in swordplay, although he did so with ill grace. He instead delved into another area to prove his superiority: womanizing. Once he hit puberty, not a day went by when he didn't have a tale to rub into the other boys's faces about his time with one girl or another. Yet despite this, neither of the other boys were dismayed by being shown up in this area.

Jon had no desire to leave any Snows around. While the Stark family, even Catelyn, were supportive and welcoming to him, Septa Mordane and those like her had never ceases to make certain Jon knew his place in no uncertain terms, and at one point had almost corrupted Sansa to their way of thinking before Catelyn put her foot down hard.

Theon did, however, convince Ranma to come with him. But this wasn't because Ranma wanted to use the whores, (after all, he had seen Genma use whores on their training journey and nothing good came from it) but because he wanted to learn what girls liked.

((Flashback))

The whore was slightly older than the normal fare, and had actually been surprised and rather amused when the Young Wolf had chosen her when he came in with the Kraken boy. Every whore knew Greyjoy by this point and knew how to handle him. The young wolf was a surprise but not an unwelcome one. He was after all very comely and every girl in Winterfell except Arya (though it included Sansa thanks to her friend Jeyne) wondered if his well-known endurance translated into other things. "So what will it be, my lord, a little bit of the mouth, the tit, or the full service? You paid for it, your choice."

Ranma smiled, more than a little embarrassed by this but his desire to find out what girls actually liked overrode that. Once more, he cursed the fact that for whatever reason, he had never really been interested in girls in that way back in his previous life, not even to the extent of looking at porn. If he had, this trip would have been unnecessary, but he would be damned if he didn't please his partner when he actually got one. "None of that, actually. I just have one request: teach me what women like, in y'know, like in bed."

The older woman stared at him for a moment, then began to laugh gently. It was a rare boy indeed who cared about his partner. She reached out to cup his chin and pull the boy's embarrassed face up to look into her own. "That will take some time my lord, but you've paid for it already. Now, to begin with, many women like a man who kisses in a certain way..."

((End Flashback))

Ranma spent the entire day with the woman and left a very embarrassed but much more knowledgeable young man. The whore was asked by her fellows what the young lord was like, but she would merely smile, shaking her head and leaving them to guess.

Needless to say he was ribbed about this trip constantly by Theon and Sansa though for different reasons. Sansa was appalled her favorite brother had gone to a whorehouse, but eventually decided to blame Theon's bad influence.

Theon on the other hand was more amused and astonished that Ranma didn't want to go back, but when pressed about what happened would not reveal anything.

More importantly, Jon, Ranma and, to a lesser extent, Theon made friends with several of the young nobles of the North, especially the heirs that began to visit Winterfell on their parent's orders. SmallJon Umber, the Karstark boys Harrion, Eddard and Torrhen who were welcomed as family with open arms by Lord Stark and his family, even the older Robett Glover who was a man grown and married, Daryn Hornwood, Roger Ryswell and others. All of them showed up to learn what they could from the Young Wolf and the Twinblade, as Jon began to be called when he started to use two shorts swords rather than a longsword and knife. Edd, SmallJon, Daryn and Roger became friends with Jon and Ranma, appearing often to hunt, train or simply spend time with the two brothers, to the approval of all their houses.

Yet, the one heir who most often resided in Winterfell was Dacey Mormont. She appeared at Winterfell a month after Ranma was freed from his captivity and stated simply, "I'm here to see if the stories about the Young Wolf and his culling of the leeches of Dread Fort are true."

After that Dacey challenged Ranma to a fight with swords, and was soundly beaten. This didn't dismay her, instead the two were often seen together, and she too, became a friend to Ranma, Jon, and Theon. She stopped by at least once a month, sometimes more, to learn from Ranma and to see him. In fact rumors of the two being lovers began to circulate, but if that was the case neither gave any sign of it.

Catelyn had been somewhat worried about the relationship, hoping that her son had not fallen for the nearly thirty year old Dacey, who despite being an accomplished warrior was still striking to look upon. A marriage to house Mormont however was unnecessary, they were already counted among the most loyal vassals and friends of house Stark, so there was no need to bind them to house Stark through marriage. Ranma's hand, like that of Sansa and to a lesser extent Arya was a potent tool that could be used to strengthen the house.

When asked, Ranma had simply smiled, kissed his mother's cheek and said, "We're just friends, that's all, neither of us are interested in marrying." It was only later that Catelyn realized that this didn't mean the two weren't physically interested in one another, but as no evidence to back that up came to light, she let the matter drop. Theon didn't, of course, and needed both Dacey and Ranma, but the two bore it stoically, firing back as well as they took.

And so time passed, until one day when news of a deserter from the Night's Watch reached Winterfell.

End chapter

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So there you have my attempt at the start of a Ranma/A Song of Ice and Fire crossover. My muse thought this story up and would not let me alone until I wrote it, and since I am in a holding pattern on my job, I figured why not let my muse loose, so here you are. If you are expecting a bleep ton of dark shit, go elsewhere. If you are looking for a cocktail (mmm.... B-52's) mix of comedy, drama, violence, warfare (three parts warfare –strategy, politics/espionage and combat), a bit of romance with more than a hint of lemons eventually, then please go to my profile and vote for this story to be continued after I am finished with Horse of the Dead. The other choices are my other newly posted story, Gods, Devils and Wild Horses, Oh My a High school DxD/Ranma crossover, or continuing my mass effect/Ranma crossover. The poll is like all my others, vote = one point for your choice, a PM that tries to convince me that this story or that one is the best one to go with other than for reasons like 'I think this is good, write it' will get that story five points. I had help for this from *Trinel*, *N0mster* and several others, so that automatically gives this story 45 points. Thanks again for letting me bounce ideas off you guys and for all the facts you hooked me up with *Trinel!*

Be warned, I may make up a few names for heirs to houses like House Dustin, who don't have one designated, I'm thinking of the name Hathan- kudos do anyone who recognizes it. If I do continue it I would also be eternally grateful for a beta reader, one good at spotting small mistakes and who has a knowledge of the world of Westeros, and in particular Daenerys and her journey.

As always read and review please.

## \*Chapter 2\*: Chapter 2

EDIT: Changed where I said Jon would be the steward of house Stark while Ranma and Ned were gone. Thanks go to NOMster for pointing out how very strange and attention grabbing such a move would be.

I don't own ASolaF, if I did some of the main characters would have stopped dying off a long time ago; nor do I own Ranma 1/2, there's too much Akane and not enough Kasumi.

I have decided to put this work only in the ASolaF crossover because I will be following that version more closely and because I will be using many characters that haven't/won't appear in the TV version.

Regardless, the fact this chapter is here should tell you that it won the poll. I was amused however by the fact so few people actually PM'd me to back up any of the stories. Ah well, if you're interested check out the poll, as the PM's didn't really change any of the choices positions in relation to one another. This story won by a freaking landslide.

Normally I would respond to reviews here, but I have gotten into the habit with Third Path story of responding to them via PM, so I will start doing that for this story in the future. I will put responses to reviews from guests and people who have their PM service shut down at the end of the chapter.

Thank you everyone who pointed out the numbers screw up in the last chapter. I have gone back and corrected it, and I would urge you all to go back and reread it anyway. I have a new beta named Jessolt, and he is the man. Seriously, the chapter reads so much better its not even funny. I'm giving him a shout out for his work on this chapter too.

BE WARNED! I look upon canon as a mere guideline, something that should be touched upon a few times, but other than that... Now, on with the show.

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### Chapter 2 Times They Are a Changin' (ready or not)

"I despise you right now. I want you to know this. It is important to me that you, Ranma Stark, understand how much I loathe you at the moment."

Theon Greyjoy had grown up into a somewhat tall, good looking, rakish young man with dark black hair and equally black eyes. He bore a longbow behind him on his horse as well as a longsword at his hip, chain mail and leggings along with a cloak made of deer hide. At the moment however his good looks were ruined by the scowl on his face and the fact that said face was also a little frostbitten.

Jon too was feeling the pinch of the weather. Despite the fact that he rode out regularly with Ranma on hunting expeditions, to visit their friends in other parts of the North, and on tasks for their father, they had **never** been this far north. The farthest north they had ever gone was the Last Hearth which was the seat of House Umber, firm ally and now close friend to house Stark in the person of the house's heir, who right now was riding behind Jon and Theon. Now however, they were well past that and about a third of the way into the Gift, the land south of the wall that had been given over in perpetuity to sustain the Night Watch.

It was the fact that he couldn't feel his face anymore or the fingers of the hand that was resting lightly on one of his short swords' pommels that made Jon speak up in agreement with Theon. "For once we agree, Greyjoy. If my face doesn't recover from this Ranma, I'm going to blame you."

A great booming voice laughed behind them and both the ward and the bastard son of house Stark turned to glare at Smalljon, who was smirking at them. "And you call yourselves Northerners, it's balmy out!"

Smalljon Umber was the son and heir of House Umber's current lord, though he was small in comparison to only a very few people in Westeros. Standing at six feet five inches with wide shoulders and a heavy brown beard, the man looked as if someone had decided to mate with a bear. Ironic, considering that Dacey Mormont rode beside him yet would not touch his hirsute body for gods or gold. "If you can't handle this, wait until you get north of the Wall!"

"Ha, as if you've ever been north of the Wall!" Theon barked back. "I'm not like you, you great fucking bear, protected by your fat and that beard or yours!"

"The weather is nothing in comparison to what our father will do if we do try to get north of the Wall, which, I may remind you, is not something we plan to do on this trip." Jon muttered as another blast of cold air came through the

trees at them. This area of the North looked almost completely untouched, giving the impression that it had never felt the hand of man until you noticed that there was a single road leading through it. This was the Kingsroad, but here it was a mere dirt path leading from the western lands of house Umber and the headwaters of the Last River.

His words went unheard however, as Smalljon fired back. "At least I'm not complaining about the cold like a southerner who's seen less snowfall than tits!"

"That is pure envy speaking there," Theon crowed. "You wish you've seen as many tits as I have!"

"Point to Theon," Ranma said from the front, where he had been ignoring the not so witty repartee behind him. Jon turned to stare at his brother, who seemed to feel his eyes and turned in the saddle to smirk at him.

To an outside observer, Jon and Ranma looked very much the same, at least from a distance. Both of them were tall, slightly over six feet with lean bodies, but wide shoulders, though it was obvious that they still had some growing there to do. It was said that they both took after their fathers in looks, dark hair, long, lean faces, and dark gray eyes, in Jon's case. When someone got closer, however, they would begin to notice differences.

Ranma's eyes were not gray but blue, a deep ocean blue, deeper, darker than the normal Tully eyes and in contrast to the rest of his features, which were pure Stark. Both their hair was long, but where Jon let his hair flow free down to his shoulders like their father, Ranma had his tied in a ponytail like the Dothraki barbarians who ruled the interior of Essos were supposed to favor. Both of them had beards at present, but whereas Jon was growing quite fond of his and was thinking of keeping it in a goatee, Ranma had quickly decided that the moment he could, he was going to lose his. He didn't like having facial hair, complaining that it itched all the time. This had caused several rude comments from his male friends, to which he replied in a mature manner by threatening to thrash the lot of them (not an idle threat).

He was still boyish in many ways, shown by the smirk on his face as he looked at his brother and friends. Yet despite this, Ranma had a gravity and power to him when he wished and could exude a sternness that was all Stark, which he hadn't had when he was younger. Ranma had really come into his own as his father's heir and took his duties and responsibilities seriously. For the most part anyway, he still shied away from one specific duty that reminded him far too much of the problems he had back in his past life.

Another difference between the two brothers was what they were wearing. Jon was clad in scale mail and leathers, with a good cloak clasped on one shoulder by a white lacquered wolf's head. Ranma was clad in half plate armor. His shoulders and chest were covered with heavy armor, as were his lower legs and forearms. The rest was leather, allowing him a free range of movement to wield any weapon of his choice. For this trip he had chosen both a warhammer as well as a claymore. The warhammer was so heavy it would take a normal person both hands to wield, if they could at all, but Ranma wielded it easily with one hand and it didn't even slow him down. The claymore was a gift from House Dustin and Ranma had been obliged to take it as well, despite it being too light for his tastes. He, too, had a cloak lined with fur around the neck, which was secured on one shoulder by a small gold pin shaped like a wolf's head.

"It does my heart good to see the two of you getting along so well," he said now, blue eyes sparkling with wry humor. Those eyes were the best indication of his emotions at any moment. Ranma could control his face to a certain extent, but his eyes told that only the truth of what he was feeling. Sometimes they were light blue snapping with humor and sometimes they deepened to the darkest blue of the ocean depths with fury. Such moments were rare indeed, but they showed beyond anything else that he had the wolf's blood that house Stark was known for, despite his general outgoing nature. "If nothing else this trip has been made worth it by the fact it has given you to the opportunity to bond."

Their companions hooted and hollered at Theon and Smalljon who exchanged grimaces. They had never gotten along since being introduced, much like Jon and Theon though for different reasons. Smalljon didn't like Theon, thinking him more of a Kraken than could be trusted, while Theon thought Smalljon was an idiotic barbarian.

Theon swiftly shot back, "It'll be the only outcome, and don't get used to it Stark! This is a madcap chase and you know it."

"I knew that the moment we set out, doesn't mean it isn't worthwhile," Ranma replied, nonchalantly resting one hand on the pommel of his Claymore, staring down at the little wolf pup that was keeping up with the ride with some difficulty. That he was keeping up at all, both him and Ghost, Jon's pup, was a surprise in and of itself, for direwolves so young. Yet, the sight of Fenris running along beside his horse made him remember how they all had come to be out here.



(Flashback)

Ranma and Jon looked up from their studies when they heard a polite cough from the doorway. They had been discussing with Maester Luwin the tactics of one of the battles in the war called, rather romantically (and stupidly in Ranma's opinion), the Dance of the Dragons. Theon, too, looked up from where he had been reading a book on naval tactics, something that Master Luwin had given him since the next battle they were going to study would have a naval component to it.

In the doorway stood a servant, his face apologetic. "Young master, your father requests you to get ready to ride out with him. Patrols have found a Night Watch deserter and they are holding him in a nearby holdfast."

The three boys stood up and bowed to the maester, while Ranma made their apologies. "Sorry about this maester, but duty calls."

With that all three boys made their way out of the room and followed the servants down the corridor and out into the courtyard. There they found horses ready to go, and Ned arguing with Catelyn. "He's too young Ned! You can't let him see something like this!"

"I was younger than Bran when I first saw my father carry out a sentence."

To one side stood Arya, looking put out. Ranma shook his head at her. "Don't look like that, this isn't something you should be sad about missing, Arya."

"I'm missing it because I'm a girl," she growled angrily, sounding almost like one of their family's totems for a moment. "I'm older than Bran, why can't I go?"

"Because I said so!" Catelyn said sharply, turning from her losing argument with Ned. "This is not something that a young girl needs to see and you get out of too many lessons as it is!"

"Arya, it is not like we're just going out riding for the heck of it." Ranma said moving past her and placing a gentle hand on his mother's shoulder. She calmed down a little, hearing him agree with her, and he turned back to Arya. "There is nothing interesting about this Arya, trust me. It's simply a task we have to see to, that's all, the law of the land." Arya subsided, but still scowled irritably at not being allowed to come and Ranma sighed.

Bran was already in a saddle, looking nervous and rather torn between exhilarated and scared, possibly even a little nauseous. "Father, did commander Mormont send word about why this one deserted?" Ranma asked, smiling encouragingly at his younger brother.

His father shook his head somberly. "There will always be men who try to get out of their duty and given word, my son. Their reasons vary and rarely will they tell the truth even when caught."

Jon came back at that moment, carrying both his short swords strapped to his sides as well as a claymore for Ranma. He murmured "Were you able to talk Arya out of coming with us? You know she'll only try to follow if she's still of a mind."

"We can only hope," Ranma muttered back, and Ned carefully kept his face blank hiding his amusement. Arya was proving more of a handful with every passing year, but Ranma's initial idea of channeling her wild ways had paid off handsomely.

Because of the deal they had struck, Arya kept at her studies of needlework and other feminine skills in return for training with Ranma in the afternoon. She was still nowhere near as good at the womanly activities as Sansa was, yet that wasn't who she was either. Arya was good enough to get by, and the relationship between the two sisters, while not friendly was, at least, not combative (or not overly so).

On the other hand, she had taken to Ranma's training like a duck to water Ned felt at this point that she could even take on one or two of the other younger bucks in the guard (outside of his heir's companions or those who practiced with them often, of course) and possibly beat them. But that had done nothing to change the fact that she was a willful, wild little girl, who constantly tested her parents, trying to get away with anything she could. It was trying even for Ranma, especially when she tried to get out of her end of the agreement they had made so many years ago.

Ned shook that thought off however, simply nodding at the two boys, along with Theon who had already moved to his horse, strapping his bow behind his saddle. "Let's be about it," Ned said and turned his horse to face the portcullis of the King's Gate.

The road went through the small town that had been built to house the smallfolk during times of winter and strife around Winterfell, which in these long years of summer was home to a permanent village, and then out into the lands beyond. It took them several hours ride to reach the holdfast where Ned's patrol was keeping the deserter. They had him tied to the ground, three of them standing over him silently. Their lord had given stern commands to any group that found a deserter from the Wall (there had been several over the last few years). There was to be no taunting or any other kind of humor at their expense. The lives of the Night Watch were harsh and people sometimes simply could not stand up to it. While breaking their given word meant that their life was forfeit, that didn't mean you had to make japes about it.

Ned and the others got down from their horses, with Ranma helping his younger brother down. Ned grimly walked up to the man as his guards forced him to kneel on the ground. "Your name?"

The man on the ground was a swarthy sort, still somewhat tanned despite possibly years serving the Night Watch, and when he spoke his accent told Ned man was Dornish. Yet, there was also a broken air about him, and his face and fingers were suffering from frostbite. "A-Andrew Romario, my Lord, I come from Dorne originally. Er, I was an inn keeper before I had the lapse in judgment that landed me in trouble with the law."

Ned nodded, one-handed bringing Ice around from where it had hung on his back. "As a man of the Night Watch, you know the penalty for running from your house, for breaking your word. You have any last words before sentence is carried out?"

The man shivered a little looking up at them all with wild eyes. His eyes lit on Bran for some reason and he twitched a little. "You Northerners," he murmured, "a cold harsh people to make such a young lad face this."

He broke out of that odd little moment to stare up at Ned and at the others. "I, I know you won't believe me Lord, but I saw them, t'was only fleeing that let me live. I saw them, the White Walkers." Ranma's eyes widened and then narrowed in contemplation as the man began to giggle maniacally. "Legends, living legends and nightmares!" he shouted, shaking his head. "Legends, alive and killing, killing my patrol entire. Rangers with three or more years of service with the Night Watch and only I survived. To run and hide and run again, always running!" He raised his hands beseechingly. "I know what I saw, my lord, crazy you may call me, coward I am, but I know I saw them."

Ned nodded slightly, and raised his sword about to pass sentence when Ranma said, "Wait, father." Ned turned incredulously to his oldest son, but Ranma swiftly went to his knees in front of the man. "These White Walkers, what do they look like?"

The man stared at him, surprised, then answered hesitantly. "They, they look almost like a man, but they are slightly taller and thin, too thin, almost skeletal. But they have inhuman strength despite that. Their faces are like ours only pointed, far more angular, as if they were crossed with a fox and their eyes, they glow. They glow blue, so cold it eats at a man's mind. And they bring the cold with them, so cold..."

Ranma nodded thoughtfully and stood back. His eyes were far away and Ned watched him for a moment wondering what his son was thinking but then Ranma came back to earth, looking down at the deserter. "I can't forgive you for breaking your chosen word, for that you know the sentence. But know that I'll try to get to the bottom of what you saw, and, if you told the truth, I will have your name remembered as one of great renown."

The man looked up at him, his eyes filled with tears and he nodded. Ned took this as his cue and stepped forward, raising his sword. "Andrew Romario, you are accused of deserting your brothers and your place on the Wall, proven by your own words. The penalty is death and is to be carried out immediately."

Bran shuddered and looked away as the headless corpse collapsed to the side, the stump where its head had been spurting blood for a moment. "Don't look away," Jon said sternly, pulling his head around again. "This is the duty of a Lord Paramount of the North, the power of life and death. The man who passes the sentence swings the sword. If you take a man's life, you owe it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words." Jon actually was paraphrasing what Ned had told the trio of older boys the first time he had them watch him dispense justice years ago, and it had been easier for him, since he had already been through a battle by that point.

Theon sneered a little and was about to say that it wasn't a duty a bastard would have anything to do with, but a single searing glance from Ranma made him choke on the words. Bran didn't notice, simply staring at the body of this stranger who had been alive moments ago, and now wasn't due to his own father's blade. He gulped convulsively, but did not look away again.

Ned shook his head softly and moved over to get a cloth from Ser Jory, slowly cleaning his blade, then turning to look at his oldest son. "You know he was just raving, correct? There hasn't been a sighting of a White Walker in over 400

years."

"That doesn't mean they aren't coming back." Ranma said quietly, tapping his forehead for a moment, covering the act by pushing some of his hair back up out of his eye.

Ned's eyes widened as he realized what Ranma was implying. *Could this be why Ranma was given the gift of the memories of his past life?* Ned shook his head, however. That's not enough, if you're asking me to do something like rouse the North or send troops north to the Wall, we will need much more than this."

"That's why I think I should go. I'll go up to Commander Mormont personally." He hurried on as his father's expression grew stonier. "You know there must be something odd going on, father. This is the fourth deserter from the wall in the past year alone! There hadn't been five in the previous ten years combined, was there?"

"No, there wasn't," Ned muttered, shaking his head, not having put that together before for some reason. He stood there thinking hard for a moment, taking in his son's stubborn face and that niggling little feeling at the back of his mind that said that this was at least in part why Ranma had been allowed to keep his knowledge, had been gifted with his physical skills. "I will agree to that, I suppose, but you will tell your mother you're going and you will take as many of your friends as are free." Ned refused to use the name given to Ranma's companions by the smallfolk, thinking it ostentatious in the extreme. Wolf-sworn indeed!

The idea of telling his mother that he was going to go out on it what amounted to possibly a personal adventure made Ranma gulp a little. She never liked watching him leave. Still, he nodded gamely and the group remounted quickly.

Bran was still having trouble with what he had seen, though Jon was helping him as best he could. Ned allowed his horse to slow until Bran's came up alongside him then began to talk to his second-born son.

About an hour later one of the scouts came riding up to them. "My Lords, we found something you might want to see."

(End flashback)

What the guards had found was a dead direwolf bitch and her litter of puppies, the bitch having been killed in a battle with a massive stag. There had been five puppies, or so they thought at first, and taking it as a sign Ranma, with Bran's help had convinced Ned to let the siblings have one each. They found another one, with fur the white of new fallen snow along the way back, which Jon had claimed. Reactions had been mixed, but all the children had fallen in love with their new companions swiftly.

That was why Ranma had decided to head further north and how he'd gained Fenris as a companion, as well as the others. He thought Sansa and her choice the name Lady for her direwolf was rather silly, though not as silly as Rickon's naming his Shaggydog. Nymeria and Ghost were much more fitting, though Bran had not decided on a name for his yet.

It had been three weeks since then, and Ranma had learned quickly that there was a far deeper connection between him and Fenris than the bond of master and pet. The direwolf was very intelligent with much more stamina and strength than a puppy his age should have. So did Jon's Ghost and they both seemed to have taken on some aspects of their Masters personalities. There were times... Ranma shook that thought off, it wasn't possible was it?

The banter behind him continued, the rest of Ranma's companions joining in and he smiled. Ranma had more friends in this dimension than he had ever had in his old one and not a single one of them had tried seriously to kill him (outside of spars anyway). Dacey, riding next to Smalljon, saw that small smile of her lord and smiled to herself looking around at their companions.

Her mother was always irritated with the fact that Dacey spent so much time at Winterfell or traveling between it and the Bear Island, and at first Maeve Mormont thought that Ranma and Dacey might be getting married at some point, but neither were under any illusions about the relationship. For Dacey, it was almost a purely physical thing. Ranma's physical abilities, the aura of command that Ranma allowed out sometimes, attracted her on some animal level. Ranma liked her as a friend, and had no issue with meeting her physical demands. To Dacey, it was simply a physical thing; to Ranma it was both a physical thing and a learning experience.

*Not*, she thought now, remembering their last encounter before they had left Winterfell, *that he has much in the way of learning to do there any longer*. She'd had a few lovers before him, but none of them had Ranma's **flair** for it. It was as if he was able to take his ability to learn the skills necessary for combat and apply them to anything physical, reading how Dacey's body reacted to learn what made her respond. Dacey had been the master the first time and him the apprentice, filled with knowledge but not much real life experience, now the relationship was decidedly

reversed, and she loved it.

Neither of them were looking for a serious romance at this time and Ranma knew that when he married would have to be a political marriage. He hated that, and made no bones about it, but still hadn't wouldn't truly fight against it. Still, Dacey was always amused when the Lords of the North would stop by bringing their daughters with them in an effort for one of them to catch Ranma's eye.

Almost all of them were simpering silly little girls, sort of like Sansa with the same romantic notions, and utterly in awe of Ranma and his reputation, which had spread over the North despite the fact that no one who hadn't been there (outside of Dacey and his other friends) believed what had really happened at the Dread Fort. It had even spread south, and as far as the cities of Essos though no one knew it, but as a bard's tale not something seen as truth by most.

She chuckled now, remembering the last time the Karstark girl had come by with her father and brothers. All of them were welcomed warmly, but there was no hint of her romantic relationship between Alys and Ranma, who had instead taken her and Sansa on a trip to White Harbor for Sansa's name-day present. Despite her father's best efforts, the two of them saw one another as family, and the young girl, she was only a half year older than Sansa, enjoyed having another brother especially one who was much funnier and more willing to spend time with her than any of her own.

*They'd do better to learn how to fight and stand up for themselves rather than all that womanly duties crap,* she thought, shaking her head and trying to free it of the thought, but it wouldn't free itself that easily. A few of them were being trained in estate management, but very few and not a one of them had caught Ranma's eye. She knew the Lady Catelyn was growing concerned about it and she had taken to glaring at Dacey whenever she was around, but it wasn't her fault that none of them were Ranma's type. Ranma knew he was perfectly free to look around. There could be nothing permanent between the two of them and he knew that before they even got together for the first time.

She looked over when Edd said "What are you smiling at Dacey? There's no way this lot can amuse you any longer, their normal jests have gotten so old on this trip I'm almost inclined to try and get Hathan to join in just to break the monotony."

She laughed a little reaching out to slap Edd on the shoulder. Edd and the other companions chosen for this trip had gone through Ranma's training, though nowhere near to the extent that Jon had. Most of them had caught up with her and Theon, however. Edd, for example, was the youngest of them, a full year younger than the three Winterfell boys and wasn't even at the point of shaving regularly, but he was devilishly quick. A spear rode in his stirrups, which he could use as a lance or as a pole arm, and he wielded it with a style that Ranma had begun to teach him almost from the moment they met. Dacey had heard it described as somewhat similar to the Red Viper of Dorne by Ser Rodrick Cassel, who had seen Prince Oberyn fight at a tournament down south.

"Just remembering the last time your father brought Alys along to Winterfell. He's really trying to push that marriage, isn't he?" Dacey replied.

Edd chuckled, then laughed aloud. "Yes, he most certainly is. He's wanted a closer relationship with house Stark since I can remember, though I think he's chasing down the wrong trail there. Ranma is no more interested in wedding and bedding my sister than he is in bedding one of his own."

Dacey cocked her head for a second, her eyes narrowed speculatively. There had been something about the way he had said 'chasing down the wrong trail' there... She shook it off however, and nodded. "Exactly, I don't know what sort of woman Ranma is interested in, but simpering romantic little girls who have had their head filled with romantic and knightly drivel certainly isn't it."

Daryn Hornwood and Roger Ryswell were riding behind them, and both of them broke out into laughter. "True," Roger said between chuckles. His house had been one of the noble houses that had had ties to the Bolton clan due to the marriage of his older sister Bethany to Lord Bolton, and his family had initially been angry that the house had been wiped out and the Dread Fort razed. That was before they learned why it happened and before Domeric passed on the idea that Bethany had possibly been killed by poison, although no one could prove it so long after the fact.

Both young man were tall, fair to look upon, and wore chain mail. Daryn was a brown haired young man who wore it cut short. Roger wore his own blonde hair down to his shoulders, though his beard was nowhere near as luxurious as his friend's, which was close to rivaling his father's. Roger wielded a single bladed axe and the lance with equal proficiency, both of which he had strapped to his saddle beside him, while Daryn had a long sword and shield, much like Dacey, though her own weapon was closer to a bastard sword than a longsword. This was only natural as she was quite a bit stronger than Daryn, although he was quicker than she was.

Roger went on, "My father's been most amused by it and relieved that Lord Stark and Lady Catelyn have made no efforts to encourage the match. It's well-known that Karstark has ancient family ties to House Stark, and the friendship you have with Jon and Ranma is well known Edd. But House Stark can't favor one family of the North like that over another."

"All the same," Daryn said worriedly, pitching his voice lower now, "Ranma's sixteen, it's about time he started to look for a wife." He was an older man, full twenty and two, and he took a more stoic and somber look of at the word than Roger, who was only two years older than the Winterfell trio. "At least a betrothal should be coming soon, don't you think?"

The last member of their party, which was the majority of the group the smallfolk had taken to calling the wolf-sworn, was named Hathan Snow. He was the next oldest of them after Daryn at age twenty and he had a distinct look of the Manderly family, though he was much thinner than any of that family and none had claimed to be his father, although he was raised with the main Manderly family. He already sported a large handlebar mustache. He was but of medium height, making him one of the shorter members of the party, but had truly massive shoulders and he wore full heavy plate. He was also deadly with the lance that was even now riding upright beside him and had cut his teeth on tournaments in the South since he was ten and two, coming home only last year.

There were rumors going about that the knight he had gone south with as his squire had been killed in a tournament 'accident' after facing the Mountain that Rides in the Crown Lands. The storytellers claimed that he fell off his horse badly cracking his skull open on the ground, but the grim look in Hathan's face whenever anyone mentioned tournaments seemed to signify something else had occurred there.

He didn't speak up often, yet Hathan had the political acumen that the Manderly family was well known for. He spoke up now, his voice a soft, almost musical tenor. "I think the Lady Catelyn would prefer that Ranma look south for his future bride. Tell it true lords and lady, does House Stark really need a marriage in the North to solidify its position at this point?"

They all burst out laughing at that. House Stark and its position in the North had rarely been stronger than it was today. There was the friendship between the heirs to consider, as well as the fact that Ned was well thought of as an honorable and trustworthy man, building on the reputation of his house easily. And then there was the way that they had dealt with House Bolton.

While House Stark hadn't gained anything in the way of coins or land from doing so, all of Bolton's former neighbors had been enriched by it and with those riches, came the message. 'Cross me,' that message said, 'and I will end your house'. One or two of the houses minor might have been angered by that message, especially the ones that looked to house Bolton, but the houses major and the noble houses themselves were simply approving of it. A strong and honorable lord, who could also be ruthless when the situation called for it, was precisely what they wanted to see.

"How far south do you think?" Daryn asked. He and Hathan were really the only ones who had much interest in politics, but the others were slowly realizing that they needed to learn this game as well, something that their parents were encouraging each in their own fashion.

"Lady Catelyn is a Tully," Hathan said earnestly. "A marriage between House Stark and one of the other houses in the Riverlands would probably be a good idea tying the regions together even more. Though I'm uncertain which of Riverlands house would be strong enough to interest her for Ranma, or even have daughters of a marriageable age."

"Just hope it isn't the Frey's." Roger muttered shaking his head.

One or two of the others actually shuddered a bit at that. House Frey were the rulers of the castle/bridge known as the Twins, the biggest and best, indeed in many ways the only crossing over the river Green Fork. It was an important position in many ways, since the castle was in an excellent position over a trade route, and a bastion between the North and the Riverlands along the only quick route South for trade or any force of a significant size. The Freys however were not well thought of by any of their neighbors or indeed practically anyone else. 'We take our tolls' was the house motto, and they certainly did that, extorting as much as they could from anyone who tried to cross their bridge.

Walder, the head of house Frey, was ambitious. He was always looking to marry off his large brood of children (both legitimate and not), who he had gotten on numerous wives, to better his position. But that and the exorbitant tolls he forced on most travelers were only two reasons why the men of the North had nothing but contempt for him and his entire house. While the rest of the Riverlands had risen to follow Lord Stark and Lord Baratheon in the rebellion against the Targaryen dynasty, House Frey had sat it out until it became clear which side was winning and then sent forth its own men to claim their share of the spoils. Nor had they supplied any men to either the defense of the

Riverlands' ports or the forces attacking the Iron Islands during the Greyjoy rebellion.

Only Daryn and Dacey (who at twenty and eight was actually the oldest) was old enough to remember anything from that war outside of the history books, but that kind of opportunism and cowardice did not sit well with any of them.

"Have no fear," Ranma said quietly from the head of the column. "I have no intention of marrying a Frey, come what may. They are far too ambitious and not nearly honorable enough to interest me or my family. I **would** wish to marry a woman with a spine, one who can stand on her own two feet of course, but alas what she brings to the marriage in terms of family and influence is indeed more important." He shrugged, "Such is life. Now hush, I think I can hear our scouts returning." Actually Ranma wasn't at all certain it had been his own ears that picked up the sounds of the scouts, but he shoved that thought aside, yet again.

The scouts had been one of Lady Catelyn's additions to the group. She had insisted that Ranma at least be able to send out scouts around his party, to make certain that they weren't being ambushed or walking into anything. North of the Last Hearth the land was harsh, and House Umber and the nearby mountain clans had often felt the sting of wildling raids.

She had in point of fact argued strenuously against Ranma going at all and had then almost demanded he take a large force of guards, but Ranma had countered that he wouldn't need protecting that much, that his friends would be with him, and they could move much faster than a larger force. Catelyn had at last capitulated, but only with the demand that he send a message back by raven whenever he could, as well as dozens of other motherly conditions. Ranma hadn't minded, still loving the fact he had a mother who cared for him now and simply hugged her and kissed her on the cheek for worrying about him. Indeed, he had sent back regular reports to her until they entered the Gift, which was even more sparsely populated than the rest of the North, apparently.

Ranma and his band had met up with the trackers on the border between mountain clan and Umber land, before they entered the Gift. They were both superstitious and did not like the fact that Ranma fully expected them to run into trouble at some point. When they had heard about the reason for the trip, both of them had looked very concerned, muttering about ancient tales and the forces of the far cold. Whatever that meant, Ranma didn't quite know. He had talked to Maester Luwin about the White Walkers, but all he could tell him up about them were tales and hearsay and had refused to believe there could be any facts behind those rumors. Regardless, the two mountain clansmen believed in the White Walkers far more easily than any of Ranma's friends, who felt this was simply an excellent excuse to go and see the Wall.

According to Luwin, however, there hadn't been a single proven sighting of a White Walker since the coming of the dragons and the Targaryen dynasty. *But the dragons aren't here any longer*, Ranma thought to himself grimly, waiting as the two scouts made their way back to them through the heavy, rocky scrubland and woods that made up this portion of The Gift.

One of them pulled up in front of Ranma's horse (which he only rode because he hated having to look up to his friends when he talked to them) pointing back the way they came. "Stark, there's a group of wildlings coming this way, about two hands worth." The mountain man didn't actually know his numbers, but he knew to count by his fingers.

"Could you tell what they were? A raiding party, scouts themselves, or something else?" Ranma asked sharply.

"They're armed, Stark," man said shaking his head, "that's about all we could tell. There may be some among them that're female, but amongst wildlings the women all carry weapons, too."

"About two hands worth." Ranma said thoughtfully looking around. All of his fellows were looking anticipatory, checking their weapons. "I want prisoners," he said calmly, "try to remember that, please. At least four, I think. Are they actually coming down the road or moving through the woods?"

"No, they're making straight south, as fast as they can go." The Norrey man frowned thoughtfully scratching at his facial tattoos. "If I didn't know better I'd say they were being chased, or at least runin' from something that scared them something fierce. They ain't being nearly as careful as normal, and they ain't stayin' fully on the road. They're headin' straight south... tis odd to be sure."

"Definitely want prisoners." Ranma said nodding his head. "Make that an order, gentlemen. If they're not coming down the trail, do you think they'll jump us or simply move on past?"

"Wildlings don't grow beyond puberty if they're stupid, Stark pup," the other scout, an older man with a long grey beard, scoffed. "If I was them, I'd steer well clear this lot. You're armed, there's nine o' you, and even if they took you by surprise they'd take their lumps doing it. And you ain't carrying anythin' that they'd be interested in."

"A good point." Hathan said thoughtfully. "So we'll just have to ambush them instead."

The younger scout smirked, tapping his long dagger where it was thrust through his belt. "There's a place about two miles back, Lord, heavy rocks and even more trees than here, including one large rock about on their path. One of us can be up in the trees, and we can tell you when to ride out."

Ranma nodded approvingly. "Let's do it."

With that, the group turned their horses and trotted back the way they came, anticipation rising in the air. Fenris and Ghost seemed to feel it and were jumping around anxiously, but a stern look from their chosen masters stilled both of them. Ranma motioned for Theon. "When we get it stuck in, I want you to shoot down anyone that tries to run. If our scouts are wrong and this group is scouting for some larger force behind them, I don't want any information to get back to them."

"Right," Theon answered, smacking his bow lightly. "I'll head up into the trees with the scout who's going to signal the attack. I can shoot from up in the trees just as well as I can off horseback and my range will be better."

"Good man." Ranma smacked him on the shoulder causing Theon's smile to widen into a grin. Ranma turned to Dacey and Jon and said softly, "You two will be in charge of gathering a prisoner each for us. While I trust the others to try and follow my orders, they are kind of excitable. I can trust you two to keep your cool, can't I?"

"Yes." Dacey nodded seriously. She was the most blooded warrior among them and knew all too well the value of information.

Jon simply smirked. "You have to ask?"

Ranma grinned at him and the ride continued until they reached the hiding place the scouts had found.

Once there, Jon and Ranma spent some moments trying to get their direwolves to stay put. While they were doing this, everyone save Hathan and Roger tied up their horses out of sight. The two of them were the only ones who had trained predominantly to be cavalymen and were the only ones with lances. Ranma split them off, leaving them with the horses for now. This was going to be a quick and dirty skirmish. There would be no time for them to get up the speed that made cavalry so deadly or even space to do it here in here in the rocky scrubland, where a hoof put wrong could break a horse's leg. Neither man made much of it, being experienced enough to know that the horses needed to be watched, and that their skill set was ill suited for this.

They waited there for about forty minutes, then the scout signaled that the group work of wildlings were in view. About thirty minutes later, they were close enough and the younger Norrey scout signaled the attack.

The wildlings were a straggly bunch, clad in mismatched leathers, breeches, and straggly furs but all of them carried weapons, the sight of which made Ranma's eyes narrow in speculation. The party had gotten strung out here in the slightly denser woods, but when the wolf-sworn charged the wildlings, unlike a disciplined force, which might have felt shock, retreating or holding their ground they simply turned and bellowed their own battle cries, charging forward. If the wolf-sworn had outnumbered them, they'd probably have broken and ran, but as it was they were simply going to stay and fight.

Ranma ducked under one badly chipped and rusted sword that was trying to take his head off before that man was forced to turn aside to face off against Daryn. Ranma blocked another, slightly better, blade with his own claymore then reached out with one hand, snake quick, to grab the shaft of a spear right behind its head as another wildling tried to drive it into his side. Without even a grunt of effort, he used the spear to lift the man who had tried to kill him and, before he could let go of the spear, the wildling found himself slammed head first into a tree. There was a horrible cracking sound and he fell to the ground, neck broken along with his skull.

The wildling man whose sword was locked with Ranma's gaped at this show of strength, then when Ranma disengaged tried to lunge forward desperately. Ranma sidestepped easily, his Claymore coming back in an economical swing with the flat of the blade slamming into the man's unarmored head. He went down like a sack of wheat and Ranma moved on. By this time, however, all the other wildlings were down, dead or unconscious. The only exception to this was one who Jon had pinned to a tree, his short swords on either side of the wildling's neck like a pair of scissors ready to snip an errant lock of hair.

Ranma grimaced a bit internally as he looked at the bodies littering the woods. Despite all the 'practice' he had fighting his way out of the Dread Fort's dungeons, killing was not something he ever got used to. Nor did he ever wish to be used to it, really, but unlike in his original life Ranma would not shrink away from it either.

While the others made their way over to the still awake prisoner, Ranma looked around at the wildlings, turning one of them over to stare down at his chest and opening a few of the packs many of them were carrying. He frowned thoughtfully then nodded at Theon who had joined him from out of the woods. The two mountain clan trackers were also making their way over to the prisoner Jon had taken and the two younger men joined them quickly.

"Ha!" said with one of the scouts, as he got close. "That's a woman. At least we'll have some fun tonight."

Theon blanched and moved very quickly away from Ranma as his eyes grew dark blue. Ranma said softly, "And what do you mean by that?"

The two scouts had never been around the young Wolf before this trip. They had heard stories, but most of those stories centered around his skill in battle not his thoughts about... certain activities. So it wasn't surprising when the man answered "Why we'll be taking our pleasure with her tonight, what else! Oh, of course you'll go first but surely..."

That was far as he got before he felt a clamp lock around his throat and he was suddenly lifted off the ground a full foot into the air. His eyes widened in shock and his hands went to his throat trying to fight back but Ranma's grip on his throat was unbreakable. He held the man aloft without any apparent effort and stared at the other tracker. "There will be no further discussion about that." he said softly. "If I hear that you tried to force yourself upon our prisoner, I will kill you both myself, is that understood?"

Dacey smiled approvingly as did most of the others, save Smalljon and Theon who simply shuddered a little. Smalljon could no longer remember how it came up in conversation, but he'd whispered, probably while he was drunk if he was honest, that his father and his family still practiced the right of the first night. Ranma's reaction to that news had given Smalljon nightmares for days after. Ranma hadn't raised his voice, but when his dark blue eyes locked on you like that you knew he was very angry indeed.

Theon, too, had come under fire for his family's motto and habit of raping women they came across in their raids when he espoused the family motto once too often in Ranma's hearing. Theon had commented about it being the right of the strong or something like that. The next moment found him hanging by his ankles outside a window while Ranma calmly asked Theon if it was Ranma's right to drop him because he was strong enough to do so.

Daryn stepped forward, placing a comradely hand on Ranma's shoulders. "Let him go, Ranma, he doesn't know your ways, and to be fair, it's not as if wildlings don't steal away women. What they do with them doesn't bare thinking about."

"Just because of our enemies act like animals doesn't mean we need to stoop to their level." Ranma said dropping the young Norrey scout to the ground. "Besides, look at them," he went on, motioning with his head over at the bodies. "Only two have any kind of armor, most of them were carrying small packs full of clothing and food, nothing else, and while they were armed, does this look like something a real wildling raider would use?" He reached down and picked up a rusted sword one of the wildlings had wielded and showed the others.

Roger grunted, reaching down and grabbing up a spear, which the word makeshift could be used to describe very well. It was a simple piece of wood, sharper at one end, with none of the hardening, shaping, or the steel tip that a real spear like Edd's had. "Ranma's got a point."

Ranma moved over closer to the prisoner to stare at her. The woman's face was oddly composed, having gotten over her fear while Ranma was making his point a moment ago. "So what are you? Deserters from some wildling band or refugees of some kind?"

The woman answered in the old tongue and it took a moment for Ranma to mentally translate it into common. "We flee. I not understand word refugee, we flee."

Ranma looked at Jon, who nodded and translated Ranma's question. While Ranma could understand spoken old tongue, he couldn't speak it without a horrible accent that made him sound like a complete idiot, sort of like a male version of Shampoo's Japanese. Jon, however, was much better at languages. "Flee from what?"

"We flee from Ryder and the Others" the prisoner replied, shivering in dread. "The Others are coming South. The Great Cold is coming."

"Look at me!" Ranma ordered, turning her head so that he could lock eyes with her. "I am Ranma Stark. 'Winter is coming' is the motto of my family, but you're not scared of winter, you're scared of something else. What are these Others you mentioned?"



"I cannot speak of them." She said. "They feel it when you talk of them. Monsters of glowing blue eyes and endless unlife."

"White walkers.", Ranma replied, grimly.

The woman shuddered. "Yes, but do not name them!" She looked up at the sky, where the sun was going down already. Soon it would be night. She shivered at the idea of speaking of them so close to dusk since it was at night when the Others came out. "They have powers, odd strengths, no man can stand against them, no spell or weapon works upon them. And where they go, where their will touches the land, the dead come alive. Come alive to serve them." She shuddered again and would not speak further.

Jon translated for the others, who hadn't been trained in the old tongue as well as he or Ranma had.

Smalljon scoffed as did Hathan. "Please, the White Walkers are a myth. I'll admit that you were quick enough to grab onto an idea for a bit of a lark up to the Wall, Ranma, but surely you didn't really think..."

Smalljon trailed off staring at Ranma's serious expression. "You were serious?"

Ranma nodded grimly. He had never shared with anyone but Jon and his father how he had the memories of another life inside, but the description he had heard from the deserter, the glowing blue eyes, matched what the old gods had shown him that one time in the godswood of Winterfell, or at least a part of what they had shown him.

"If that is so we should turn back." Hathan said. "We have prisoners now, they can give us an idea of what's going on beyond the Wall. Ignoring this mumbo-jumbo about White Walkers, if something is going on to stir up the wildlings, then you need to inform your father and the other Lords of the North."

"Bah!" said Smalljon. "It's some kind of wildlings trick, trying to use superstition against us, to make us wary of facing them." Roger and Daryn both nodded agreement.

"I think," Jon said, thoughtfully staring at the prisoner who he was still pinning to the tree with his swords around her neck, "that we've taken several prisoners here. We should take this one back South with us, but I think we should keep going with the others and drop them off at the Wall with Uncle Benjen and Lord Commander Mormont. "There are some wildling groups that the Night Watch work with at times. He may be able to convince them to tell him more one way or another."

Roger frowned. "I think we should turn back. We've got valuable sources of information here, watching them on the road would be difficult, and if a few of them escape..." he shrugged.

"We keep going." Ranma said shortly, reaching down to pick up Fenris, who had left the horses behind to find his chosen human, scratching the pup behind his ears. "We keep going, and we force this lot to tell all they know about the White Walkers and what's going on north of the Wall to the Night Watch. I'm getting the impression that there's more going on here than just the Others. She said something about fleeing from someone else, which might mean that there's more trouble stirring than the Others, if they weren't bad enough."

"A new King Beyond the Wall, you think?", asked Edd, remembering his history lessons.

"Maybe, and if so the Night Watch will have to be reinforced. The Wall is a fantastic defensive position but you all know how weak the Night Watch has become the past few years and how many of their fortresses have been left to fall apart in recent years."

Theon shrugged. "That process started before even Robert's rebellion, it's just getting as low as it can go now. Though I agree with that, if something's going on beyond the Wall, the Night Watch needs to be warned."

Ranma nodded and gestured around at two unconscious wildlings, which Dacey was standing over. One was her own prisoner, the other had been smacked aside by Daryn and she had jumped in before the Hornwood heir could finish the wildling off. "Tie them up, we'll put them on the spare pack horses, and I'll carry some of our gear."

"And I." Jon said. "I might not have your endurance Ranma, but we can at least give the horses a bit of a break."

Ranma nodded, and the others, all of whom knew the two Starks (for Jon was a Stark, whatever his mother's lineage or the dubious validity of his birth) brothers had much more endurance and strength than any of them, even Smalljon, went about their business.

Within twenty minutes, the group was on their way again. They stopped to rest for the evening several hours later,

well away from the scene of the battle.

The next day, they were up early. The woman they had captured, whose name was Osha, had proven to be the most levelheaded of the prisoners. The others had all tried to escape at one point or another during the night and refused to say anything to the wolf-sworn but curses. Osha tried to reason with them, but they simply spat at her and called her a traitor but something about Ranma had given her courage, despite the fact that they were taking her North again.

All the others had also realized that, and it was a constant trial watching them for the next three weeks while the group continued to traverse the Gift. Having to watch the prisoners slowed the band down, but they still made good time, yet for all of that, their unease grew.

For one thing, while the Gift was supposed to be somewhat sparsely populated with smallfolk, who were dedicated to providing for the Night Watch and the Wall, they had seen no sign of anyone. That population should have been built up around the Kingsroad, yet they had not come upon a single person yet. Even the massive, well defended inns that were maintained along the Kingsroad in the North were empty here for some reason, their owners apparently having fled.

Three weeks after the ambush they passed another abandoned inn. Ranma frowned faintly and held up a hand for them to halt. The Norrey scouts came out of the surrounding forest, looking at him quizzically and he shook his head. "Stay with us for a moment. Hathan? Can you get out our map?"

Hathan was staring off into the distance, fingering his lance shaft uncomfortably. And it took Ranma several moments to get his attention. "Hathan!"

The Manderly man shook his head shaking himself out of whatever stupor he had fallen into. "Sorry, what?"

"What's wrong?" Ranma asked moving back to join him while the others looked on in concern. Hathan was not normally given to introspection or spacing out like that and they all wondered what was going on.

"I don't know, milord," Hathan said shivering a little. "There's something wrong. By the Seven, I can't give you any more clear a description than that but there is something wrong. That's all I can say."

The wildling woman cackled. She had picked up the common tongue easily over the past three weeks and was able to follow what the lance bearer had said. "The Seven," she scoffed. "You left the lands of the Seven behind when you entered the Gift, man of the white city. They're barely a whisper here. It is the old gods who hold sway here. The farther north you get, the more true that is."

For some reason Hathan shivered, he actually believed her. After a moment however he regained control of himself. Resolutely, he removed the map, putting the uneasy feeling to the back of mind.

Ranma looked down at the map, frowning faintly. "We've seen a few abandoned farmsteads and inns but we haven't come upon any town yet. According to this map, there should be a town four hours ride or so ahead of us. We'll see if we can stay there for the night and maybe get some answers about why the Gift is so empty."

The others all nodded, looking forward to getting a roof under their head and some place to stick their prisoners so that they wouldn't have to be on guard all the time. The last three weeks had been the most trying most of them could remember.

It actually took them five hour of travel. When they arrived at the village, Ranma and the others looked around in dismay. The whole place looked abandoned and somewhat in disrepair. It was as if the people here had just up and left. Ranma frowned. "Have any of you been this far north before?"

His friends all shook their heads, but Osha nodded when Jon translated the question. "We came through here scavenging for food. No one was here."

Jon frowned, looking around. "This place looks like it was only abandoned recently, like in the last month or so. I mean look," he said gesturing to a one story house that had its roof caved in slightly right above the open doorway, "if that had happened more than a month ago the snow would've built up inside it. It hasn't yet, that means this is relatively recent."

"So what happened to the smallfolk here?" Edd asked a little worried.

"I don't know," Ranma said, looking around him. "But I'm beginning to get a bit of a puckering factor."

"Yeah," Theon laughed nervously, "like we're in for a fucking and not the good kind."

The others all laughed, their laughter ranging from true humor to that used to cover concern, but the group headed deeper into the village. They found a building that was relatively intact and decided to commandeer it for the evening. They took another house that had part of its roof torn off to paddock their horses there rather than in the small corral that was outside the large inn they had commandeered, which had been an inn at one point.

The prisoners were all placed at the back of the house away from the entrance and their ropes tied together against a large supports beam. Osha, however, was allowed to move about freely but she was ordered to remain near the center of the large room that made up the first floor of the house. Yet, the closer night came, the colder it got, and the more worried and antsy most of the wolf-sworn became.

Ranma looked over at the prisoners, noticing how they were shivering in fear now that night had fallen. That wasn't anything new, but it seemed to get worse every night and tonight was the worst. They had even stopped trying to run away during the night (they still tried during the day of course) and were now muttering to one another in the old tongue. He wasn't as good with languages as his brother was, but Ranma could tell fear when he heard it. He turned to Dacey. "I want a fire right in the middle of the room, make sure that it stays lit all night," he ordered. "Get some branches and what not too, we might need torches."

"Both here and with the horses?" Dacey asked.

Ranma looked over at Osha. "These Others you're afraid of, would they go after the horses as well or just us if they came here?"

When Jon translated the question, the wildling woman looked frightened, staring out into the darkness and backing away from the doorway. "Us," she answered, shuddering. "They have no interest in horses. They had no need of them."

"You can't seriously be thinking that she's telling the truth, can you?" Smalljon asked. "I tell you, it's just a trick."

"Look me in the eye and say you don't fill something in the air." Ranma said, looking at him sharply. "I'm not saying it's the Others like she thinks, but there's **something** in the air tonight. You know me," Ranma said, turning to stare out into the dark, "I'm as at home moving through the woods at night as I am during the day most of the time. Hell, I've snuck out of Winterfell numerous times and gone into the wild, but I've never felt threatened. Nothing like this."

Smalljon shook his head. "I don't feel anything."

"I do." said Jon quietly pulling his short swords from their scabbards, putting them on the ground within easy reach. "Four guards rotation?"

"Yes." Ranma muttered, still staring out into the darkness, his back to the fire that Dacey was tending in an effort to keep his night vision. He had first thought to maybe snuff the fire and let them all keep their night vision, but the fire could also be a weapon at need. "I'll take second watch."

More and more, he was beginning to think that this was the threat that he had been brought here to face, or at least a hint of it. There was still the human element to be considered and Ranma wasn't about to make any plans for the future on vague visions, no matter where they came from. *Still*, he thought to himself, *if I know I was brought here for a purpose, do some of the enemies I'm supposed to face know about me in turn?*

For the next three hours, nothing happened. Ranma, who had laid down on his bedroll but had not fallen asleep, was beginning to think he was just jumping at shadows, and the others had come to that conclusion even faster. Two hours later, Fenris began to whine and bite at his heels.

Ranma sat up to look down at Fenris, and the pup looked up, his eyes locked on Ranma's. Suddenly he could feel what his direwolf was feeling, the oppressive cold coming towards them, the feeling of death and hate, the smell of something old and dead, yet moving...

Swiftly Ranma stood up, grabbing his claymore from where it had been lying next to him and moving swiftly to join the guards at the door, who at this moment were Daryn and Roger. Dacey and Theon were also both awake, looking out the windows on either side of the door.

Almost as soon as Ranma began to move, he noticed that Jon had woken up as well, although he didn't seem to understand the feelings or where they were coming from. Jon looked around wildly, as if he had just been woken from a very deep dream, uncomprehending the sudden change.

Ranma didn't understand how he could be feeling what Fenris was feeling but he wasn't about to question it at the moment. He'd seen too much magic in his life before he came here to bother with skepticism.

Roger looked up at him sharply. Daryn did as well gripping his longsword at his side. "What is it?"

"Something's out there," Ranma muttered looking out the door. It took his eyes several minutes to adjust to the oppressive gloom outside and when they did he stared. "What the...."

Roger and Daryn looked out as well, wondering what their younger friend had seen and gaped. Coming around the corner of the village's main road toward them slowly was a veritable horde of people, but there was something odd about them. First, despite the moon not being out and the stars hidden behind clouds, none of them were carrying torches, though there did seem to be some kind of glow about them. Second, they were all moving toward them. And third was the way they moved, like someone not quite in control of their own bodies, sort of like a drunk yet not quite.

"I... Are those... they look like smallfolk, are they the villagers from this town? Where were they?" Roger asked in a whisper.

"I don't know," Ranma muttered, "but they're not moving correctly."

Daryn looked closer and saw what Ranma saw. "They're sort of dragging along aren't they? I wonder why?"

"I don't think it's for any reason we want to know," said Ranma. Almost as soon as he had said that, the smallfolk turned in their direction. Ranma and the others all gasped. The odd light wasn't coming from anything they were carrying. It was coming from their eyes, so bright a blue it hurt to look at them, deep, bright, and filled with the cold of the grave. Ranma shuddered, his hand tightening about his claymore. "Get the others up quickly!"

As everyone else was roused from sleep, Ranma raced back pulling on his plate armor, clasping his vambraces in place around his arms. That was all he had time for when the back of the house was suddenly, without any warning, smashed apart by some monstrous force from outside. All they could see, before the snow that had built up along the back of the house came in snuffing out the flames, was a giant shadow pulling back a massive club made of some kind of clear ice or something.

Ranma sprinted back towards the front of the house, shouting, "Out, everyone out! We need some room to maneuver!" He plucked up a burning twig from one of the fires, hurling it back over his shoulder. There was a roar and a sizzling hiss as it hit something, but then he was out of the door, followed quickly by the others.

There were screams inside as the prisoners were killed by whatever that thing was. Ranma realized sickly that none of them had thought to even try to release them from their chains. Then he had no more time to think because the assumed villagers were on them, reaching forward, their hands grasping with inhuman strength, their eyes blazing with cold blue light.

At the front of their force, Smalljon gasped as one of them grabbed his arm when his sword stuck in another one's ribs, wrenching Smalljon's arm almost out of its socket. Smalljon gritted his teeth at the pain finally pulling his sword free and he sliced the man's head in one great blow before backing away, wincing.

Ranma snarled, then blocked two blows from the villagers before grabbing the arm of one and pulling it in front of the other, raising his claymore and slicing one man's head off before stabbing the other in the center of his chest. That man kept pulling himself however pulling himself along Ranma's blade until Ranma kicked him hard in the chest sending it back off his sword.

"Wights!" Jon shouted, his short swords blocking blows from three of them. "They're wights! Cut their heads off! It's the only way to slow them down and even then the bodies will come back against us later! We'll have to burn them!"

Ranma remembered the simple bard's tale they had heard once out in the village of the smallfolk around Winterfell. Maester Luwin had scoffed at the very idea that there could be wights still around but did not claim that there had never been.

"Smalljon," he barked, "get out your flint and tinder, Dacey, Jon, Daryn protect him, light everything up you can, grab some kind of torch throw it up on every roof we pass." None of his friends bothered arguing and swiftly began to go about carrying out his orders. Smalljon, still cradling his wrenched shoulder, moved into the center of their makeshift formation while the others began to hack and slash at the horde all around them. The two Norrey scouts were trying to protect themselves as best they could but nowhere near as well as the others. Between one kill and the next Ranma looked at Hathan and Roger, who were fighting alongside him. "I saw something back in there." he said,

jerking his head back to the house they had just vacated. "Something huge, I don't know what it is, but you and your lances might be the only things that can kill whatever it is. After Smalljon starts lighting things up, we'll make our way over to the horses. You two, get out of town, build up some momentum and come back in!"

Then five more wights were on him, wielding simple weapons but with truly monstrous strength. Strength for strength, all of his fellows would have been overwhelmed, save for Smalljon and possibly Dacey, though they weren't quite strong enough to overwhelm Ranma.

The beasts that had destroyed the back of the former inn they had been staying in, however, were different matter. As Smalljon threw his first torch up onto a wooden and straw roof, they came around the edge of the inn, two of them from either direction.

They were huge, two stories tall if they were an inch. Their skin seemed almost made of rock or ice and was gray with patterns of blue shot through it, with patches of long gray hair. Their faces were like that of a gorilla (though none of Ranma's fellows would make that connection) with long beards and they didn't seem to have any genitalia or anything else. They almost looked like someone had taken something living and then built on top of it with ice and stone. Their eyes glowed with a colder blue than even the wights and they held huge clubs made of some kind of deep blue ice.

"WH-what the hell are they!", Smalljon gasped, backing away even further into the circle of his friends, unused to looking up at anyone let alone that far up. Daryn, Roger, and the others all looked disturbed as well.

"They, they look like frost giants," Jon stammered, "but they can't be! For one thing, they're too damn big! And for another all the frost giants are dead, long dead!"

"So were the villagers." Ranma muttered angrily. "Break through and away. Keep as much distance as possible from them until we can put down all of the villagers. We can't face those things and the wights at the same time!"

The others nodded grim agreement and with Ranma in the lead, forged their way through the throng of undead villagers; bashing, slicing, and hacking them to pieces as they went, although even beheaded or without limbs, the wights kept on trying to get at them. All of them were covered with nicks and bruises in short order. Ranma's plate armor was dented a few times by strong blows that he couldn't quite deflect or dodge. One of the Norrey scouts fell, his stomach sliced open by a shovel and pulled down by the horde, his screams ringing out into the night over the clamor of battle. But they kept grimly on while Smalljon continued to throw out his incendiary torches, lighting more and more fires throughout the village.

As Ranma predicted, the giants couldn't move very quickly and while they were more than strong enough to simply smash through a house, it slowed them down even further doing so. Five minutes of desperate, close in combat later, the group arrived at the makeshift stables to find their horses still tethered there, whinnying and neighing in fear. They were all wild eyed and straining at their tethers. Ranma cursed. He had thought, just maybe, they could just all ride away or just use their higher elevations against the wights but none of them were good enough to control horses maddened by fear. Only Roger's and Hathan's horses looked even halfway calm, and even they were moving around restlessly.

"Everyone back away, let the horses through when they move!" Ranma shouted, racing forward with the two. "Roger, Hathan get moving!" Ranma barked, darting in and grabbing his warhammer from where he had left it, then swiftly helped Hathan and Roger undo the tethers, pushing them both up onto their horses.

Now freed from their tethers, the horses bolted toward the open door. Theon was nearly clipped by them as they charged out, smashing a few of the wights to the ground and allowing the humans to move away from the crowd of wights. However, looming at the back of the crowd were the Giants and Ranma knew that they would be coming towards them at any moment.

"Keep moving away from the giants!" Then Ranma charged forward, slicing into the horde with his claymore in one hand and his warhammer in the other smashing out, protecting his friends backs. His friends followed his orders, pushing away from the giants and the entrance to the makeshift corral, using the moment the horses charged to move away while Hathan and Roger raced away down the street.

The fires were everywhere now. The smoke was getting to the wolf-sworn a little but the flames seemed to be bothering the undead more. It didn't seem to do anything to them without them actually being set on fire, but they were definitely wary of it, something Ranma made a note of.

Ranma ducked under one of the Giant's fists, his Claymore slashing into the thing's knee. His sword sliced into it, but only halfway or so, and the monster's empty hand came back, clipping him upside the head, flinging him aside, and

forcing Ranma to let go of his claymore. It was only because of his durability that he survived that blow and he quickly got to his feet, largely uninjured. It was as well he did, because two of the wights were on him almost immediately. He swung his warhammer around to slam into the first one's head while his other hand thundered out with a blow that picked up the other wight, tossing it up into the air and away over one of the burning houses.

The others were not doing nearly as well, but even they were stronger and faster than the wights.

Edd was using his mobility, weaving and bobbing, his spear spinning around slicing and hamstringing when he could. It appeared that the wights **could** be hamstrung, losing much of their already limited mobility, so it was surprisingly effective. Daryn was guarding his back and sides, shield and sword both moving easily to defend them, but it was obvious that both of them were under great amount of strain. The sheer number of wights around them was beginning to pin them down.

Ranma found Dacey was the closest of his allies and she was holding her own well enough. That was discounting Fenris, who was running at his heels biting trying to hamstring his opponents. The pup was still too young however, and the wights were easily able to ignore both him and Ghost. It was simply a fact they couldn't quite get at the back of most of the enemies knees. That was, of course, until a few of them were knocked down and Ghost came out of nowhere, ripping and tearing at their knees and elbows, and even some necks.

Jon was standing with Smalljon, defending him and Theon, who was sending arrow after arrow towards the giants. Already, there were dozens of shafts sticking out of two of them, mostly in the face or the neck and Ranma realized that the Iron Lander was trying to get his arrows into the giant's eyes. Jon was the one doing the best so far, his chainmail only lightly scuffed, his blades flashing out with more skill and speed than any of the others could manage.

Ranma gritted his teeth as more wights began to come at them from the direction they were heading, though, thankfully, he hadn't heard the sounds of combat from that direction, which meant Hathan and Roger had gotten away at least. He sped up, his hammer flickering out like lightning and hitting just as hard. He was everywhere at once, his hammer slamming into any of the wights that were in a position to get behind or surround any of his friends. For some reason, Fenris also sped up and his bites became much more powerful, able to rip off the wights' feet from the ankles and he was now also able to get at the back of their knees. With that, they were able to hold the line for now and continue to move away from the giants, limiting their impact on the battle for now.

However, with more wights coming out from between every house they passed it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed. He blinked in astonishment as he noticed Osha wielding a hunk of burning wood beside Jon and Smalljon.

That gave him an idea, however, and Ranma jumped up from a standing start up onto a roof. Once there he grabbed up a large wooden beam from the roof, pulling it up, hefting it above his hand, and flinging it down into the largest throng of undead villagers. That gave his friends some breathing space and they raced back towards Ranma as he ripped up another one, throwing it down as well while his friends, save Jon, looked up at him in pure astonishment at his strength before turning their attention back to their battle.

Jon suddenly stopped when he noticed something in through the broken doorway of the house he had just passed. Quick as he could, Jon ducked inside, coming back out with several skins of spirits. Above them, Ranma continued to hurl his ever decreasing number of projectiles. One even nailed a giant, knocking it off its feet with a roar, but it scrambled up, seemingly uninjured.

He tossed the spirits out over the undead pinned under Ranma's projectiles while his friends moved to guard his back from the horde that had now gotten around them on all sides. He looked over at Theon who grinned and grabbed a special arrow from his quiver, reaching out and lighting it on Osha's makeshift weapon. The end of the arrow began to blaze and he quickly placed it to his bowstring and cocked it back. "Say the word!"

Ranma saw what Jon had planned and barked a laugh while he jumped from one roof to the other racing towards what was about to be a massive conflagration. "Do it!" he ordered, and Theon let fly.

Theon's aim was true and the burning arrow smacked into the skin of wine, igniting it with a roar. The conflagration ignited quickly as Jon continued to hurl the next skin out into it.

The inferno spread over the timbers that Ranma had used as projectiles and, soon enough, more than half of the horde plus one of the giants were set alight.

The undead had thus far been silent but now they began a keening wail, accompanied by the bellow of the burning giant as it actually began to toss snow onto its burning chest. Ranma's friends answered this with a roar of approval.

They went to hacking and throwing the bodies of those wights that made it around the conflagration to come at them onto the flames.

This moment of good fortune ended when two of the giants burst through a house right alongside Dacey and Edd.

Edd went down, slammed away by a fist the same size as his upper body that caught him in the center of his chest, throwing him into the air and away to impact against the wall of another house where he collapsed boneless to the ground. That same giant's club smashed the one remaining scout to a bloody splatter.

Dacey was able to dodge the other giant's club, which was encumbered by the remains of the house it'd just smashed through. Her sword flicked out, catching the giant's arm right behind the elbow slicing it as deep as she could force it. Her sword stuck there and she gasped in horror as she felt herself being lifted off the ground by it and saw the other fist of the giant incoming.

Suddenly Jon was there, leaping from the remains of the wall that the giants had just burst through. He landed on the back of the other giant attacking her with both his short swords flashing, stabbing down deep as he could force them into the giant's back, which wasn't too far, unfortunately.

Ranma appeared too, blocking the blow, forcing it to the side with one arm as his warhammer came around slamming into the giant's leg with as much force as his body could muster. The leg shattered at the thigh and the behemoth could no longer support its own weight, falling to the side.

That giant slowly collapsed and Dacey, relieved, pulled her sword out of its arm. She looked up at Jon only to gasp "Look out!"

The giant that Jon had been fighting wasn't going down easily and Ranma was standing right in front of it. As its club came crashing forward, Ranma couldn't dodge it without letting the blow hit Dacey, so instead he braced his arms in front of him.

The blow landed and Ranma felt himself lifted into the air flying over Dacey's head, gasping in agony as his left arm was broken by the blow. He turned in midair, his feet hitting a wall and he launched himself forward; slamming into a group of wights nearby, fist and feet flashing, his warhammer lost when the giant's blow caught him.

Dacey was busy attacking the same giant Jon was, dodging this way and that. Smalljon and Daryn were busy with the remaining zombies, but Ranma could see two more Giants bursting out of a house right beside them. A fifth giant burst out behind Ranma and he turned his teeth bared in a snarl as he charged forward.

Ranma's working hand slammed into the giant's stomach with enough force to actually lift the monster off his feet and throw him backwards a step. He dodged the first blow, dodged the second, and almost dodged the third one, hammering blows on the giant who was grunting now at his center of mass was almost crushed by Ranma's fierce Amaguriken speed blows, but the fight turned against Ranma when something grabbed his leg, tripping him up.

He looked down and realized that a hand chopped off one of the undead villagers had reached out grabbing his foot, pulling it out from under him.

He looked up at the giant as he kicked the undead creature off him, the goliath's club already falling toward him.

Suddenly he heard a shout. "In the name of the Warrior, go back to hell!" Then Hathan was there speeding forward, his lance point slamming into the giant's upper chest with all the force of his charging steed behind it. The giant roared, not in pain but in fury, as the lance point took it in the chest and through the heart but even that wasn't have stopping it. Hathan, however, noticed this and let go of his lance quickly, bringing around his longsword to hack into the giant's neck.

By this time Ranma jumped up, turning as he heard Dacey shout his name. "Ranma!" With that shout, Dacey threw his warhammer at him.

Ranma grabbed it out of the air with his one good arm. Turning he leaped up into the air, bringing the hammer down with a roar to slam into the giant's head, crushing it utterly.

He looked up from his personal fight to see that Roger had arrived as well, spearing the giant that had been about to destroy Smalljon and Daryn through the skull. He had chosen his target better than Hathan, though he took a blow to his armored chest from the other giant's club that threw him up and out of his saddle. His horse was running away but he had saved Daryn and Smalljon who stood over him, protectively cutting down the few remaining undead villagers. They then grabbed him and moved away from the one giant remaining on its feet.

Ranma looked up at Hathan, nodded his thanks, and the two of them turned, splitting apart. Hathan moved towards the giant that Jon and Dacey were battling, trampling several wights under his horse's hooves.

Theon raced in front of giant that had fallen to its side, which Dacey was fighting, his bow raised at near point-blank range and fired up into its face, an arrow taking the giant through the eye.

At the same time, Edd came back, roaring and screaming, his helmet askew, and blood flowing from his nose, eyes, and a cut on his face, slamming his spear into the giant's chest right over the heart. His spear broke as the giant roared, flinching away but it had done its job, taking the thing in its heart. With no heart and no brain even its undead vitality failed it, and it collapsed into the snow at last.

One outstretched arm clipped Theon as the giant collapsed, but he shook it off and turned back, using the last of his arrows on the wights before pulling out his own longsword. He blocked a blow from one of them that actually had a real weapon, a massive bastard sword that it swung at his head. The blow was so powerful it knocked Theon back several steps, but he recovered and moved with Jon and Dacey protecting one another's back.

By this time, Ranma had smashed through the wights between him and his friends. He jumped up, dodging over the giant's club. His feet touched down briefly on the giant's outstretched arm and his hammer came around smashing the behemoth's head, shattering its skull.

Still the giant kept moving, reaching forward, but Smalljon raced forward, slamming his broadsword into the thing's chest with his one still working arm and all the strength of his body behind it. "Die and stay dead this time!"

With that, the battle was effectively over. The wights still up and attacking were cut down easily. The warriors went about their grim business cutting them down and tossing the parts into the growing fires that were practically everywhere now. Soon, the last went down from a blow of Ranma's hammer, the head of which was now so splattered with blood and bits of flesh that you couldn't even see the steel of it underneath.

Ranma looked around at his shell-shocked and shivering companions, feeling the adrenaline slowly leaving him a little shaky himself. He could already feel his healing ability kicking however, although it didn't seem to be doing much for his arm for some reason. He looked down at it and gasped a little as he noticed how black and blue it was, as well as the bone sticking out of his forearm. "That's going to leave a mark." He muttered, shaking his head and looking up at Hathan. "So, do you believe in the Others now?"

OOOOOO

In the far north, far, far beyond even the most northern wildling settlements, several beings frowned in their places around a large unbroken column of ice reaching down from the ceiling of the cave they were inhabiting. It was covered with strange glyphs and had several large crystals imbedded here and there, all of them lit up with blue light.

"The trap failed." one of the beings said, his voice a lilting song on the cool breeze, yet somehow wrong as if it had the taint of death on it. "It took the bait, but shattered the thorns of our trap. The aberration still exists, and we have lost much of our resources beyond the cursed human wall. Our supply of tools there has been reduced, and our current crop of homunculus are gone."

"It was a near run thing." another said. Their faces were hidden by shadow; they distrusted one another only marginally less than they'd despised and loathed humans, though their eyes, glowing blue, could pierce the darkness easily. One hand waved at the stalagmite, which suddenly darkened. Far away the homunculus giants that they had commanded began to collapse, leaving nothing of them behind. "What concerns me is what we saw from the other humans in our tool's eyes; all of them were better fighters than normal humans should be. Still, we know its abilities, we can plan better for the next time."

"We need not do anything for a time." another one said, and the others all turned their sparkling blue eyes towards it. Only the eyes were now visible in the darkness of the cave, or at least so it would appear to human eyes. Of course a human would freeze to death in seconds here anyway.

"Use the other humans. They are skeptical, they will not believe save what they themselves see. They will not see the real danger. There is always strife among them, they will destroy one another, weaken one another so long as we play a waiting game." That voice said in response to those looks. "Merely make certain that there is no solid proof other than these humans various injuries, and few will believe them."

With a thought from one of them, the crystals buried in the frozen stalagmite lit up again and they began to send their



thoughts out once more, determined to erase all evidence of the attack. Of course the humans would help them with that, fearing the pawns under their control.

OOOOOOO

By the time Dacey, Jon, Ranma, and Hathan finished throwing wight bodies and parts onto the fires. The giants had dissolved entirely, leaving nothing behind them but snow and ice. Not even their blood remained where it had splattered on rock and wood. Ranma shook his head, wondering if that was a natural thing or something magical.

He scowled, looking down at the pyre where they had also put the body of the older Norrey scout. The other one had been hacked apart and they had burned what parts they could find. Ranma was guilt-ridden at the fact he had lost two men, but at the same time, knew they had been incredibly lucky to only lose two men. He felt even more guilty at being grateful it had been the two scouts that had died.

"I lived through it," Daryn muttered, as he sat down next to Ranma grabbing some of the jerky that Ranma had pulled out of the packs for them. "And I still don't believe it. What were those things?"

Jon looked up wearily from where he had slumped next to his brother. "The large ones looked like frost giants. Like the ones from the tales from before the times of the First Men, not the giants who we know still live beyond the Wall. And the undead, they're called wights."

"GAHHHH!" Smalljon yelled, as Dacey reset his shoulder and then moved it around gingerly, wincing occasionally. "That fucking hurt! I still think this is some kind of magic trick of the wildlings, but it's also a threat, one my father and the Night Watch need to be warned about. Couldn't you have done that less painfully?"

Dacey snorted, moving away to lean against the remains of a house's wall, wincing as she did. "Hah, you're just lucky that thing didn't rip your arm off entirely. If not for Ranma's training, none of us would have lived through that. And if they are wights, going by the old stories I heard when I was young, we'll have to burn the bodies to make sure they don't come back to life again. I've never heard of any magic beyond the White Walkers that could bring the dead back to life."

"Neither have I." Ranma said, standing up join Theon at burning the pile of undead. In the distance they could see the light of day beginning to make its presence felt and he smiled before looking at his friend. "Guess now you can change your name from Greyjoy to Giantslayer, Theon." Ranma laughed, slapping the archer on his shoulder.

Theon smiled wearily but shook his head, his eyes showing how rattled he still was. "I'll think about it but this was a near run thing, Ranma, way too near for me to want to remember it later."

Ranma chuckled and moved on but there was some truth in Theon's words. If Hathan and Roger had not returned when they had the group would have been overwhelmed save perhaps for Ranma himself. And Roger had paid a price for his killing that one giant. His ribs were cracked so badly that he was having trouble breathing and he was still seeing double.

Edd was also in a bad way, he looked to at least have a concussion, maybe even a cracked skull though he had come back into the fight like a berserker. He was also complaining of back pain from where he had slammed into the wall of the house but Ranma was hopeful that that was only bruising.

Daryn had come through the best of them all, besides Theon, only taking a small gash from one of the villagers' makeshift weapons. The others were nicked and battered from head to toe and Jon was favoring his right side. Ranma alone wasn't slumped in weariness, though his arm was healing much slower than he was used to even from a wound as bad as this.

His healing ability was actually a little higher than it had been in his old world, far higher than it had been when he was sixteen and just arriving at the Tendo place. Even so, something in the wound he had taken was fighting him. He wondered what the heck that giant club had been made out of. It looked like ice, but it didn't shatter like it should have upon hitting him, so Ranma wasn't certain.

Theon's eyes narrowed as he looked at Ranma. "Speaking of, where by the Drowning God did you learn how to move like that? I know you're good, Ranma, but that was... You moved faster than I could follow sometimes, and you jumped from roof to roof with ease, as if you had been doing it all your life."

The others looked at Ranma, waiting for an answer. All except Jon who simply sat there, one hand scratching at Ghost's head. He would wait for a time they could be alone before asking his own questions. Not even these men

(and woman), firm friends all, would believe the tale of Ranma remembering his previous life and carrying over the skills from it. Even Hathan, whose religion had a place for such things, would never believe that, not even with the reality of his otherworldly skills rubbed in their faces. And if they didn't believe him, well nothing good come from that.

Ranma shrugged. He wanted to tell his friends about his memories, but he knew that most of them would not believe him. Dacey might, and maybe Theon since they had lived together so long, but the others? No. The other problem came from Theon. Despite growing up alongside him, if you asked Ranma if he trusted Theon, really trusted him, the answer would be a somewhat ambivalent shrug. There just seemed to be too much of the Iron Born in Theon for Ranma to want to trust him and, if he told just the others, that kind of secret would push a further wedge between Theon and his other friends.

Still he ignored that once again and replied, "I've never tried to hide the fact that I'm simply more physically skilled than most. You all know how strong I am, how skilled. Is it such a surprise to see that maybe I've got other skills you haven't seen yet? And as for jumping from roof to roof, other than Smalljon and Roger, I bet every one of you could do it if you practiced. I like to climb trees and jumping from one to another. The skills and coordination that I learned doing that, made jumping from roof to roof pretty easy, actually."

All his friends frowned, wondering why he was so skilled in the first place, but couldn't really come up with a reason to question him further. After all, without those skills, none of them would be here.

It would have surprised them all that Ranma was thinking along similar lines, though he wasn't thinking positively about it. *I need to figure out why I can't use ki attacks and why I can't move as fast as I could in my old life. That barrier, whatever it is, that's blocking my ki from coming out of my body, I need to break it. Whatever those things are, to fight them on a more even footing, I seriously need to get better than I am right now.* He had a few ideas as to what that barrier was, but he would need some time to think about it.

"What should we do now?" Hathan asked trotting up to him. He had not gotten out of the saddle since the fight, and had made himself a new lance almost as soon as he could. While the others were busy burning the bodies and tending to their injuries, he had been gathering the horses and had actually done a better job than he had realistically hoped, coming back with five of them. Those plus his own and Roger's gave them seven.

Ranma stared out into the distance, watching the sun's rays make their way across the land. "We'll continue as fast as we can go towards the Wall."

The others looked up at him in astonishment and he shrugged. "It's the nearest place with a maester healer and we need to tell commander Mormont about this." He gestured around them. "A verbal report will be much more easily believed, though I could wish we had some more physical evidence than our injuries and your word Osha." he said, looking over at the wild woman.

She had been tending to the injured, and she and Roger seemed to be talking quietly to one another. By the look of interest in Roger's eyes, he wondered if the man had designs on her. He shrugged that thought off as none of his business, especially since Roger wasn't the type to force his affections on anyone.

In reply to Ranma's nonverbal question, Osha nodded but resolved to keep her own secrets. She had given her word to the King Beyond the Wall, and though she had run from his army she had no desire to be a betrayer as well as an oathbreaker. She would tell the men of the Wall as much as she could, however, about the Others. She looked down as the two direwolves frolicked around, still energetic despite the night's activities, and wondered about what she had seen in the one called Fenris or his owner.

Ranma knelt down, holding out a bit of jerky to Fenris, who pounced on it gnawing at it happily while Ghost moved to his other hand nuzzling in and whining a little. He held out another bit of jerky to Jon's direwolf, wondering about the odd sensation of being Fenris for a moment there when the pup somehow warned Ranma of what was coming their way. If not for that warning, even with how on edge they had been, the group would've been taken completely by surprise by the giants.

*What was that?* Ranma thought to himself, rubbing at Fenris's head, causing the wolf pup to wag its tail. He noted absently that Fenris was bigger than he had been before this trip began and he wondered if that was normal for puppies. He had seen on this trip that Fenris had more vitality and energy than Ghost did, though he would have to wait until they got back to Winterfell to see if that was simply Ghost being much more calm and laid back than Fenris or something that was different in Fenris from his brothers and sisters.

He also resolved to get a handle on what the heck had happened between the two of them and he continued to look down at Fenris who looked up at him suddenly meeting his eyes. Suddenly it was as if Ranma was staring at himself.

*Pack leader, good hunt, run good, strong, partner.*

Ranma shook himself, moving back from whatever that had been when Hathan trotted back leading the horses already packed with what they could salvage. He and Jon and Daryn had created a makeshift litter, tying it between two of the horses for Edd and Roger. "We're ready to go, milord."

"Let's be about it then," Ranma replied, and the others wearily got to their feet and began to prepare themselves to leave. Ranma himself moved quickly to Roger, lifting him into the litter along one side before moving to Edd and doing the same with him. Within minutes they were on their way, with Ranma leading the way.

Around them the undead continued to burn. Within a few hours, there would be nothing left of them but ash and an hour after that the ash, too, would disappear. Nothing would remain but the wreckage of the village behind them and the wolf sworn's own injuries to provide evidence for their tale.

OOOOOOO

The Lady Catelyn moved through Winterfell, smiling faintly at the servants as she passed them. She paused a moment outside the solar, looking inside at her two daughters who were working at their stitching.

Watching them at this task, the contrast between them was even more apparent than other times. Sansa sat quietly, sewing with dexterity and skill. Already her needle and tapestry work was famed throughout Winterfell and the lands around it. A 'scarf from the lady' had become a gift sought after by both the guards and the smallfolk, something that made Sansa smile faintly when her mother informed her about it, though in truth she was often bored with Winterfell. She always enjoyed hearing stories about the South, where things actually happened rather than here, where nothing seemed to change from day to day or, if it did, it was always happening somewhere else to someone else.

On the other hand, Arya had never taken to sewing, tapestry, painting, or anything else that a normal lady of her station should have liked. She was fidgety, anxious, looking out at the sky through the window wistfully every other minute, and wasn't even a third of the way as far in her current design as Sansa was.

Catelyn smiled faintly, shaking her head at the sight of her youngest daughter. She had lost many battles there and so Ranma continued to train Arya so long as she continued to try and learn the womanly duties. The young girl was taking to Ranma's lessons better than Bran in truth. Bran had enthusiasm, though that seemed to have wavered since the day that Ned had taken him out to see justice done, but none of the skill or energy Arya had. All in all, even if she still thought it barbaric and far too cruel to force a child to see such, Catelyn was happy with the result, as Bran had taken to his intellectual studies even more.

Yet it was coming to a time when she would have to put her foot down, permanently, about Arya, though she was not looking forward to that. Not only would it prove detrimental to her relationship with Arya but it might also impact her relationship with her oldest. Ranma had never backed down from his statement that Arya would do whatever Arya wanted, regardless of station or gender, and Catelyn was not looking forward to his reaction when she decided to put a stop to this nonsense.

At the moment, Catelyn moved on searching for her husband, a letter clutched in one hand. News from the South was welcome at times, but this news she knew would change everything and she wasn't certain if it was going to be good or bad change.

Catelyn sighed faintly, wondering why her son was off gallivanting when both she and Ned might have need of his counsel or, at least, support. Ranma rarely gave his opinions on anything outside their family unless asked to, although he had taken to being his father's messenger and voice easily enough, getting real world experience and fulfilling every duty asked of him with flair and energy.

*Of course, she smirked, that might be because he knows that he is shirking one particular duty in particular.* She was still searching for a suitable wife for her son and had found one or two that looked promising on the surface, if the families weren't too proud to see the merits of at the least looking into the match.

At first, she had thought that possibly marrying him to a Frey might actually be a good idea, but upon consultation with her father and with Ned that idea had been halted in its tracks. She hadn't realized how much bad blood was between her family and the Freys, though she had known of the disdain the northern men had for the family, calling them opportunists and cowards.

Yet if you removed the Freys from the equation, there were no families in the Riverlands of suitable importance that had daughters of the correct age. And all of the families in the North were unsuitable for one reason or another, be it

age, no real need to weld their name to the Starks, or other reasons.

The Karstarks, the Reeds, and the Umbers were the only ones to have daughters of the appropriate age. The Karstarks were related already to the Starks from long ago, and their newly reinforced friendship made anything more unnecessary, despite Lord Rickard's ambition. House Umber's girl wasn't from the main line and she was already promised to another. Meera Reed was the right age but the two had met when they were very young and had fallen into the role of cousins easily, much to the later chagrin of Catelyn and Lady Isolde Reed. Ranma however was not going to be willing to change that relationship.

Catelyn found her husband working with his castellan in his office, going over some notes on field production and transportation. She recognized one of them as a note coming from House Reed, stating that the last of the stone taking from the Dread Fort had arrived and work was going to begin on renovating Moat Cailin.

Catelyn frowned at that, not liking the implications and not liking the fact that her advice on what to use the stones of the Dread Fort had been ignored. Catelyn had felt that the stones from the Dread Fort should have been added to either an existing Castle, or to help House Glover renovate their castle's walls. It was well known that Deepwood Motte was an old and poorly designed castle, yet it was an important one despite this, being on the Bay of Ice. It protected what was easily the best landing zones for coming and goings from between the mainland and Bear Island. If anything was going to be defended that should've been, since it was on the shore closest to the Iron Islands.

She did **not** trust house Greyjoy and the Ironborn to remain loyal to the crown and, in fact, didn't even trust Theon overmuch. Moreover, Catelyn felt that repairing Moat Cailin, which had been allowed to fall into disrepair over the past decade and a bit would send a bad message to those further south, since it was such a powerful defensive position against any threat further south.

She had been overruled by Ranma and Ned however. A survey of both castles had revealed that the Moat was the one most in need of repair and House Glover had been unable to come up with the manpower required to renovate their own castle or even help transport the stones through the wolfswood. Winterfell would have had to supply the workers as well as the money necessary to pay them.

House Reed was able to produce both so long as House Stark dealt with the transportation. Many of the poisonous plants and animals in the swamp of the crannogmen were sold for medicine, bringing in a goodly amount of money, making House Reed much richer than they appeared to outsiders, though they truly had need for little in the way of possessions given their lifestyle. And the transportation would be much easier, since the Kingsroad could be used for the majority of the trip.

Still, Catelyn was worried about how it would be seen by those further south, most especially those who were apparently coming north even now. "My lord," she nodded her head at Eddard, her face serious. "There is a message from King's Landing."

Ned's face gave nothing away as usual but he knew somehow it wasn't good news. He nodded his head to the castellan, indicating he should leave. Catelyn handed the note over quickly and Ned read it silently. He sighed as he sank back into his desk's seat raising his free hand to massage his eyes for a moment. "I take it you have read this?" he asked.

"I have." Catelyn frowned, reaching forward to take his hand gently. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Jon Arryn dead," Ned muttered. "I know he was old man, but he was still hale and hearty the last time we saw one another. This is a sad day. Have you had word from your sister?"

Catelyn's younger sister, Lysa, had been married to Jon Arryn in an attempt to forge an alliance between the Riverlands and the Vale of Arryn. It hadn't worked as well as it might have, exacerbated because the marriage had borne little fruit, save for one sickly child, and Lysa and Jon's different ages. The fact that Lysa had to marry such an old man and the fact that no love had blossomed between the two was a major point of contention between the two sisters. "I have not. I'll send my condolences but we haven't talked in years. You know she somewhat resents the fact that I am," she smiled as their fingers twined together, "happy in my marriage to you and that it has been so fruitful."

Ned smiled faintly reaching out to take her hand in both of his as she sat down on his desk. "I see. Nonetheless, the king is coming here. We will have to send ravens out telling Ranma and the others to return here to welcome them. It will take the royal party weeks at best, months at worst, to get here depending on how many they bring. Yet for all of that, there is only one reason for that I can think of that would be enough for Robert to come north."

"King Robert means to make you the Kings Hand." his wife replied. "A great honor, though I am uncertain if it is a

good idea."

"You do not think that Ranma could handle himself here?"

"I think he most certainly could!" she said angrily then blushed a little shaking her head. "You know what I mean. I am proud of our son, but he is still a young man, with all the impetuosity of the breed. This whole adventure he's on at the moment should be proof enough of that."

Ned frowned, once more wondering if he should share his suspicions about why Ranma had the memories of his past life fueling his abilities, and why he had really gone north, something they had not shared with her for fear of stiffening her resolve against Ranma's going. While reincarnation was a part of the Seven's doctrine, Ranma and Ned were both certain he was here at the will of the old gods, which would not sit well with Catelyn, despite the fact that she had come to at least not look down on the old god religion.

Eventually, he said, "I cannot in good conscience turn it down. Robert is my friend and without Jon there to watch out for him he will be at sea when it comes to politics and running the kingdom. And besides," he said, reaching out to stroke her cheek tenderly, "Ranma will have your counsel here to rely on."

That was said with quite a bit of pride in his voice. No other lady in the northern lands could handle herself as well as Lady Catelyn in the area of land management or politics, and Winterfell and its environment had thrived under the two of them. Indeed, the ideas that she had brought to farming alone was a large advancement. The idea of rotating crops, as they did now, had made the lands his family commanded, as well as those of the vassals that answered to them directly, richer than they had ever been before. They actually produced a bit of a surplus, allowing them to send food elsewhere in the North to lands that didn't have as much arable land such as House Umber or Glover.

"I know," she sighed faintly "but I still worry. And... I have had some thoughts about possible betrothals for our son."

"Oh?" Ned chuckled. "And who exactly are you going to recruit to control our wayward boy?"

Catelyn told him her two best choices and he looked at her in shock. "There is no chance of them agreeing! We aren't wealthy enough to interest the first. Besides, the last time someone from that realm married a northerner, it did not turn out well for either the houses or the individuals. And as for the second, no, just no. The hatred they have for anyone who had anything to do with the rebellion means any marriage into that line would be folly at best."

"I will bow to your experience with those of Dorne, but you cannot think that a single marriage is a good test of such things, Ned. And besides, unless we start looking at much younger or much older ladies, outside of the Freys and the Western Lands there isn't anyone of a suitable rank."

Ned frowned, not liking either option for much the same reason. "I suppose you can pursue this, though I would be astonished if you got a positive response."

"I as well," Catelyn admitted, "but it would not hurt to make inquiries, possibly set up a face to face meeting between the two."

Her husband nodded at that then turned back to his paperwork, and Catelyn excused herself to see to sending out several ravens to various parties.

OOOOOO

Ranma and his now extremely ragged band of friends continued on their way for another week before they were within sight of Castle Black, the home and headquarters of the Night Watch. All of them, even Smalljon who had actually been here once before with his father, stopped and stared at the sight of the Wall.

A loud horn coming from one of the small towers announced they had been seen and that they were friends, seeing the black wolfs-head banner fluttering in the breeze from Hathan's lance, standing upright by his side.

To say the Wall was massive would be like saying the ocean was wet. It was simply monstrous, made of stone and ice, more resembling a mountain carved semi-smooth by the hands of a god rather than something made by the hands of man. Even from here only Ranma could barely make out the top of the wall, and even he could not make out the buttresses or crenellations, which disappeared into the clouds well above them.

In comparison, Castle Black didn't seem to be a real castle, as it didn't have a wall surrounding it, instead being a series of keeps and towers, all of which, even the largest, was utterly dwarfed by the massive wall behind them. Most of them were sturdy looking and seemed well made, though a few had obviously seen better days. On the southern

face of the Wall, was a long wood and pulley elevator, its wooden beams hammered into the ice of the Wall itself. From here, several men could be made out exercising in the courtyard around one of the keeps. Other men had already begun to race to what looked like a stable.

Yet, it was the wall that grabbed their attention. "They say it was raised by Bran the builder," Jon said looking at the Wall in wonder, "our ancestor, Ranma."

Ranma shook his head, pride for his family filling him. "It is an amazing sight." he said, his voice full of awe. Even in his old life he had never seen something that came close to this. It made the portions of the Great Wall of China he had seen seem small and miserly in comparison. In truth, it made anything made by man on Earth seem small.

Osha, however, had a much different reaction to the Wall. She simply glared and spit to one side. The Northerners saw this but ignored it, knowing the wildling disdain for the Wall and those that lived beyond it, who they called 'kneelers'.

The group remained there, staring up at the Wall as three riders approached them quickly.

Ranma smiled faintly as he saw one of them was his uncle Benjen, Master Ranger of the Nights Watch, though all three pulled up sharply in surprise as they came close enough to see how battered the group was. Both Roger and Edd were being carried in a litter between two of the horses and Osha was riding next to Roger. She had taken over looking over their wounds as best she could. Despite their condition and the injuries of the riding wounded, Ranma had set a brisk pace. They hadn't stopped since the battle against the wights and monster giants, crossing nearly half of The Gift in that time.

"Ranma!" Benjen reached down from his saddle to grasp his nephew's hand. The fact that Ranma was on foot didn't bother him, he had seen the almost unnatural endurance the boy had before, though the injuries of his companions were much more worrisome. "What, in the name of the old gods, did you all run into?"

"Uncle." Ranma said, grasping the man's forearm with his good arm. His other arm still hadn't quite healed, though most of the black and blue marks had faded slightly and the bone had been set. For some reason, whatever the club he had been hit by was made of, it seemed to be fighting his ability to heal himself and he could barely force any extra ki into that arm, to help the process. It was still healing but Ranma had no idea what the club could have been made of to create such an effect. "We need to talk to you and Commander Mormont."

Not ten minutes later, Ranma sat down in a somewhat comfortable seat in the commander's office in the Lord Commander's tower, sipping at a very hot mug of tea while Jon and Theon did the same, leaning against the wall behind him. The office was small, dominated by a single wide desk but it had a few chairs with one somewhat good one on the other side of the desk where the Old Bear, Jeor Mormont, sat.

Jeor was a large man, now bent slightly with age, yet still possessing wide shoulders and lively eyes set into a weather beaten face. He had no hair on top of his head but a white and grey beard grew down to his chest. His hands, clasped on the desk in front of him, were large and strong looking despite the signs of age there. All in all, he cut a formidable figure and had an air of command that could be felt by anyone in his presence.

Throughout Ranma's narrative he had remained silent, simply taking it in while Benjen asked a few questions, mostly about the giants and what they had been able to glean from talking to the wildling woman. He sat that way for several minutes after the tale concluded then slowly shook his head. "That is an unbelievable tale young Stark, and I mean that sincerely, in admiration of the fact that you all survived and in disbelief of what you ran into."

"I know sir," Ranma said seriously. "It was near run thing most of the time." And it had been, even for Ranma. Caught by surprise and unable to open up any distance without leaving his friends behind, he had been forced to fight a more constrained battle than he would have preferred. Without ki attacks, it had been damn difficult. Not exhausting really, but tough.

"I'm not doubting that or your word, but then again, I've spent more years than you've been alive up here on the wall, I doubt even many people even here in the North will believe you with only your injuries as proof. And you say the giants or whatever they were decomposed quickly?"

"They came apart almost as soon as we killed them, sir." Jon replied. "I thought that was unusual but there didn't seem to be anything we could do to stop it. And by the time we were ready to go, a lot of the undead bodies were also ash."

From where he was leaning against the wall behind the Lord Commander, Benjen Stark frowned thoughtfully, tugging

at his beard, which was rather short, only coming down to the top of his chest but was still completely brown, although it was somewhat unkempt in comparison to Jeor's. Benjen was Ned's younger brother and looked it, having much the same facial features: a long face with high cheek bones and dark grey eyes that could appear blue tinted if he was happy. He was a tall man, though not as broad as Ned was across the shoulders, and seemed built for speed and endurance over strength. His eyes were set deep into a face worn by weather even more than Jeor's, despite being much younger. Even here he wore a longsword at his side.

When he spoke, he seconded his commander's thoughts. "I don't believe even our fellow Night Watch members will believe you ran into a force of the Others, Ranma. I'm not even certain that's what you did, either. I don't know how it could be done, but wildlings could have found something, some way to raise the dead and control them, or perhaps some kind of mind control spell. There are supposedly sorcerers and mages over in the free cities of Essos, possibly one of them has come to the lands beyond the Wall? No, you personally didn't see a White Walker, so you only have supposition, not proof, and as for the undead rising, that is even more unbelievable."

"When you talk to anyone but possibly Greatjon, don't mention the giants and do not, by the old gods, mention your opinion that this is a sign the White Walkers have returned. You'll only make them disbelieve you entirely. Tell them you ran into a trick of the wildlings, some illusion or other that covered their approach and that'll be enough to arouse their interest without arousing their skepticism at the same time. That will be enough for you to rouse the North and get us some aid on the Wall."

Ranma nodded. "Makes sense, I suppose, though I'm not happy about it. Still, I'll talk to my father when I get back and we'll stop in at every Castle we can on the way back. Do you think it might be a good idea to leave our injured here and head back without them? Normally I wouldn't even think it, but I want to get the word out about this and I want supplies, especially, to start heading your way as soon as possible. The Gift is practically empty, there's no way it can support a large force on the Wall."

"True enough." Jeor nodded, smiling faintly. "I'll take whatever help we can get."

"The wildlings have been acting oddly lately, we've seen a lot of movement on their side, especially in larger groups, larger than we've ever seen before in my time as a ranger." Benjen added. "We might be looking at another king beyond the wall and if we are, even without the White Walkers throwing their weight in, we could be in for some rough times."

Jeor nodded grim agreement with his Master Ranger. "The Night Watch is weaker now than it has ever been in my lifetime. But no, I think you should take your wounded with you. The Karstark boy has a concussion but he will survive and Roger Ryswell's ribs are already on the mend, as are all the other cuts and bruises you lot sustained. I wouldn't recommend going very fast for either of them but if you stay here and rest for a few days, they'll be up to riding again."

"Besides, Ranma," Benjen stood moving around the desk and clapping his nephew on the arm, "this gives me the chance to show you lot the Wall." Despite his relatively upbeat attitude, however, Benjen was very worried. The White Walkers had not been seen in millennia, so the odds of this being them were slim. Yet even if this was some sorcerer who was able to mimic their powers somehow, it would be a very bad time indeed for the men of the Wall. He hoped his nephew could convince the Lords of the North of the seriousness of the threat stirring beyond the Wall, because he doubted that without their aid, the Night Watch would be able to withstand the storm he could all too easily see on the horizon.

For the next few days, while Jeor spent time with his granddaughter and sent out orders to the rangers, pulling them back closer to the Wall, as well as to the other two fortresses of the Night Watch, Benjen showed the rest of the wolf-sworn, those that were not convalescing at any rate, the Wall. Every day they went up the elevator (save for Ranma who raced them up the steps, which he felt was damn good training) and were shown the Wall, moving along the top of the massive fortification. The wall was so wide, the entire group could walk side by side along it with room to spare on either side, comfortably away from the drop to the ground so far below. Here and there they came upon ballistae, ranging from catapults to massive crossbows, and there were hundreds of large, man sized pots, ready to be filled with something to dump on any attackers that tried to scale the wall.

Yet, for all the obvious strength of the Wall, it was quite obvious that much of the defenses were in disrepair due to lack of personnel. Once they got more than ten miles from the castle along the Wall, they began to run into ballistae and other defenses that were rotted, falling apart, or simply frozen in place, becoming part of the Wall. Of course, men patrolled the Wall in groups of ten along its entire length, but even so, there wasn't enough of them to do that and get the defenses back in working order. Both Jon and Ranma noticed, also, that most of the ballistae were older styles, not having the range of newer types, and none of them were mobile.

All this, combined with the threat they had run into (or, as Ranma was almost certain, been ambushed by) made certain that all the wolf-sworn knew how important it was to get as much help to the Wall as soon as they could. They also all agreed to not share the true nature of the threat for a time. The fact the wildlings were gathering would be enough to get the North to send aid. After that, they might be able to convince them of the real threat, later.

During this time, the two brothers also talked alone, and Ranma told Jon as much as he could about the vision he had in the godswood. Ranma told him about visions of betrayal, the fact he was fighting humans a lot of the time, and the fact the vision ended with a White Walker staring at him with those glowing blue eyes. Jon agreed that part matched the historical description of the White Walkers, and vowed once more to stand with Ranma come what may. He also demanded they step up his training as soon as they could so he could come closer to matching Ranma's sheer lethality.

The Night Watch Commanders expert opinion was proven correct, and within three days, the group was once more riding out, with Osha still traveling with them. The Wall was no place for a woman, as the song of Brave Danny Flint told anyone who cared to listen. More, she hated the Night Watch with a passion, and had refused to even stay with Jeor himself in his quarters.

Ranma and Jon were at the back of the group, looking down and smiling faintly at their wolves, who both of the young men had taken time over the past few days to get even closer to. Ranma couldn't quite figure out their connection just yet, but he could feel it growing with every passing day. He was certain now that Fenris had taken on some aspects of his abilities and maybe a bit of his personality, too. He was already three inches larger tail to nose than Ghost as well as standing a little taller at the shoulders and he could keep up with Ranma on foot for several hours. The wolf was always running around everywhere and seemed to delight in play fighting with Ranma or Ghost.

Jon however soon switched his gaze from the two direwolf pups to staring back over his shoulder at the Wall. Ranma noticed this and nudged his leg. "It was amazing, wasn't it?"

"It was," Jon said softly, "but that wasn't why I was still staring. I just feel as if I'm going to be up here again, sometime. As if my fate is tied to the Wall." He looked down at his brother. "Does that sound odd to you?"

"A little," Ranma laughed, "but not all that much. We both know why of course," he said looking ahead of them where the rest of their party had opened up a bit of a lead on them, "but for now, your fate is tied to mine. Remember what you said, you stand with me. Your fate might be on the Wall, but that will only be because I'm there too."

John nodded seriously and the two brothers clasped hands briefly renewing their vow before racing to catch up with their fellows. None of them noticed a single raven winging its way overhead heading toward Castle Black.

OOOOOO

"Welcome, your grace." Lord Howland Reed bowed his head, seeming even smaller than he normally would as he stood next to the king on his steed. Like all crannogmen, he was short, wiry, and somewhat hunched, though the women did not share that last aspect. His clothing was well made, but durable rather than high quality, in colors of green and brown predominantly, able to blend in easily with the swamp of the Neck. He had a short, well-trimmed beard, and his hair was cropped short as well. His eyes were bright and intelligent. His cloak was clasped with a green lacquered pin shaped like a lizard-lion, its back arched and mouth open.

Robert grunted, looking around at Moat Cailin. There was a lot of work being done in the area, several dozen men had stopped their work, repairing and renovating the towers of the Moat with stone, to bow their heads to Robert and his entourage. The Moat had once been a **massive** castle. It was designed to dominate the causeway, the only route through the Neck that was large enough to be viable for an invading army to use going either way, much like the Twins further south, only more so.

It was possibly one of the three deadliest defensive positions in Westeros, only matched by the Bloody Gate of the Vale and Casterly Rock. There were stronger, larger, and better built castles, but no others whose positions gave them such natural advantages.

Even now with only three large towers, it could hold for years against any army from the south. Each tower could hold two to three hundred soldiers comfortably, including two ballista on each tower. All the towers were situated around the causeway and any army that tried to attack or pass through would be mauled by the defenders. And given the bend in the causeway, no ballista or other siege equipment could be brought to bear on them in turn without being well inside their range.

But most of the rest of the castle had fallen into disrepair, making the Moat vulnerable from the North. Yet, the work



being done now was putting two more towers back into working order plus three connecting walls, covering the Moat from the back and western flanks, leaving the only entrance, other than the causeway, the shifting, dangerous trails leading further into the swamp.

Robert took all this in, then turned back to the crannogman. "Ho, Howland. We mean to press on." Robert spat to one side of his horse, away from the crannogman since otherwise that could have been taken as an insult. "The queen is not one to rough it out here with you lot. But I must ask, what's all the work about? Where did the stone come from, it already looks cut?"

Howland blinked. "Your grace, surely you've heard about House Bolton and the destruction of the Dread Fort?"

Robert frowned a moment, then nodded, his face lighting up with humor. "Aye, now that you say it, I remember reading a missive from Ned about that several years ago. Something about Bolton taking the normal raiding too far, and it rolling over his son? Killed the old leech himself didn't he?" Robert laughed loudly and rather abrasively. "So that explains where the stones come from, but why here?"

"We outbid House Glover to be the house given the stone to repair our castle, your grace. We could provide the workmen and pay them while House Glover could only provide the workmen. Also, transporting the stone down to here was much easier than trying to send any large shipments of stone through the wolfswood. We can of course make use of the Kingsroad, they could not."

"I see, a good use of the material, I guess." Robert mused. "Well, if we want to leave the Neck behind before finding an inn, we need to get a move on. We'll see you on our way back." With that the king turned back and rejoined the company.

Howland stared after him thoughtfully, taking in the king's body, the wine stains on his clothing, and the red eyes, shaking his head. He had seen people drinking themselves into early graves before and the king definitely looked like he was doing the same.

The king rejoined the party, telling the others with him about the reasons behind the new construction, but unlike the king, they were much more suspicious. "I cannot understand it my lord, there is no need to repair the Moat unless you are concerned with threats from the south," Varys, the Master of Whispers, suggested.

Varys was a eunuch, fat and bald, always coiffed in purple silk or other outrageous color and smelling of perfume. He was also known as the Spider due to his extensive spy network. Indeed, he was ostensibly along with this trip to check in personally with a few of his 'little birds', his personal spy ring. Considering the rumors that the man had been following up on, Robert had been willing to let him come with them.

"You heard the explanation, Varys." said Robert coldly. "It makes sense, especially if House Glove can't fork out the money."

"Possibly, my Lord." Varys muttered. "Yet, still it seems odd to me."

Robert grunted and ignored him from then on.

Varys frowned, he never truly liked the fact that King was almost immobile on some issues, and far too easily manipulated in others. Robert also had a blind spot when it came to those loyal to him. *But he could be right in this,* the eunuch thought to himself, *after all house Stark has never made any move against the crown, it would not have done so even during the rebellion if not for the death of the Lord and his heir as well as the daughter of the house. Still, it is odd to me.*

Such was the nature of those who work in the shadows; they are always on the lookout for other shadows, other plots, and those with dangerous ambitions. It would never occur to the eunuch to just take Lord Reed's words at face value, a problem that would carry over into other matters.

OOOOOOO

The trip back South was as uneventful as the trip up had been, up until they ran into the wildling refugee party. It took them a month to reach the Last Hearth, seat of House Umber, where they were welcomed with open arms.

The Last Hearth was a squat sort of castle, melting into the ground around it, made of stone torn from the earth nearby. House Umber was known for its stocks of wood and stone and their castle showed it, though, thanks to the lack of roads here in the North, they weren't actually able to sell much of it to anyone else. Even getting from the quarries to the Kingsroad was a trial for anything larger than a mule. Their castle was nowhere near as large as some

of the castles further south but there was a certain blunt practicality about it, much like Winterfell. Around it in clusters were several small communities, not even villages really, for smallfolk, with a few more scattered through the forests of the Umber lands. People this far north tended to band together like that, there wasn't a single farmstead or woodcutter's cottage in these lands. Too many such had disappeared, sucked up by the wilderness or taken out by wildling raids.

As they came closer they heard the harsh calls and commands from the castle's wall, always at full strength here, unlike Winterfell, which only had fifty men on the walls, most of the time.

Osha looked scornfully at the Castle knowing it to be the main bastion of the Umber kneelers, but she became subdued when Ranma glanced at her. In truth, the wild woman was rather in awe of the young Stark. The speed and monstrous strength he had shown during the battle against the tools of the Others had astonished her.

As soon as they were close enough, someone hailed them from the walls, shouting down. "Smalljon! What the fuck happened to you all, you look as if you've run into an army!"

Smalljon waved his hand up at his father, who had been the one to shout. Indeed, even so many weeks later their clothing and general appearance hadn't changed overmuch and Roger and Edd were still riding gingerly, even though all their other injuries, even Ranma's arm, had healed.

Greatjon Umber was a massive man, taller than even his son, though admittedly, his son still had some growing to do. He stood at around six feet eight, three inches taller than Smalljon, and even broader in the shoulders. He was reputed to be the strongest man in the North lands. In reality, Ranma knew that Smalljon was stronger than his father these days and Ranma was stronger than Smalljon. "We ran into something new father, something that we need to share with you!"

Later that evening Ranma, Smalljon, and Jon met with Greatjon in his Hall, while his servants were preparing a meal for their arrival.

Greatjon was not only a large man, but he had a full head of hair, a massive beard, and big shaggy eyebrows. Everything about him was larger than life really, even his voice. "So," he boomed, "what did you lads run into?"

Ranma cocked his head to one side thinking of whether or not to follow his uncle's advice. He shared a glance with Smalljon and shook his head slightly, something his father missed, thankfully, and decided to follow Benjen's advice. "We ran into a wildling force before we hit the wall." Ranma explained. "They'd hit one of the villages in the Gift, emptied it of people and hid everywhere inside it. We didn't suspect anything for a bit, since we couldn't find any sign of anyone being there, despite having searched a few houses. They attacked us in the middle of the night, and they brought giants." That was close enough to the truth that Greatjon would get most of the pertinent information without getting so much he started to question what really happened.

"We lost both of the Norrey scouts the clan assigned to our expedition, and it was touch and go for several of the others too." Ranma grimaced at that, still not liking the fact he had lost men and the fact they had to burn the bodies. He had sent a raven from the wall to the Norrey clan telling of their heroism, though giving them the same prepared story as he would everyone else.

The older man looked at them in surprise. "Giants, truly? They haven't been seen even close to the Wall in hundreds of years." From anyone else, he would have scoffed at the very idea that the almost mythical giants, who resided in the Frozen Lands beyond even the wildlings land, would ever come south. But he had never known Ranma or Smalljon to tell such a bald faced lie. The rest of the story was much easier to swallow, since the wildlings were masters of ambush. The fact they had wiped out a whole village without word getting out, however, was a worrisome sign of how empty the Gift was becoming.

"I don't know what to tell you." Ranma said shrugging. "One minute all was fine, then there were giants smashing through the back of the house we had taken over for the evening." From there Ranma went back and explained how they had run into the first group of wildlings, who were heading south fleeing from something, he didn't specify what, letting Greatjon come to his own conclusions.

"So something is stirring behind the Wall." Greatjon muttered shaking his head. "That is fell news."

"Yes," Ranma answered crisply, "and it is for that reason that I want you to spread the word that something is going on with the wildlings, we may be facing another King Beyond the Wall here. The Night Watch is weak now, weaker than they've been in a hundred years, and commander Jeor needs all the aid we can send him. You'll start the process, both people and food. The Gift is nearly empty, the wildlings seem to be able to get small forces around the

wall, and without the Gift the Night Watch can't sustain itself, unless we all send aid."

Greatjon leaned back in his large chair, scoffing. "You may be your father's heir boy, but you don't order me."

"Yes," Ranma said coldly, "I do. Winter is coming, and we must prepare." His hard blue eyes held the older man's.

Eventually Greatjon looked away. "I won't be alone in this, just the first?"

"Yes," Ranma replied. "We'll stop at every hold along the way we can and I'll be sending Edd home from here to Karhold to get them moving, as well."

"How much of my ready force do you think we should send?" Greatjon asked now past the posturing. The boy had proven time and time again that he wasn't someone to cross and always met such challenges head on, just like he should. Greatjon approved of that.

"I'd like you to send half, you keep four hundred men, yes? Send two-hundred, that'll leave you with more than enough to guard your castle, and give the Night Watch a decent addition for their forces. If every lord, major and minor, can send half of his ready men up there, then that should be enough. Hell," Ranma laughed sharply, "the Wall is such a good defensive location that one man is worth a thousand attackers. Though I've also asked my uncle to make certain that word is sent to every Castle in the North if any large contingents of wildlings approach. If we are facing a King Beyond the Wall, their numbers will be staggering, plus with this new ability to get forces large enough to be a threat around the Wall, we might need a defense in depth as well. With the Gift as it is, any supplies we send will have to be well defended."

It was actually that suggestion that had made the commander unable to send a raven after Ranma and his group, having used all his ravens up sending the news to the other lords of the North.

"I'll send my men out in the morning, with my uncle Mors in command. He'll take orders from Jeor easily enough being of an age with him, and he has a hatred of the wildlings that burns bright in him." Greatjon nodded his head then smiled suddenly, his whole face creasing around it. "You've your father's way about you, lad, both your take charge attitude and seeing true to the crux of the problem."

Ranma shrugged, looking a little embarrassed, and Greatjon guffawed, slapping him on the shoulder. "Go on lad, at least we can set you on your way with a hot meal and good night's sleep."

Ranma feasted well that night with his friends, of whom Smalljon was going to stay here and help his father, while Edd rested for some more days before heading home with a small escort. In fact, Smalljon was probably going to be put in charge of the wagons and two-hundred or so smallfolk that would eventually go north. This would be the first small caravan that would be sent, but within four months the Wall would be strengthened massively.

The very next day, the group rode out again, leaving Smalljon behind them with many clasps of farewell. The plan was to head to Hornwood, through the ex-Bolton lands, then send Hathan home to White Harbor with the news from there, while Daryn would remain with his family at Hornwood. The others would continue on, returning to Winterfell. There Ranma would speak to his father and the two of them would send out messengers to rouse the rest of the noble houses and prepare their bannermen.

A week later as they rode, or ran in Ranma and the direwolves case, they came upon a hill that overlooked the site of where the Dread Fort once stood.

Osha had breathed a sigh of relief as soon as they were out of the Umber lands, knowing them for the most implacable of enemies and grateful to have been under Ranma's protection during their stay. Yet, now she was looking around with wide eyes. She and Jon often spent time conversing, Jon getting better at the old tongue while teaching her their own in turn and he filled her in on what had happened here. Once she learned this had been the flayed man's land and what had happened to them, she was relieved beyond all measure. Umbers would kill or rape you; what the flayed men did was worse by far.

Ranma pulled the horse he had been given by Greatjon momentarily, looking towards where the Dread Fort had stood. The others left him to it until he shook his head and moved to join them. The majority of the stone had been sent South, but two minor lords, answering to Hornwood and Umber, had their longhouses expanded and built up in turn. As the Dread Fort had never been designed to house any smallfolk, the impact on the people of the region was minor, save for one or two houses that had shared Bolton's inclinations, who were most put out by their new lords. When they took to banditry to express this feeling Greatjon had responded by removing their heads for them and adding their holdings to other houses in the area with Ned Stark's approval.

All that remained of the Dread Fort was the godswood, now standing free of any man made walls. It had grown in the past few years, almost mystically fast, to completely cover the area previously occupied by the castle. Nor was that the only change. The heartwood in the center of the godswood had once looked like a flayed man's face, constantly weeping sap. Now however for some reason the sap had dried up and the face, which had seemed to be screaming in agony before, was now smiling. Ranma had seen that once a few years ago, and the sight had made him smile.

Now, however, he frowned as a thought came to him. "Does anyone know what happened to Domicer anyway?"

Daryn shrugged. "He went across the sea to the free cities of Essos. That was about, what, two years ago, I think."

"Ah," Ranma said nodding, "I'd wondered. I wasn't exactly fond of him, he was a nice enough guy but way too interested in putting me in song and story."

They all laughed and he growled at them then looked down at Fenris who had imitated the sound. The puppies could now run along with the horses and him for half a day before having to ride and their endurance was building daily. Still, he knew that Fenris was done for the day and he leaned down, allowing the pup to leap into his hands. Fenris licked his face and Ranma chuckled, pulling out a bit of chicken, which the two shared, as Ranma made plans on how to train Fenris and figure out what the hell their connection was.

OOOOOOO

Domicer Snow, as he rather fondly called himself after Lord Stark's decree that the Bolton line was dead, loved the bard's life. He sang for his supper, he traveled and saw new and interesting places, and he had no ties to the land of his birth or his father. Here in the cities of Essos, he was known as Domicer, the Crooked Hand, due to his hand where the skin had grown back to look stiff and inflexible. Yet, for all that, it slowed neither his sword nor his harp playing and his wits were still as sharp as they ever were, tempered now by the memories of betrayal and personal suffering. Domicer had made his way from city to city, sampling each in turn, but not finding anything (or anyone) that could compel him to stay. He was always more interested in what lay just beyond the horizon than what was right in front of him.

Right now he was in Pentos, a city where life was based off of the golden rule: he who has the gold makes the rules. The rich magisters ran everything, using a puppet prince to add a bit of theater to their iron grip but nothing more than that. Rules and laws only mattered to those not rich enough to bribe their way out of trouble or pay to have the laws changed. Case in point: there were not supposed to be any slaves here, but the rich had servants who wore bronze collars and had as little rights as slaves.

He looked up slightly, letting his eyes rake over the young man and younger girl who had just turned onto the street where he was singing in front of a medium sized crowd. Both were dressed in ragged cloaks covering them from head to toe, yet, a flash of platinum still could be seen underneath their hoods.

Domicer had written several new songs and many of them, especially his masterpiece, the Ballad of the Young Wolf, were always well received. Of course he had changed a few things for the Ballad, making his own part in that conflict into a maiden to add some romance to it. And he had kept his promise to young Ranma. In the song, Ranma had flowing hair, true, but it was his normal black. His eyes had needed no embellishment, and many a girl had tittered about those 'deep sapphire orbs'.

Like all experienced bards, Domicer was able to play and sing while keeping his attention on other matters and he watched the two silver-blond haired siblings (With that hair, who else could it be but the Beggar King and his sister?) moving down the street even as he played the 'Ballad of the Young Wolf. They stopped, however, at the edge of the crowd around Domicer. From underneath her hood, the sister smiled faintly at the current tale of heroism Domicer's harp was playing, while the older brother was staring at him with a burning intensity, a look that somewhat worried Domicer.

They waited until the song ended then, when Domicer bowed and told the crowd that was it for the morning, the older sibling began to move through the dispersing crowd. Soon he stood before the bard and spoke abruptly, his voice even and cultured, belying his ragged clothes. "Your voice has the tone of a Westerosi, be that true? Have you any news from Westeros?"

"Aye, a man of the North I am. Domicer Snow at your service, formerly of house Bolton." Domicer bowed extravagantly. "What kind of news are you interested in, scion of house Targaryen?" At the young man's sudden sharp glare, he shrugged. "Who else has hair or eyes that color, Lord Viserys?"

"Bolton?" The young girl looked up. She must have been all of fifteen, if that. She gave the impression of being shy

and mousy in demeanor, yet her general intelligence shown through those violet eyes. "Then that tale you just sung, it was true?" At her brother's glare, the girl hunched her shoulders and backed away, pulling her hood further down to cover her face.

A face, Domicer could see now that they were standing in front of him, that was quite beautiful, if too young for his tastes. Still he answered her question readily enough. "Aye lady, 'tis true as death, t'was a tale of the death of my former house and good riddance besides. What they found in the hidden halls of the Dread Fort." Domicer shook his head, shivering theatrically. It had been years after all and he had become used to the memories of that time of his life, both what happened to him and the sights of the skins, hanging in the air of his father's dungeons that they had found after sacking the fort. "Yet, let us not dwell on such things, again, what kind of news are you interested in?"

The older boy continued to glare at his sister for a moment then turned back to Domicer. "You follow house Stark then, the traitors. Why should I listen to you?"

"Because you came up to me, my lord. And the Starks were no more traitors than the Mad King Aerys was sane. No family could have allowed his horrible murder of its lord and heir to go unpunished, to say nothing of the young lady of the house being kidnapped by Rhaegar."

The younger man snarled while the girl gasped in shocked incredulity. But it was Viserys who had the most violent reaction. He reached under his cloak and pulled out a long dagger. "You lie and I'll gut you for besmirching the honor or my family!"

Domicer quickly caught the younger man's wrist with his good hand, holding the blade still. "Calmly, lord, calmly. I said not a word that was untrue, and every man and woman in Westeros, aye and maybe more than most here in Essos, know the tale by heart. If you react so badly to all such inconvenient truths, then how will you convince any to serve you?"

"They should serve me because it is my right to sit on the Iron Throne!" Viserys gritted his teeth, trying to free his hand but having little success. "The Baratheon usurper has no right to it!"

"That at least is true, if by right, you mean by blood. Yet, Baratheon won the throne the way your own ancestors made it, by killing and forcing any who stood against him into submission. That is not to say that he is a good king, because he is not. I have heard many things in my travels both on Westeros and here in Essos, and I know that for truth. Now, have you calmed down enough for me to let you go? Or should I turn this blade of yours on you, then walk away and let your sister, I believe I have heard her name given as Daenerys, to her own devices?", Domicer asked, his voice showing no strain at holding the younger man in place. Indeed for all his bluster, the boy had no muscle to speak of and was obviously untrained in matters of combat. Domicer, on the other hand, was reckoned a fell blade and his undamaged hand was his dominant one.

Viserys frowned, then regained control of his anger, that pure violent anger that he knew proved he was a true Targaryen. He nodded his head sharply. "Very well, I will hear what you have to say. Tell me anything you know about the court and Kings Landing."

Domicer kept from rolling his eyes with difficulty, wondering how the hell someone dressed in rags and who had next to nothing to his name, no swords at his back and no real power base, could ever sound so imperious. "Well, your highness, if you are interested in such as that, the first thing you must know is that the Hand of the King, Jon Arryn, is dead. He was an old man but the suddenness of his death is astonishing, and possibly suspicious."

"If you have news of Essos, sir bard, then pray come into my home and share it in more seeming environs." a new voice interrupted.

Domicer turned and looked toward the speaker, nearly bursting out in laughter at the sight of the man. The man was obese, so over weight, it was a surprise he could move under his own power at all. He was also the proud owner an oiled, forked yellow beard and beady, yet intelligent eyes set into a fat, florid face.

It was his obvious wealth, however, that stopped Domicer's laughter in his throat. The man had a ring worth a normal man's yearly wages on each of his fat fingers and he had jewels and golden thread worked throughout his red and gold shirt; a vast expanse of silk that again was so expensive Domicer could have made enough money off it to live for years without needing to raise his voice in song even once. On either side of the man were two very competent looking bodyguards, each with long spears in hand and short swords on their belts, wearing quarter plate armor.

The man continued to speak, looking now at Viserys, his voice taking on an buttery tone. "I had heard news of you arriving in the city, my lord, but had no idea you were so close, else I would have had my manse to meet you all the

sooner. I am Illyrio, I'm glad you got my message. Come, let us take this bard inside and sit down to eat while he tells his news."

Domeric knew he didn't actually have a choice, but then again this looked to be interesting. In many ways, he had somewhat tired of the lonely life of the road and being adviser to these two young dragons looked to be fraught with peril and daring do, all of which he could easily turn to song. So he merely nodded, smiling faintly. "That sounds like a lovely idea, magister, so long as I am invited to sup as well?"

Illyrio laughed, loud and false to Domeric's ears, before turning to lead the way back to his house. As they fell into step behind him, the young girl looked up at the bard. "Is, is what you said about King Aerys true?" She whispered fear and revulsion in her eyes. "Is he really called the Mad King?"

Domeric paused, looking down at the girl thoughtfully. "I was a young squire in the Stormlands when the Rebellion began, lady. I well remember the reasons behind it, the murders and the use of fire on innocents, young and old, lord and smallfolk alike no matter the infraction. All that is public record in Westeros, lady. You have no need to take my word for it, simply find a recent history book or scroll. Always remember, if someone tells you something, make certain it is the truth and do not take anything at face value. I will say that when he took the throne, Aerys was well liked, even loved. But by the time he was slain through Lannister treachery, aye, he was hated and reviled. Time and power lass, can change many a man or even a woman."

Daenerys nibbled at her lower lip taking in his words, but the moment was broken when her older brother shouted for her to come and walk with him. Domeric looked after the young girl thoughtfully, then at the guard who had taken position at the back of their small group, shrugged his shoulders, and followed the Targaryen siblings into the house, wondering what the future held for him.

OOOOOOO

The trip continued, and a few weeks leisurely travel later they arrived at Hornwood castle where they were greeted with open arms by Lord Halys, as well as his Lady Donella.

Donella was older than Catelyn, pushing fifty years old, but despite that she was still beautiful. She had straight black hair falling down her back with only a hint of gray to it, a curvaceous body, and a beautiful face, which hid a witty brain besides. As such, her husband was the envy of many a lord in the North. Ranma had heard that there had been many men of the North trying to woo Donella Manderly when she was younger and could well believe it looking at her. She was also like Catelyn in that she was a decent enough administrator, able to help her husband manage their lands effectively.

"You are welcome here young lords, though I'm afraid you should not tarry," Halys said holding out his hand to Ranma and the others one after another as they jumped down from their saddles, before pulling his son into a hug. "We have fresh horses for you and you must hurry to Winterfell."

"Why?" Ranma asked, cocking his head. "Has our news gone before us?"

Halys shook his head. "No, we have had no ravens from House Umber or the Wall, what is your news? But in any event news has come from Winterfell. The King is riding for Winterfell even as we speak, he's halfway to Castle Cerwyn by now going by the last urgent raven we had. The King's Hand, Jon Arryn, has died, and he needs Lord Stark's advice on who to choose to replace him."

Those words sent a cold chill up Ranma's spine. For some reason, something inside him was telling him that this was going to change everything. "I see, and how long do we have before he arrives?"

Halys laughed. "As I said, the last raven put him halfway to Cerwyn castle, which was several days past. You'll probably arrive quite a bit later than him, and you'll need to make your excuses for that. Your father, in his last message, said that he will be handing you over to your mother for 'proper chastisement'."

"But we never got the message!" Ranma said, a little panicky now. His father wasn't much of a disciplinarian unless the issue Ranma and the others were being disciplined for was physical. Then he very thoroughly shouted at them, raising his hands very rarely. In fact, the only time Ned had raised his hand was to Jon and Theon because one of their fights had occurred in the wine cellar and had ruined several hundred gold dragons worth of wine, including several bottles that had been laid down on the day of his younger sister's birth.

The lady Catelyn on the other hand... She made you think you were the smallest, stupidest boy in the world. She never raised her voice, she was simply very, very condescending. Ranma couldn't quite describe it, but it made him

feel small, silly, and foolish. It was **never** fun.

"And since when has a mother ever been moved by such a logical argument?" Halys laughed, ignoring his wife's look of mock indignation. "You're in for it lads."

Theon groaned his head in his hands. "We are so dead. Your lady mother is going to skin us alive."

"She can't do that." Jon said shaking his head, pointedly not looking at Donella, who he had developed a childhood crush for years ago that he hadn't quite gotten over yet. "Flaying and skinning are both outlawed, remember. No she'll just cut out our tongues and pickle them."

Ranma shook his head at their antics but there was definitely very real fear there. "Not if we can get there fast enough."

"Lad, you're dreaming." Halys laughed. "The King is but four days away, at best, and it's the better part of two weeks journey from here to Winterfell even if you switch horses and ride as fast as you can."

"I aim to try it anyway, get those horses of yours out here, Lord Hornwood." he laughed, clapping the older man on the shoulder. "Your son will tell you what we ran into," he looked over at Daryn, who was looking rather relieved at the need to stay and not having to face the Lady of Winterfell, "that'll give you all the information you need about our news."

"So you did run into something?" Donella asked looking between them while Halys cocked an eyebrow at his son.

Daryn nodded. "Yes, we did, which is why we convinced Greatjon to send half of his ready men to the wall. He's also sending out notes to all of his vassals, telling them to ready themselves to be called up at a moment's notice."

Halys' eyes widened and then he looked at his son through narrowed eyes. "That is grave news, what did you find to warrant such an action?" Behind him several stablemen had already pulled out horses, two for everyone continuing to Winterfell, exchanging their weary horses with fresh ones plus a remount. Hathan would remain here for a few days, allowing his own excellent mount to recover before heading back home to White Harbor to carry their news.

"The wildlings," Ranma said, nodding to toward Osha, who glared back at all the people sending glares her way, "seem to have found some new tricks and were able to get a pretty decent force around the Wall. Your son will tell you more, but for right now, we need to be on our way."

"Are you sure you want to take her with you?" Halys looked at the wild woman askance. "We could hold her here for a time then send her to Winterfell after the king leaves."

"No," Roger said quickly, "I'm to take her with me. My father might need more convincing after all then you or Lord Stark. He is most set in his ways and often doesn't believe anything he personally doesn't see."

"And hasn't had the opportunity to meet the young Lord Stark." Halys muttered to himself.

Ranma waved away the stable hand leading two horses toward him, telling him to hand the reins to Theon and Roger. "You're not seriously thinking of running the whole way are you?" Theon asked. "Even you can't keep up with horses galloping at full stride for that long."

The Stark heir chuckled. "We'll have to see about that, won't we? Let's go!" With that Ranma broke into a run, heading down the road that would take them toward Winterfell, eventually. And as the hours went on and Ranma continued to run keeping up with the galloping horses, Theon was forced to change his tune.

OOOOOO

Far South of Winterfell, a raven sent by Catelyn had arrived and a woman who was called by many the Queen of Thorns was contemplating how to reply to the surprising missive.

"You can't be serious, grandmother! The North, it's so cold, so lifeless! More importantly, the North is the weakest realm in terms of money and men. Surely, there are better options!" The young girl who spoke thus was a true beauty, with long brown hair tied in a loose cascade that lay on one shoulder going down one side of her chest. She was currently dressed in an elaborate and extremely well-made gown of green, with rose highlights going down in two lines down her sides and on either sleeve. Her face was beautiful and her eyes were normally snapping with good humor, adding to a somewhat flirtatious air she put off. That humor was not visible at the moment, and she stared at her grandmother in shock.

"Enough of that, granddaughter. You will do as you're told!" The woman who spoke was short of stature, bent and wizened with age, and with a face best described as wrinkly. Yet she carried an air of authority, an intelligence that few could match, and her eyes were sharp and cold. This was a woman to command respect even from her own family and her name was Olenna Redwyne.

"I see no reason why my daughter should marry one of the Starks! After all, we've been pushing for marriage between her and Renly Baratheon, which would put us much closer to the throne!" Mace Tyrell was a forty something- man who had once been powerfully built, yet, was now trending to fat. Though his face was hard, there was something a little soft about the set of his eyes, about the way he stood. This was a man who despite his position as Lord Paramount of the Reach, arguably the largest and most powerful realm of Westeros, was used to following orders.

"I know." said Olenna, nodding her head. "I thought it a good idea at the time, yet we all know where Renly's real interests lie. Besides, mayhap Loras alone can be surety of our alliance." She barked a laugh and Margaery frowned slightly, but did not comment on the truth of the matter as Olenna went on. "Even so, it would have been a good match, yet things are happening in the realm, as you would know if you kept your eyes and ears open!"

Mace flushed under her gaze and she went on, speaking now as if she was talking to a rather small and idiotic child, which in her opinion she was. Mace had no political acumen at all, making him less than useless at anything beyond waving around his sword and bellowing threateningly. "John Arryn is dead. That means there is an opening for the most powerful position in the realm, one the King no doubt means to fill with Ned Stark. Now, let me tell you a thing or two about Ned Stark. He is honorable to a fault, straightforward, compassionate despite the Stark Stone Face of his, deadly with a blade and with an army. And **utterly** unprepared for life at court! He has not the skills necessary to survive there, where the most dangerous blades are the ones that are formed, not from steel, but from words and gold. Yet for all that, he is dogged and determined, and as long as he has the king's ear, which he always will, have no doubt of it, he can do quite a lot of damage to anyone who crosses him or the king. This might be enough to cause a shift in power from the growing reach of House Lannister. On top of that, Robert has always wanted to bond his house to that of the Starks, in memory of his dead love, more than anything else."

The old woman sneered, having many questions about the strength of that love, as well as whether or not Robert had ever been the sort or could become the sort to love a single woman. There were, perhaps, a dozen bastards born to the king, including one in the Vales who had been conceived during the time when Robert was affianced to Lyanna Stark.

She continued, pushing those thoughts away as unimportant. "Myrcella is too young, especially since Joffrey is not yet wedded. Yet, Joffrey is almost of an age with the oldest daughter of House Stark, which means the Starks will become even closer to the crown."

*And who knows, she thought to herself, keeping this thought from her face with the ease of long practice, with a father-in-law like Ned maybe Joffrey could possibly be made into something less of the disaster that I envision him to be in the future. Though, it's not as if his father has been all that good a king, either. But Ned is a different matter entirely, if he can perhaps learn the rules of the political arena.*

"Now think of it, we can wed our power to the Stark's growing power. Or," she said, smiling cunningly, "we may be able to show Joffrey and his mother at the very least that there are better options closer to home than Sansa Stark."

"You mean for me to go there and see if I can attract Joffrey?" Margaery pursed her lips distastefully. "There's been so many rumors about him grandmother, I'm not quite sure if that is any better an option for me."

"You will do what is best for the family." her grandmother growled and the younger woman backed away slightly. Yet, unlike her father in similar circumstances, she didn't look away, merely staring back at her grandmother. This earned her a slight nod of approval from the old woman, but Olenna went on inexorably. "Things are happening, the balance of power in the realm is shifting, and we need to be in a position to capitalize on it one way or another."

Both Mace and his daughter frowned, but nodded eventually and the woman turned to a table, with parchment and ink on it, to write the missive that her son would then copy and send off. She wondered whether or not Ned was ready to play the game of thrones, but in the end that hardly mattered. Olenna and her family were ready, and they would wring what they could from whatever advantage came their way.

O O O O O O O

Ned looked around at his somewhat depleted family, shaking his head. The missive from Hornwood had arrived a day ago, but even as fast as his son and the others with him could move he doubted that they would arrive in time. It was



over a week's travel between here and Hornwood for a small group like that, and there was only so much you could do by continuing to move even at night unless you wanted to kill your horses. *And now it's too late*, he thought to himself rather irritably. While he had made the decision to let his wife handle chastising their sons and wayward ward, he also decided at that moment to put his own coins into the equation.

*How dare Ranma disobey me.* he thought to himself grimly. *I told him not to go past the Last Hearth. And instead I find that they bypassed the Umber castle on their way up and went straight to the Wall, then went to house Umber's seat after?* To be fair, this alone wouldn't bother Ned, especially not given the news the raven returned with, if the King wasn't arriving within the next hour and his son and heir would not be here to greet him, a grave insult. Ned suddenly realized that someone who was here, was missing and he frowned. "Where is Arya?"

"She ran off, father." Sansa replied, shaking her head at her younger sister's stupidity. She also hoped that Arya wouldn't make their entire family look like bumpkins in front of the king and his family. She had heard lovely tales of how handsome the prince was and wanted to impress him if she could. To that end, she was wearing one of her best dresses, a black and blue dress lined with white fur, and her hair was done in an intricate swirl down her back. "She refused to get ready with the rest of us."

Bran suddenly laughed and pointed. Rickon, who was standing next to his older brother, grinned too, waving his hand wildly.

Marching across the open field of the courtyard was a very short soldier, and Ned shook his head. He moved over quickly, catching the young guard by the back of the shirt. "And where do you think you're going dressed like that young lady?"

Arya pouted at being caught but stared up at her father innocently. "I'm going to join the guard for the king's arrival father."

Ned reached down and took the helmet off his daughter's head, filching her spear in the same movement, though where Arya had come up with **that** was a mystery. "Do you think you can make this young lady presentable quickly, my love?" he said turning to his wife.

"I can certainly try." Catelyn said grimly taking her daughter sharply by the shoulder. "We will be having words young lady, whatever you might think, there is a time and place for such things, and this is not the time."

Aria quailed a little under her mother's gaze but stared back defiantly. She hated doing all this women's stuff, and without Ranma or Jon here, she had lost her closest allies in her ongoing war against them. Arya just couldn't understand why she couldn't be what she wanted to be, why she had to pretend to be this lady of the court or whatever, when she was anything but. Arya scowled further seeing her older sister's smirk of triumph.

However, she didn't have any chance of escape and not ten minutes later, she was back dressed in the dress that her mother had originally laid out for her. She stood at the end of the row of children scowling angrily, wondering where her big brothers were, and Theon as well. Though in truth, Arya wasn't as fond of him as she was of her brothers. Of course that made sense, since she was related to them and Theon really didn't make that much time for her.

Ned sighed sadly when an outrider he had sent out returned, telling them of the king's approach, and still there was no sign of his sons.

OOOOOOO

"Look, see there's Winterfell, and is that the king's party just coming into view? Who's the fat guy at the front? And you said we wouldn't make it!"

"Hate you so much right now! And that might be the king you're speaking of, worthless piece of sea jetsam! Actually, please, say that to his face, I would love to see you without your head at the moment."

"If I could feel my legs I would kick you! And if my thighs never recover I'm going to curse you!"

From the back of another horse there was only the sound of snoring while the two women in their party were awake, yet far too tired to join in. Osha had thought she was tough, the veteran of many battles and a life spent in the wilds of beyond the Wall. But the pace they had set after leaving Hornwood had beaten her thighs and back to mush.

Ranma, for it was indeed he who had spoken first, laughed at Theon and Jon's words. "Ha! Listen, I'm going on ahead, you all keep moving, but no offense but my own presence is going to be much more sorely missed if I'm not

there than any of you." Ignoring their gaping faces Ranma leaned down, picking up Fenris who had been running with him for the last full day. Then with a final wave of his hand, he sped up, leaving his friends and brother behind with their almost exhausted horses.

OOOOOOO

Ten minutes later, not a minute after the watchers on the wall had spotted him, Ranma charged through the Hunter's Gate, dropping off Fenris in the kennels with Hodor, the gentle giant that was one of the castle's better stable hands. After exiting the kennels out into the courtyard, Ranma skidded to a halt as he saw the group already prepared and waiting for the King.

Catelyn and Eddard were both staring at him, their faces showing something of an inner turmoil. They were happy to see him of course, but his timing was horrible. He looked as if he hadn't shaved or bathed in months and was altogether rather scraggly, in no way ready to see the king. His younger siblings, of course, had no such qualms, and were simply smiling at him in welcome, happy to see him after nearly three months, with only Sansa seeming at all dismayed about his appearance.

Ranma quickly ran up to them and said, "Mother, father, do I have time to..."

"Barely." Ned said sharply. "I'm not even certain how you got here, it's nearly two weeks from Hornwood to here even with remounts."

Ranma shrugged. "I ran, the others galloped and they all had remounts. We didn't stop. They even strapped themselves to their saddles when they were in danger of falling asleep and we kept going every night. I left them about fifty minutes ago."

Ned nodded. "After we have given our greetings, I will send a group of guards out to escort them in. And we will be talking later."

"Yes, father, we will."

Something in their son's tone made both his parents look at him sharply, and Ned looked at him with one eyebrow raised, wondering if more was going on than what the raven carried message had told him. But Ranma merely nodded his head firmly and Ned sighed. "For now, run and get a shave and clean clothing, one of the servants will prepare both for you." Indeed two servants had already broken off from the crowd of them waiting outside the keep and hurried inside.

Ranma nodded, racing over and hugging Arya and his younger brothers before winking at Sansa. "I'd hug you too dear sister, but I'm afraid I'd get your nice dress all sweaty."

Sansa scoffed at him, not liking how wild looking Ranma seemed at the moment. "After you take a bath, **maybe** I will deign to allow you to give me a hug."

At that, Ranma chuckled and ran inside leaving the two parents to stare at one another. "Well," Ned said, a little weakly, "he's here at least." Catelyn rolled her eyes, but ten minutes later their son was back, just in time to slip into the line again. Now shaved, clean looking, and dressed in good leathers, a white jerkin, and dark grey coat lined with wolf's fur. He exchanged a quick hug with Sansa, now that he was clean, ruffling his two brothers' hair fondly before standing at attention next to his parents.

OOOOOOO

Queen Cersei Lannister hated the North. She hated its ruggedness, she hated the trees, she hated the fact that it snowed here even in the summer. She hated the people, rustic idiotic peasants, the lot of them. She hated the roads; despite the comfort of her specially made carriage, the trip was hideously uncomfortable without nearly enough creature comforts. And above all, she hated the Starks. Too cold by far, too honorable, too stupid! Moreover, every time she heard that name Cersei was reminded of why her husband never truly loved her, never committed fully to their marriage. No, he was more in love with a dead woman than her. *Well I've had my revenge there.*

She looked across at her children, all of them hers and none of them Robert's, smirking internally. No one seemed to be able to see the truth right in front of them, the truth being so terrible, and in the end Jon Arryn was the only one to realize anything. He was dead now, and hopefully with him, the chance of anyone discovering the truth about her children.

Myrcella glanced at her mother looking at her older brother and shuddered a little. She was a very bright young girl of

ten, one had to be in the court after all, and over the last year she had begun to see things in her older brother that she hadn't noticed before, especially given the way he treated her and Tommen. She winced a little as the carriage went over a bump aggravating her badly bruised ankle. But she kept the expression off her face, not wanting to let on that Joffrey had hurt her stamping on her ankle like this morning when no one was looking. He had begun to do things like that, hurting her and Tommen in small ways whenever he could get away with it.

Yet, she knew nothing would come of complaining to either parent. The king wouldn't care, their father spent as little time with any of them as he could. And the queen was even worse.

He might not have meant to do it, after all, or at least that's what their mother would say, just children playing. Their mother always took Joffrey's side over everything. Joffrey was the golden boy, the heir to the throne and thus more important than either Tommen or Myrcella.

Soon enough they were in sight of Winterfell and she stuck her head out the window despite her mother's hissed injunction to act appropriate to their station, and looked at the castle.

There was something **solid** about Winterfell. It was big, larger than the Red Keep she thought, and there was nothing about its exterior that hinted at anything but its simple purpose, defending those within. Yet even so, there was something majestic about the sight, coming out of the mist, situated there among the hills and forests like it had always been there, simply a part of the landscape.

From the head of the column of one hundred forty men-at-arms and sixty five servants, Robert laughed. "Winterfell!" he roared out, laughing, "by the Seven, it's been too long."

OOOOOOO

Not five minutes after Ranma joined them, Robert descended from his horse with difficulty and Ned took a moment to examine his friend, sighing internally as he saw what the years had done to him. Where before he had been a heavy, muscular man, now Robert was simply heavy. He still looked somewhat muscular, but his beer belly was huge, sticking out over his waistline by a wide margin. His eyes were bleary from drink, his hands looked slightly palsied, and his good tunic, possibly made specially to make him look less fat, was dotted with wine stains.

In stark contrast, the Queen, as she got out of the carriage, looked as if time had not affected her at all from the last glimpse of her Ned had seen. Cersei's blonde hair fell in waves down her back and her dress was magnificently embroidered, all in white of course, as well as the white pelt of some animal or another on her shoulders and back for warmth here in the North.

He turned back to the King as Robert walked up to him Ned bowed formally. "Your grace, Winterfell is yours."

Robert looked at his old friend and said bluntly, "You've gotten fat."

At Ned's back his wife and children looked a little shocked as did members of the king's party. But Ned merely looked the King up and down, one eyebrow interrogatively. Robert laughed, then the two men hugged like brothers, clapping one another on the back.

Ranma rolled his eyes, but inside he was thinking, *This is the King?* He was not impressed. Ranma hadn't been impressed by much he had learned about Robert Baratheon, certainly not after Robert had taken the throne at any rate. He really wasn't much of a King. The tales that reached the North told nothing about what he truly did as a king other than putting down the Greyjoy rebellion. All they spoke of was his drinking and whoring. To Ranma, raised as a martial artist and steeped in the Code, then raised as a Stark and knowing his duty to family and those who looked to him for protection, this was not what a king should be known for. Where were the new laws, new public works, hell, new taxes? But no, Robert Baratheon, the man who had led the successful rebellion against the Targaryen Mad King, was not known for anything but his drinking, whoring, and past glories.

"My Lord," Ned said after releasing the King from their hug, "My children and my wife Catelyn."

"Cat," Robert said pulling her into a hug.

Catelyn returned it demurely. Ned turned and said "And these are my sons, my heir Ranma, Bran, and Rickon and my daughters Sansa and Arya."

Robert grunted at them all, giving a cursory glance to the daughters though his eyes seemed to linger on Arya for a moment before he shook it off. "Where is she?" he said, "It's been years and I want to pay my respects."

Ned understood immediately. "Lyanna is in the crypt of course, where she wanted to be. But that can wait."

"No, now." Robert growled.

The Queen came forward. "Husband, surely this can wait until we're all settled in, it's been a fatiguing journey and..."

Robert turned to Cersei and gave her a glare which shut her up quickly, then turned and moved away. "Now, Ned!"

Ranma's father shrugged apologetically at the Queen and went off after his friend.

As soon as the pair was gone, Catelyn moved to step forward, but Ranma shook his head, speaking before she could. "And that is our king? My deepest sympathies, milady." He said, bowing from the waist towards the Queen.

"Ranma!" Catelyn scowled, horrified by the lack of respect. "You cannot speak of the king like that!"

Ranma shrugged. "I don't turn a blind eye to what I see, mother." He looked past the queen when he saw the children getting out of the carriage. The oldest, with short blond hair, green eyes set into what Ranma would call a WT (weak type) bishounen face with a small pouty sort of mouth, was the first to get out during the king's greeting. He had been looking around somewhat disdainfully, but seemed to have schooled his expression and was now studying the Starks, or possibly just one of them, with interest. The little boy, who had the same blonde hair and same hair style as the older boy, was looking around with great interest, especially at the array of five direwolf puppies arrayed with the Stark children. Fenris had since rejoined the others after having had his own, admittedly rather splashy bath (hence why Hodor was the one Ranma had left him with).

The middle one and the only daughter had honey gold hair done in twin braids going down her chest, and was wearing a dress much like the queen's, white with highlights. Though in the princess's case, the highlights were Baratheon black rather than Lannister red. She was a very pretty young girl, with a face and developing figure that hinted she would someday rival her mother in beauty, though her face had yet to develop the lines or regal coldness that Cersei exuded.

That wasn't what had caught Ranma's attention however; what had was the wince Myrcella couldn't quite hide as she stepped off the carriage's small step onto the ground. "I think however that the young lady should be taken to see the maester. She seems to be favoring one of her ankles."

The Queen turned sharply, her shock at a Stark of all people speaking so about the king overridden for the moment and saw that her daughter was indeed favoring one of her feet as she stood there.

The young princess watched in surprise as the young Lord of the castle came bounding towards her, so fast it took several of the White Cloaks aback. Ser Selmy, the White Cloaks commander, blinked in shock at how fluid and quick the boy was while several of his fellows made to grab him but were too slow.

Myrcella didn't notice that, blushing more than a little at the older boy's good looks. Stark cheekbones framing a thin and handsome face, with hair swept back into a long pony tail and deep Tully blue eyes which were sparkling with humor at the moment. She squeaked a little when, before Ser Arys Oakheart, the Kingsguard assigned to her, could intercede, Ranma had lifted her into the air, perching Myrcella on his shoulder without even rumpling her dress somehow. Before any of the guardsmen around her or her mother could take Ranma to task for his lack of courtesy, Ranma asked, "And how exactly did you hurt yourself?"

She gulped a little, swiftly looking at her mother and Joffrey before answering. "O-on one of our stops I-I tripped, getting out of the carriage and twisted my ankle. I, I didn't want to make a fuss..."

Hearing that the mother in Cersei rose up over the queen's indignation and she shook her head sternly at her daughter. "You should've said something, sweetling." Cersei looked askance at the young man who was holding her daughter on his shoulder, as if Myrcella weighed next to nothing, and then looked over at Catelyn, having lost her forward momentum for a moment.

Catelyn frowned a little but eventually just gave in. Her son was not one to waste time on courtly manners and decorum. She had been trying for years to change that and failed. She wasn't about to suddenly succeed in the next five minutes. "Ranma," she sighed, "yes, you can show the young lady to the infirmary, I'll be showing the Queen and the rest of her party to her rooms. Our servants will see to your ladies and men."

The Queen nodded and Catelyn turned to Sansa who had been almost blatantly staring at Joffrey, a blush on her pretty face which so looked like Catelyn's own. "Sansa, could you go with your brother and princess Myrcella? I'm sure that the Princess would prefer to have another lady around, even for so short a time, in an unfamiliar place like

this."

Myrcella looked down at Tommen, who was staring up at where she was perched and said, "Don't worry, Tommen, I'll be right back."

"You can both come," Ranma said, shrugging. Without dislodging Myrcella, Ranma then knelt down and picked up Tommen setting him on his other shoulder. "I carry my siblings like this all the time, anyway."

The two younger Royal siblings looked at one another in shock and amusement, they had never before run into someone who treated them like this. It was a little weird, but also rather fun and it was about to get a little better. Joffrey on the other hand, carefully hid a sneer of amusement at someone volunteering to be a beast of burden like that. This went unnoticed, however, as Ranma said "Perhaps I can tell you both a story as we go?"

"Oh," Sansa clapped her hands together, her irritation at leaving before she could speak to the prince, disappearing, "do you have a new one about why you were so late getting back? You were supposed to be back weeks ago!" At the word 'story' both his younger brothers raced over to Ranma as well.

"That is indeed a tale, dear sister." he said, reaching down and taking her hand. "Yet, it is a tale of derring-do that I'm afraid Arya would prefer to you, though possibly I could revisit some of the tales I told you when you are younger. I doubt you remember them very well."

The chattering of the children receded and Catelyn turned to the Queen. "I'll show you to your quarters."

The Queen, still extremely nonplussed by he young man had forcefully kept the proceeding informal, simply nodded and followed along. Around her Jamie and the Kingsguard were left shaking their head save for Oakheart who moved swiftly after his young charge. Joffrey however merely sneered at the other young man being so concerned about children rather than the royal prince and turned away, thinking however that the older Stark girl was rather attractive...

Arya was about to go after them when she paused, frowning and looking around. "Where's the Imp? I've heard about him, but I don't see him here?"

That question about her freak of a brother was actually just what Cersei needed to get her brain rebooted from the surprise of Ranma acting so informally with her children. She looked around, scowling angrily. "Where is that little nuisance? Probably in the nearest brothel, I'll wager. Jaime, could you go and retrieve him?"

Jaime Lannister was a good looking man in his late twenties, with long dirty blond hair down to his shoulders; a very small, well-trimmed mustache; and the green eyes of all Lannisters in a face set into a permanent smirk. "I will take on this most arduous duty, dear sister. It wouldn't be the first time after all."

Cersei smiled at her twin, relishing the secret they shared for a moment before turning back to their hostess, her mask of hauteur falling into place easily. Catelyn smiled tightly at her and led the way inside the keep.

OOOOOO

An hour later found Ranma sitting in the middle of the maester's sickroom, telling his younger siblings, a few friends, and their guests a story. Myrcella's ankle had been wrapped with gauze and she was sitting up in one of the beds, a large pack of snow on it. At the foot of the bed sat Sansa with Lady, her very well-mannered direwolf pup between them, being scratched behind her ears by both girls. Arya and his other siblings sat on the ground with Tommen and the other direwolf pups all in a jumble, something that the young prince had been a little leery of, but seemed to enjoy. Luckily his mother wasn't here, or his enjoyment would have been short-lived indeed.

"With that statement, the pigtailed hero realized that the curse on his hair was all in his mind! After all, he was still a young man, not bald like his father. So he had no need for the cursed item to keep his hair! With that knowledge, he grabbed the massive lengths of hair that had sprung from his head, and began to use them as weapons, like so many ropes and whips in his hands. He flicked his hair weapons through the air, grabbing his beloved out of her kidnapper's hands and swiftly bringing her to his side before tying up the four bald attackers in his hair from the ankles up to their necks."

Ranma's audience laughed and giggled at the tale he was spinning, never realizing that it had actually happened to him in his past life, except for the 'beloved' part. Though at the time, Ranma would have been hard pressed to tell you yea or nay on that, looking back on it Ranma knew he hadn't really loved Akane, been infatuated with maybe, but not love.

"And then, the hero of our tale finished tying up his enemies. After that the hero put all four of them on a boat to a distant land. After that he returned to his lady's house, wondering when the next challenge would occur." As the children cheered, he nodded at the servant in the doorway. "Can I help you?"

"Lord," the servant bowed his head, "your father requests your presence in his study."

Ranma nodded and reached over to pat Rickon on the head where he had been sitting right across from his older brother. "With that children, I will see you all later this evening for the feast. I understand it is expected."

The children all thanked him for the story then began chattering excitedly amongst themselves about the story. Even Sansa and Jeyne Poole, who had heard the same tale when they were younger, had enjoyed this retelling.

He exited the room, smiling slightly at the smiling Kingsguard standing at the door and the maid Cersei had assigned to her daughter. The maid curtsied, bowing forward to give Ranma a very good glimpse down her bosom, blushing as she stared avidly at the handsome young lord. "A most lively tale, Lord."

Ranma shrugged. "I have a very good imagination for some reason, and my siblings have always seemed to enjoy it."

The woman looked at him and smiled but before she could follow up he bowed again, leaving quickly, and she clicked her fingers. She had only been here a few hours but already she had heard many strange tales, wonderful tales in many ways of the Young Wolf and his amazing endurance. She was eager to see if that endurance carried over into other things, and that line had given her on almost perfect opening.

The servant who had come to fetch Ranma hurried after him, smiling a little at the way he had ignored the girl's attempt at flirting. Whether or not there was any truth to his and the lady Mormont stepping out together, the young master was amazingly adept at ignoring or simply not responding to the come-ons of women.

Ranma found his father in his study, writing something down, and Ranma noticed it had a lot of numbers on it. He figured it was probably a bill of some kind for the food necessary for the king's stay.

Ned looked up as his son entered and smiled at him. "Jon has returned along with Theon, Roger, and the Lady Dacey. They filled me in on what you saw." he said his voice becoming much grimmer. "I'm not certain if I agree with you that the White Walkers are back, but I do know that there is something brewing beyond the Wall, a threat that must be faced, which wields magic long unseen."

He looked hard at his son with a grim smile, not having liked much of what he had heard, yet, still proud of how both his sons had acted. "Jon gave me an almost blow by blow account of the battle. Including how Hathan Snow saved your life." Ranma might have mixed feelings about that, but he wasn't about to speak up, after all, it might well have been true. "I was thinking of this as an appropriate reward for that."

Eddard picked up a piece of parchment from his desk and handed it over across to his son. Ranma looked down and read it swiftly. "therefore in recognition of service to the heir of our house, we, House Stark, cede the holdfast of Eastshield to Hathan Snow, now given the name Shieldarm, to be held by him and his family in perpetuity..." Ranma looked up and smiled widely at his father. "You're giving him a holdfast and a minor title? That's fantastic father, and I think he'll do well as a landed noble. Eastshield, though, is that one of the holdfasts in the wolfswood?"

"It is, on the outer edge toward Torrhen's Square. The land has been reclaimed by the forest, but the holdfast's walls are still there and it is still a strong defensive position, once you reduce the woods around it. It will not be a sinecure to be certain, but with the title and the holdfast will come several smallfolk families and money to entice a few men at arms to his land. It will be up to Hathan to choose them, of course, and to keep their loyalty."

Ranma nodded, smiling happily as he envisioned his older friend's reaction to the news. Ned raised the paper he was currently working on and Ranma saw it was a numbers tally of men-at-arms. "I've been working out how many people we can send and still have a goodly force here, both ourselves and our vassals. I make it over twelve hundred we can send from our own lands without pulling too many men from the fields or from the workshops and still have a force large enough to patrol our lands and guard Winterfell."

"You'll send them after the King and his party leave, of course, father?"

"Of course," Ned replied, then changed the subject suddenly. "I understand that you are not exactly enthralled with the King?"

"If you mean I think he's a drunkard then you're correct, father," Ranma said now sitting down across from Ned at one of the chairs in front of his desk. "You did not see the look that passed between him and the Queen? That's a look I

wouldn't give my worst enemy."

"Their marriage is not one of love that is true." Ned said diplomatically. "Robert was still grieving for my sister, but he had to do something to appease the Lannisters, who had control of King's Landing and an army almost as large as Robert's own, but well rested and well provisioned."

"I understand that, but in all this time he hasn't learned how to, at the very least, not show his contempt of her? He basically rubbed it into the Queen's face that he doesn't care for her opinion!"

"I know what you are saying, but Robert was always one who loved fiercely. My sister was possibly the only woman in all of Westeros that could have made him leave over his womanizing ways and, since then, he's always been pining after her memory. And regardless of what you think, he is the king, and you will respect him as such."

Ranma bit back a sharp retort, merely nodding. "Will you inform him of what we saw?"

"Of course not." Ned scoffed. "Robert might give lip service to the faith of the Seven, but he isn't religious and he's not someone who'd understand something like that without seeing it himself. I'll bring up the idea of sending more men to the Wall, but I doubt even the idea of there being a new King Beyond the Wall will be believed by the others in his court. The best I can hope for, is to get him interested enough to head to the Wall himself to speak to Commander Mormont and my brother in person."

Ned went on, now looking at his son with shrewd compassion. "I also understand you lost people, the two Norrey clan scouts that met you on the edge of their territory?"

Ranma nodded grimly, looking down. "I, I've dealt with the guilt about losing people, father. It, it took me a while, but I think the worst part about it was that I was so happy it was the two of them dying and not any of my friends."

"That is a natural human reaction, Ranma." Ned replied, smiling a little sadly at his oldest son. In many ways, Ranma had been forced to grow up far faster than the father in Eddard, Stark or no, could have wanted. *First the whole Bolton incident, and now this, what do the old gods have in store for you, my son?* "We care for our friends more than we should when they are also our soldiers. It is our duty to not show favoritism in combat or other situations. And," Ned went on more grimly, "not to let grief or anger at the passing of a friend or loved one cloud our judgment."

Ranma nodded his understanding and the two sat there in companionable silence for a moment as Eddard let his son assimilate his words then he went on more briskly. "Your mother has been told you ran into a sizable force of wildlings in the Gift and our suppositions about a threat growing from that corner. She doesn't believe it, however, we don't have enough proof and it's been too long since the wildlings were a real threat."

He waved his son around the desk. "Now, I think if we both work on this we can get it done quickly, if you take House Mormont and the others from the west I will take everything east of Winterfell, and we can figure out how many each house can spare without weakening their own territories defense or harming their economy."

Ranma nodded but added a word of caution. "I also told Greatjon to send supplies up with his men, as well as people to take over the remaining farms and villages in the Gift. As far as we could tell it was practically empty, father."

Ned sighed. "We'll send up some villagers from here, I know of several married pairs that want new land, and I believe House Cerwyn and House Flint of Flint's Finger have a similar issue. The Gift will most certainly be colder and harsher, but much of the territory up there is actually arable land and it is much easier to put a house in working order than build your own and carve out a farm from the wolfswood."

His son nodded in reply but had a question. "Will Roger and Osha be staying with us for a time or will you send them on to the Rills after Roger recovers?"

Ned looked at his son with fond pride. The connections and friendships his son had forged among the heirs of the noble houses of the North were a sight to see, and he took pleasure in particular in seeing the connection between House Ryswell and House Stark started by himself and Mark Ryswell continued. "He'll stay for the king's visit. An heir of a house leaving when the King is in attendance would be seen as an insult save for truly pressing business elsewhere. Roger is right however; his father will need some more convincing of the danger."

"Though I would caution you when you go over the numbers for the Ryswell lands to be cautious in how many men you ask them to send. House Ryswell is the strong arm in the southeast; the Rills, the Barrowlands, and the Stony Shore look to Dustin and Ryswell over the other houses and unfortunately House Dustin doesn't have the men and numbers it once had." That was made worse by the fact that the Lady Dustin had never remarried after her husband

had died in the final days of Robert's Rebellion.

Ranma nodded and the two of them set to work quietly for the rest of the afternoon before breaking off to prepare for the feast that evening.

OOOOOO

Reactions to the very odd young man that was the heir of Winterfell were varied among the King's party. Robert didn't think one way or the other about him, he had been completely concentrated on paying his respects to his lost love. Cersei was oddly ambivalent; the Queen was irritated at his lack of propriety or any kind of deference to her rank or her children's rank, but at the same time somewhat amused at his obvious distaste for Robert. Of course, she was also irritated that he treated her children like children rather than princess and prince, yet at the same time he had noticed Myrcella was injured, something Cersei had missed. So all in all, Cersei was waiting to see how he and Joffrey got along before painting him with the same disdain and hate she had for the rest of his family: the wild little female, the stupid pumpkin children, the idiotic Catelyn, and the all too cold and stiff Eddard.

Joffrey thought him an idiot, and was more than a little irritated that the other boy didn't even try to talk or even acknowledge him outside of a nod of welcome (which Joffrey answered with a small nearly imperceptible sneer that Ranma had caught and filed away). Myrcella and Tommen both thought he was magnificent and a fantastic storyteller. Myrcella, for one, was sad that her own big brother didn't act anywhere near as kindly to her.

It was in the White Cloaks however where the decision on Ranma was most sharply divided. "He's an idiot!" Boros Blount, a heavysset ugly man with a mind quicker in politics than the sword, spoke up first as they made themselves at home in the barracks room set aside for them. "Did you see how he acted, he showed no care for the station of the Queen or the King. It's as if he has no sense of propriety or decorum, or the fact that either one of them could have his head for the asking!"

"That would be folly of the highest order," Jamie said looking up from where he was stowing his gear alongside his bed. "And is that what you really think? Something about him is telling me that he is much more dangerous than he appears."

"Oh, please." said Preston Greenfield, one of the Queen's appointments to the Kingsguard. "The boy is an utter idiot, like Boros said. You can't honestly think that those stories we've heard since entering the North are true? They're but bard's tales, if any were true, they would have made it past the Neck in more than bard's tales."

Jaime shrugged, something was bothering him about Ranma, the way the Stark heir moved, how fluid he was reminded him of a Braavosi water dancer, yet not quite. There was something more there, something that reminded him of someone else, though for the life of him he couldn't bring the memory to the fore.

Arys shrugged his shoulders, keeping his own council, along with Ser Mandon Moore and Meryn Trant. Meryn was not one to give his opinion lightly, while Mandon was silent as a matter of course.

While his so-called brothers discussed the young man of the house, Ser Barristan Selmy sat as memories of years gone by played through his head. They were of a better time, a brighter time. When the White Cloaks weren't a paper shield, when they truly were the best swords in the land rather than the bought swords they were today. Only Jaime was truly worthy of the cloak in terms of skill, but outside of skill he should never have been allowed to retain the White after betraying his oath whatever the reason. Selmy could cut the others down with ease, and some days he was tempted to do just that despite his own oaths.

But right now he was filled with memories of his past, comparing them to the young man they had seen earlier today and smiling to himself in wonder. *Ser Arthur Dayne moved like that, that fluid motion, his body under total control, that confidence, only young Stark moves even more fluidly, even more confidently. I must talk to this young man, he is interesting. Possibly the type we need so desperately amongst our company. And while it might cause problems with House Stark, it isn't like Ned doesn't have other children who could step up and become his heir...*

OOOOOO

Later that evening, as was his duty, Ned broached the subject of the threat rising beyond the Wall with the king and the few advisers he had brought to Winterfell with him. Of course, he didn't speak of the White Walkers or anything else he couldn't truly prove, but what he could share was more than enough to come under fire.

"You cannot be serious, you expect us to believe that? The wildlings have not been a real threat for thousands of years!" the Queen scoffed. She was not normally part of the king's council, but since there were so few members of



said council here, she had pushed herself into the conversation.

Robert glowered at her and she glared back for a moment before Robert turned away. "Unlike this one," he said, jerking a thumb at the Queen, "I've never known you to tell me anything that you couldn't prove Ned, so I believe you."

"But this isn't Lord Stark, is it?" said Varys, looking at Lord Stark apologetically, though if that emotion was real was more than anyone there could say, the eunuch was a past master at showing only what he wanted people to see. "This is your son. While I can fully understand the young boy overreacting after his first taste of combat adrenaline and concern for comrades can make a man count every enemy twice. If the wildlings have found a way to get sufficient numbers around the Wall, then surely their predations on the North of your lands would be even worse? Has there been a marked increase in raids?"

"There has not," Eddard said, "at least, not to the best of my knowledge. But there is no doubt the Gift has suffered heavily from their predations given how empty my son and his friends reported it was. If their goal was to weaken the Wall, then taking out its logistic support was much more important than raiding the mountain clans or House Umber. And this was not my son's first battle, he has fought and killed before, do not try to denigrate his abilities, Spider."

"Yet even so, I know that you have more experience, more historical records to call upon when talking about how to read the intentions of the wildlings, but that sort of thinking is well beyond anything I have ever read the wildlings exhibiting before." Varys said, staring at Stark, his voice sly and probing.

"Not if there is a King Beyond the Wall behind it." Eddard responded, looking at the eunuch with scant favor yet keen eyes. Ned knew that the Master of Whisperers was a dangerously bright 'man' but had never had dealings with him before. Robert had yet to explain why he was here at all, but regardless, Ned knew not to trust him.

"And as the Queen said, there hasn't been a King Beyond the Wall in hundreds of years," Varys reposted. "And the wildlings have never been known for subtlety even when one piper is able to get all the rats moving together." The eunuch's fat jowls twisted into a smile at his own clever turn of phrase.

"Even if they can get small groups around the Wall, they need to go through it to get any forces large enough to truly threaten the North and the Wall is inviolate." Ser Selmy stated, there to provide a military perspective. While he was willing to believe Lord Stark about what could be brewing, he didn't see why the problem was so important.

"The Wall needs help," Ned's answer rang sharply. He looked over at the King. "The Night Watch's fighting strength is at the lowest ebb it has ever been in recorded history and the Gift is too unpopulated to provide for it. I'm going to send men north to the Wall. Half of my house's men at arms and an equal fraction of my vassals men as well, and I'm sending the call out to all the other Lords of the North."

Robert frowned. This sounded exciting and it had been a very long time indeed since anything really exciting had happened to him outside of bedding a new wench or five. He could feel his heart pounding, rather too quickly it must be said, and his blood flowing again. This was just what he needed, a chance to ride out, to go to war again. *I was not made for the crown* Robert thought, not for the first time or even the ten thousandth time. *Jon Arryn or Ned should've taken the crown instead of me. I am made for war. This is what I was made for.*

Yet before he could speak, Varys spoke up again. "Again my Lord, I'm not saying you shouldn't. But this seems like a purely local affair. We have no proof that there is a King Beyond the Wall rising again. We have no proof of anything unusual save a surprising number of wildling raiders and one wildling woman's word. It's not enough evidence for us to rouse the kingdom. We must have proof before we pay to put armies on the march, to pay for the food and other necessary supplies."

Robert was about to bellow something about penny-pushers not being generals when Cersei interjected her own view. "And besides husband, remember what we heard before from our sources about Targaryen loyalists making noises of rebellion in Highgarden, the Crown lands, and even Dorne. Something has stirred them up. That is the entire reason Varys is with us, after all."

Cersei had used the magic words 'Targaryen loyalists' and completely derailed Robert's attention, much like waving a red flag in front of a bull. *By the Seven, I sacrificed too much to take the throne, I'll be damned if any fucking lizard supporters gain any head way at all!* Robert glared at his Queen then over at his old friend. "They're right Ned. I know you don't like it, I don't like it either. But your son didn't bring back enough proof for us to act on it."

Ned nodded. "I honestly hadn't thought I'd get you to agree, but it was my duty to inform you of what might be a threat to the realm, and what steps I have taken to solve it."

Varys looked a little dubious for a moment, though the fact he let the emotion be seen at all meant it was probably false. In truth, the eunuch was concerned about the changes he had seen so far in the North and, despite the fact that most of those changes, on the surface, seemed to be good things for the North, did that translate to being good for the whole kingdom? Change of any sort could disturb the delicate balance of power, which was already in turmoil due to Jon Arryn's sudden demise.

"Now that that's settled," Robert said, looking around at the others, "leave us."

The Queen and his spymaster left then, with the spymaster going to work immediately on the real reason he had come to the North: setting up a spy network in the North. Of all the realms it was the realm he had least coverage in, which had heretofore been acceptable since the North was also the most loyal realm to the current king. But there had been so many odd tales coming south and the upheaval years back about the destruction and disavowal of House Bolton, that it was obvious he needed some of his little birds here to see if anything was brewing that might threaten the good of the realm, of course.

With the two irritants gone, Robert turned back to Ned. "Bah, good riddance, necessary evils the both of them, don't mean I have to like 'em. Anyway, you ran off to talk to your son before we had a chance to really talk after I paid my respects, Ned."

Ned chuckled. "My wife and I have developed a rather twitchy feeling whenever our son leaves our sight, and with good reason apparently."

"Yes, that crap with the Boltons. Heard you killed the old leech yourself, would have loved to see that! Man was too cold and bloodless by half! We heard about that, though we only heard that your son was captured. Then we started to hear a tale of him actually fighting his way out, once we hit the inns past Moat Cailin, any truth to that?"

"He did fight yes, as I said earlier to Varys," Ned replied, not willing to give any details about what had really happened there.

"Brave lad." Robert nodded. "Your wolf blood is strong in him I see? And were those direwolves I saw with your children?"

Ned shrugged. "They are the totem of my house, we found them as we were coming back from one of my holdfasts. They can be trained you know, in fact they are already very well-trained for their age."

Robert barked a laugh. "Just keep them away from my wife. She hates dogs of all sorts. Except for the two legged kind, I suppose, else she would never have assigned the Hound as my oldest brat's defender." He guffawed again and then looked at his friend seriously. "You know why I'm here Ned. I need your help. With Jon Arryn dead, I need a new King's Hand, and I want you to be that man."

Ned was silent for a moment. This was what he had secretly feared, but as he had told his wife, this was a matter of duty. "Your grace I am honored, what else can I say?"

"Say you'll accept." the king said bluntly. "I need someone to run the kingdom while I am off drinking and whoring, after all!"

"With that lofty a goal in mind how can I refuse?" His friend replied smiling slightly.

"Then don't refuse." Robert said laughing again and clapping him on the shoulder. "I'll even sweeten the deal, we can still unite our houses you know, just like we always dreamed of doing. Your young girl Sansa seems much taken with my oldest brat. Think about it, the stags and direwolves united at last."

"We'll see." Ned said slowly. "I would prefer to watch the two of them together for a time before making a final decision. After all looks aren't everything, there must be something else there as well."

"That's the spirit!" Robert said clapping him on the shoulder again. "Now, where do you keep the wine?"

OOOOOO

That evening, everyone congregated them main Hall for a feast, save for Ranma and Jon. Catelyn found the two of them in Jon's room and Ranma was giving Jon something from the maester. "That'll help with your legs, you stupid bugger." Ranma said clapping his brother on the shoulder. "Though you'll have to apply it yourself. I'm not touching your hairy legs for love or gold."

John looked up at him wearily. "Hate you," he said slowly, "hate you so much."

"That'll teach you to try and pace me on foot." Ranma said laughing a little. "It's not my fault you tried to run with me." That was actually what happened. Jon had tried to give his remounts a rest and ran beside Ranma for a time with Ghost. Ghost lasted five hours, a very respectable time at the speed they were going and his age. Jon lasted five hours before he too had to give up, his legs burning and sore. Fenris had lasted nine hours, before Ranma had to pick him up the first time, and seemed to get a little stronger each time after that.

"Ahem," said Catelyn, coughing a little to announce her presence. "Jon, I realize you're still injured so don't let this son of mine bother you. There was a time when he couldn't have kept up with himself, either." She tapped her head gently signaling what she meant, and Jon stifled a chuckle as Ranma pouted outrageously. "Unfortunately, you know I couldn't have allowed you to come tonight, anyway." Catelyn went on apologetically. "The Queen has views on bastard children, I'm afraid, and they are not like your father's."

"With a husband like that, I don't blame her." Ranma muttered.

"Yes, well." Catelyn said, not really willing to protect the king's whoring and drinking, but not willing to speak against him either.

Jon merely looked grim. "I just hope none of them have delusions of grandeur. I would like the last war to be the last civil war Westeros ever fights." He shared a glance with Ranma. "We've got other problems brewing."

With that Ranma and his mother walked out. Catelyn looked at her son. "I expect you to be on your best behavior." she said firmly leaning forward and grasping his chin with one hand making certain she was looking into his eyes. "While the King's younger children seem to have welcomed the way you act, it is still not the way you comport yourself around royalty. You got away with it once, do **not** push it. And I can understand that you have rather ambivalent feelings towards your King, but remember he is the **King**. You must respect the office and Robert's past, if nothing else."

Ranma took a deep breath and gently reached out pulling his mother into a hug, breaking her hold on his chin. "I'll try okay? I just don't like the look he sent at the Queen. She's also a cold fish sort of person too, but she doesn't deserve that."

"He is the King," she reiterated, but did not move out of her son's hug. "And you must respect the office. Do you understand me?"

"If I realize I can't keep my tongue anymore, will I have leave to excuse myself?"

By this time they had reached the family's personal quarters. "After the music for dancing has begun yes you may leave."

Ranma nodded. "Then you have my word I won't say anything to him."

Later that evening Ranma sat next to his father, and they stood respectfully as the King and his family entered. After Ned gave a brief speech in honor of the King, they all sat down again, the food was brought in, and the feast began. For about forty minutes, it was a convivial atmosphere, if a little stilted, and Theon and Ranma were talking quietly to one another, answering questions from the adults when asked. Robert was in particular was plying Ranma with questions about his experience as a prisoner of House Bolton and asked Ranma to show him the scars from Ramsay's torture, which he did reluctantly.

This again drew various reactions. The Queen looked away, her face drawn and sneering at the scar on Ranma's shoulder and side. Robert grunted in something like approval, while Joffrey sneered a little at the ugly scars, thinking he would never allow anyone to mark him like that. His sister, sitting with the other younger children further down the table had blushed at the flat, dense musculature of Ranma's chest and stomach.

Robert laughed as Ranma quickly pulled down his jerkin again. "Don't worry lad, women love scars."

"I haven't had much experience in that area," Ranma said shrugging, "but I'll defer to your **far** greater knowledge in that area your majesty."

Robert guffawed again, slapping Ranma on the shoulder with enough force to stagger most men but Ranma merely took it, not even grunting. For the next hour, as Robert got more and more into his cups, Ranma simply sipped at his wine, though he ate nearly as much of the king. The king didn't notice this but he did notice that Ranma hadn't finished even his first cup of wine. "What's the matter boy? Can't hold your wine?"

"I can hold it quite fine, your Majesty," Ranma said simply turning from his talk with Theon to address the king "but I prefer not to overindulge."

"Bah!" the King shouted, "That's only because you haven't had good wine here in the North. Ned, you surely broke out the good stuff for this feast, right?"

"I did indeed," Ned replied smiling faintly, "but my son has never been a major wine or beer drinker."

"Tell me you know how to fuck, at least!" the King said with a guffaw, causing Lady Catelyn and Cersei to both frown slightly.

Theon laughed. "He doesn't indulge in that either!"

"I save it up for more needful times, it loses its luster if you just go rutting around like some people." Ranma replied.

Robert looked up sharply at that, but that line was directed at Theon so he ignored it, laughing loudly instead. "Ah, but they say practice makes perfect, and I mean to get all the practice I can!" The dangerous moment over Ned, sitting between the King and Ranma, breathed a sigh of relief, shaking his head at how Ranma needed to learn how to choose his words more carefully, a thought shared by his wife.

The Queen had heard all this and smiled a little approvingly. Ranma might be uncultured, discourteous, and have no respect for rank but at least he seemed to be a respecter of women, which put him in a very small minority. She caught her brother's gaze from where he was sitting at another table and she felt her breath quickening under his gaze but shook her head slightly at him. Now was not the time to indulge in such things.

Cersei's face blanked utterly when she noticed the King had pulled one of the serving girls into his lap and was making her drink some of the wine.

Ranma had noticed this, too, and looked over at his mother sitting next to Cersei, raising one eyebrow, asking non-verbally 'can I be excused?'

His mother frowned and shook her head. The music hadn't started, and until it did it would be impolite in the extreme for someone to leave the King's table.

Ranma tried to ignore it, he really did, but there was the King flirting outrageously with a girl who was almost young enough to be his daughter. Closer to Joffrey's age than Myrcella's thankfully, or Ranma would have not been able to stop himself from playing punch-the-pedo. Some things had most definitely carried over from his previous life, and his own idea of the age of consent was one of them. But what was worse was that the Queen was sitting right there next to him. It just wasn't right. To Ranma's mind it wouldn't be right at any time to cheat on your wife, but rubbing it in her face made it even worse. "A drunken whoremonger is our King, really?" he murmured to Theon.

"Oh, I don't know," Theon responded. "I like it well enough."

"You would." Ranma said shaking his head again.

Thankfully at that moment songs began to play and Ranma stood up quickly. "I hear the dance floor calling my feet, if you'll excuse me mother, father, your majesties." With that he escaped, leaving Theon to make his own excuses and head out to hunt up his own willing wench.

Ranma however wasn't searching for a wench at all, he merely nodded at Dacey, who was at another table with Roger. When she had arrived with Jon and the others, the King's men had been scornful at the idea of a woman being a warrior, but here in public they weren't about to make a point about it, not on Stark land. He shook his head very slightly after he caught her eye and moved on, leaving Dacey to shrug mentally. She hadn't recovered from the trip, so a night spent simply sleeping sounded excellent to her. Moreover, she hadn't been able to get to her stash of moon tea, anyway, and she made a point of having at least four cups after her trysts with Ranma.

Joffrey was about to get up from his seat and his eyes were locked, rather disturbingly so in Ranma's opinion, on Sansa. Ranma got there first and he held out his hand declaiming grandly "My lady, may I have this dance?"

His sister giggled a little at his antics but held out her hand willingly. "Of course, young sir, I would be delighted," she said and he took her hand pulling her easily to her feet and moving with a whoop onto the dance floor.

The two continued to dance through both a fast song and a slow song. In the middle of the slow song Ranma said

seriously, "I see you're interested in the young prince?"

Sansa blushed at that. "Oh, he's ever so handsome and he comes from Kings Landing! I've heard so many fascinating stories about it and it must be so much nicer than here and so many things happen there!"

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "And do you find being a Stark of Winterfell so boring?"

"Oh, you know what I mean." Sansa laughed, slapping his upper-arm lightly. "It must be amazingly interesting there and the weather is supposed to be warm, wouldn't that be nice? You can wear so many more fashionable things if you don't have to always be worried about staying warm."

"Possibly," Ranma said "but that isn't the stories I've heard. I don't like what I've seen of Joffrey, yet. He seems a little spoiled and whiny to me."

"Pooh," Sansa laughed again. "he's only been here a day, you know you shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"Be that as it may," Ranma said dancing around her. "Fenris doesn't like him much, either."

"Oh, now you're just being silly. Of course the dogs don't like him, he probably smells of cats or something like that, or he ate some southern food or other that they don't like the smell of."

Ranma held her still for a moment as the song ended, his face uncommonly serious. "Sansa, remember they are direwolves not dogs, they are as much a part of our family as we ourselves, the living totems of our house. They have instincts, dear sister, Fenris's instincts saved my life not too long ago and the lives of all of my friends."

Sansa was taken aback by his seriousness and then frowned. "I understand what you're saying Ranma, but that doesn't make him a good judge of character."

"No, it doesn't," he said equably, "but it doesn't make him a bad one either. All I'm saying is don't fall in love so quickly that you fail to see what you're signing up for, all right?"

Sansa nodded. "I promise. Now, since you're done delivering your big brotherly injunction," she said laughing and dismissing most of what he said, though taking a bit to heart, thankfully, "why don't you go and see what Arya is up to? I think she's about to throw some food at Myrcella and that would be very bad indeed."

Ranma turned and looked seeing what Sansa had spotted. He bowed swiftly, kissing her hand and moving from where he had been in the middle of the dancers to right behind the Baratheon princess. Behind him Joffrey moved quickly to claim his dance with the pretty Stark girl, a handsome and roguish (in Sansa's opinion anyway) smile on his face.

He arrived just in time, smacking the food out of the air with one flashing hand down onto the floor so fast Myrcella didn't even realize she had been targeted.

Quickly Ranma moved around the table to stand by his sister's side. Once there, he leaned down speaking into her ear. "Now would that have been very nice?"

"It would've livened things up at least." Arya muttered.

"Bed, I think for you." Ranma laughed, reaching down and picking Arya up easily despite her squirming. "I'll be up later to tell you the tale of what happened to Jon and I when we went North."

That made Arya stop fighting. "You promise?"

"I promise."

Arya nodded. "All right I'll go to bed willingly, but you better be up soon." Ranma promised to come up soon and set Arya down. She went to their parents, kissing each on the cheek and then left without further incident.

At the same time, the Queen came over with two of her maids and picked up her two youngest children. She looked at Ranma and Ranma bowed his head slightly to her, which she returned stiffly and the two turned away from one another.

Ranma shuddered just a little. *That woman is dangerous. There's a lot more going on behind those green eyes than she lets on. That stone mask of hers is good, too good really, and it's pretty obvious she resents either my family or*

*being here at all, not certain which, or why.*

He sat down at a random table, grabbing up a mug of water thankfully, and he quaffed down a few glasses worth.

"It's good to meet a young man who knows to avoid the devil drink," a voice, rather old sounding but still strong said from across the table from him.

Ranma looked up and bowed his head respectfully. "Ser Barristan, I trust you're having fun?" He knew of the older man's history of course and had found much to respect in the old man. He had served the previous king and continued to serve the throne regardless that the king had changed, doing so to the best of his ability. There was honor in that and, outside of the Kingslayer, he was possibly the only one of the Kingsguard Ranma could respect in terms of skill. Ranma knew that back in his old life Cologne and Happosai had been the most dangerous people he had ever met, possibly even more than Saffron in Happosai's case, so knew not to confuse 'old' with 'decrepit', even if the Barristan was portably no threat to Ranma. *Never overlook the old, they only get that way by killing or outliving their enemies. Not as applicable in this case as in those two old fossils, but still...*

"I'm a little too old for these fetes, alas," The older man muttered, "and it's not really what a knight is made for." The younger man chuckled darkly at that and continued to drink from his water. Barristan raised an eyebrow in amusement. "You don't approve of something I said?"

"Oh nothing like that, I'm just always amused though by the way some people view knighthood. I don't think being a knight means anything," Ranma said shaking his head. "Not when someone like the Mountain that Rides can be one."

Barristan winced at that, but didn't say anything. Ranma was merely giving voice to what he had thought many a time, though he also held Jaime Lannister in just as much contempt for his breaking his vows as he did Gregor Clegane for butchering Elia Martell and her children.

Ranma went on. "The oaths mean nothing if you don't keep to them, if the knighthood cannot be taken away for breaking them. Outside of House Manderly, we here in the North don't have much time to waste on such things, believing a warrior's actions speak louder for him than any oath." Ranma took another long gulp of water then stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a little sister who I promised a story to." With that he bowed and took his leave, making his way upstairs to see Arya.

Behind him the Kingsguard commander frowned thoughtfully, and decided he would continue to observe the young man. Despite his disdain for knighthood, he carried himself like one who was truly worthy of the appellation and every time he moved Barristan had flashes of Ser Arthur Dayne. If he could be convinced to join, he could be a breath of fresh air the Kingsguard needed to get rid of all the rotted wood in it at the moment.

Outside, Ranma paused as he heard himself hailed. "Ho, be you the son or the bastard born? I've been told you look alike at first glance."

Ranma turned and took in the odd man before him. He was a dwarf, with stubby legs and a jutting forehead over mismatched eyes of green and black, and another mixture of hair color, pale blond and black. In one hand he held a large wineskin, and his face was somewhat red from drink. "I'm Ranma Stark, and you are?"

The dwarf rocked back on his heels smirking wider than before. "I would've thought my dear siblings would've mentioned me or you would have heard tales about me at least. I'm Tyrion, sometimes called the Imp."

"I've heard of you." Ranma responded. "They say your tongue is a very dangerous weapon, as is the mind behind it. I was told about you as an example of why I shouldn't judge a book by its cover."

"Hah, and there we see the normal Stark method of diplomacy. My wit and my tongue can be very dangerous, young Stark, but you're not my normal target for my tongue and certainly my wit can be better used elsewhere." Tyrion chuckled, though only a twitch of Ranma's eyebrows showed he had gotten the joke. "Oh, don't be like that lad, you're far too young to start using the Stark family stone face all the time."

"Why are you out here, Lord Lannister, instead of inside enjoying the feast?" Ranma asked, actually finding himself liking the Imp for some reason.

"Hah, no lord am I, not even in contention for the Lannister name. No, I'm just Tyrion the imp, more mind than might. And why pray would I be in there? For one, my sister never likes me to be around in polite company, especially when she is trying to overawe people like your family. She has enough trouble trying to fight against Robert's lack of

manners and general Robert-ness. Out here I can have my wine, I can raid your kitchen for food, and then, when I'm full up on wine, I can head into town and find a whore to fill up in turn."

Ranma rolled his eyes, amused at the jesters' turn of phrase. "Well then, Lord Tyrion, I will leave you to it. I have a sister who has demanded a bedtime story and the amount of mischief she can get up to doesn't bear thinking about, if she takes it into her head to be annoyed that I'm late."

"Hah, a most dangerous assignment to be sure, though before you go a question. I hear from the servants that you had recently been up to the Wall. Is it as magnificent as they say it is?"

"Magnificent? I suppose, in a way, awe-inspiring would be closer." Ranma replied, pausing his turn to look back at Tyrion. "But if you're just going up to see the sights then I would recommend coming back in a few years. If you heard about my trip, you know my friends and I ran into some trouble up there. I'm afraid the Night Watch would not have people free to show you around."

Tyrion bounced on his feet, more dexterous and mobile than one would think in someone so deformed, and now he was standing in front of Ranma again. "Yes, I heard about that, do you honestly think there is a King Beyond the Wall rising again? Surely the wildlings couldn't rally around one person after so long. That's as likely as you Starks developing a sense of humor."

"I would not have told my father what I did, or told Lord Umber or Lord Hornwood about it personally if I did not truly think that something was going on!" Ranma said, now nearly snarling at the idea of someone calling him a liar, even if the story going around wasn't the full truth. He calmed himself down, though, seeing the Imp's grinning face and knowing that the man saw his ill temper and enjoyed it too.

At this point, Ranma's years of dealing with Theon came to his aid. "If you go to the Wall, I suggest you think of ways where you can be useful. I understand you have a reputation as a smart man, though possibly only when it comes to talking whores out of their clothing or in aiming japes at others. Do try to turn that mind to something else if you go to the Wall, hmm?"

Tyrion laughed a little harshly, signaling Ranma had scored a bit of a hit there, though what specifically he said to get that blow in, Ranma didn't know. With a final nod, Ranma turned away again, continuing up to Arya's room.

OOOOOO

Early the next day, Ranma was up and about. He moved on silent feet out of the keep and out to the exercise area, smiling in a bittersweet fashion at the faintest hint of light in the distance.

It was moments like these where Ranma most missed not being back in his old world, with Kasumi there to greet the morning with him and a cup of tea. *If only I recognized my feelings toward her at the time*, he lamented once more. *If only either of us realized we had grown so close. Yet it would never have worked, not with Akane being there, or my other so-called fiancés or my father. Still, maybe if we had tried to make a go of it from the beginning.*

Fenris jumping up onto his leg broke out Ranma of his maudlin thoughts and he smiled, reaching down to rub the direwolf's ears affectionately before moving on. Soon he began his initial exercises, Fenris accompanying him. The only one awake at the moment was Hodor, the large and friendly stable man, who was simple, unable to communicate beyond saying his name. "Hodor?" The big man smiled happily at seeing the Stark heir. "Hodor?"

"I'm fine Hodor, don't worry, I'm just going to do a bit of exercising, though if you could make certain that the horses we brought back are well cared for? They were run pretty ragged."

The giant man, nearly as large as Smalljon, and actually stronger than Smalljon had been before he started to train with Ranma, smiled happily. "Hodor!"

"Good man." Ranma smiled, patted the large man on the shoulder, then moved on, moving into some exercises while Fenris jumped around him.

About an hour later he smiled at Jon who was limping towards him with the silent Ghost at his side. "Are you sure you shouldn't rest some more Jon? I won't hold it against you if you want to rest a day. You did damn well to run with me for so long."

Jon shook his head with a smile. "I'll be alright, so long as you don't have me doing sprints or anything like that." Inside however he was once more amazed at how much endurance his brother had. Ranma had jogged alongside them for weeks, then sprinted alongside galloping horses for four days at the end, and didn't seem to be tired at all.

"No, I think you got enough of that yesterday. Let's start with some arm exercises, then when the others wake up we'll break to help them and then spar afterward when Ser Rodrick joins us."

With that the two of them began to move into a few of the martial arts forms that Ranma had taught Jon before, then moved on to upper body exercises. At about ten, the rest of the Stark brood got up and went about their day. Bran and Rickon joined the two older boys in exercising and were soon joined by Arya and Nymeria, her wolf, who immediately began to romp around with the other pups having a play fight of Fenris against all of them, which looked rather fun.

Ranma looked at his sister, his hands busy helping Bran to aim the bow and arrow correctly, while Ser Rodrick was helping Rickon with some hand exercises to build up his finger and hand strength. "I thought you were scheduled for lessons in etiquette and embroidery in the morning Arya, or did that change in my absence?"

His youngest sister scowled. "Ugh, it's so boring though! Myrcella's joined us, and all she and Sansa can talk about is boys and fashion and other boring things!" Actually the two were sort of comparing brothers in a way, with Myrcella trying to steer Sansa away from her interest in Joffrey. She was meeting with limited success, alas, while learning more about Ranma and Jon, who she had glimpsed that morning.

"Arya...." Ranma sighed. He liked seeing his younger sister enjoy learning how to fight so much, yet at the same time he didn't like the fact she tried to often to get out of their bargain with their parents. "You know our agreement with mother, you need to keep at your studies, or else I can't train you."

"Hmph." With that, Arya turned to Jon, "Well, that makes you my new favorite brother Jon. Do you think you can train me instead of this traitor?"

The Stark siblings broke out into laughter at that, even Rickon who didn't quite follow the joke, being all of seven. Ranma shook his head, holding up his hands. "Alright, alright I'll train you, but if we get in trouble you're going to be the one to take the blame for it. Go get your bow, and we'll have you and Bran practice together."

Arya grinned and ran off to grab her bow, made by Jon as a present for her, smaller and lighter than regular bows from the armory. Bran however seemed to sag, a motion Ranma caught. "What's wrong Bran?"

Bran was going to deny anything was wrong but Ranma caught his eyes and he sighed. "It's, it's just that Arya is much better than me at stuff like this, she's only a girl and she can shoot better than me, fight better than me, and she's even a little stronger too."

"First of all, forget all that 'only a girl' stuff." Ranma said sternly. "I would have thought watching Dacey and I practice together would have knocked the notion that women are weaker on the head for you." Bran blushed, having indeed watched the two of them and Ranma's other friends exercise several times in the past. "Good, then you should know there is no dishonor in being weaker than someone else. For another, there's no reason you need to be a warrior, Bran." Bran flushed further, looking away. "Just because Jon and I have to be, just because Arya wants to be, doesn't mean you and Rickon couldn't be something else."

Ranma reached down and forced his younger brother to look up at him again. "Let me tell you something, thinkers, scholars, builders have their place in the world. When you get right down to it, it's thinkers that change this world, builders that build things for the generations to come. Warriors can only defend things that other people have built. Take the Wall for instance, the Wall was built by our ancestor remember, **Bran** the Builder! Without the Wall the Night Watch couldn't do its job, and the North would have to deal with the wildlings raiding us all the time even down here in Winterfell, which was also built by Bran. If you want to go down that road, or become a maester or anything, you know our parents and I will support you."

By this time Arya was back and she raced up to Ranma grinning. "All ready!"

Ranma held Bran's eyes for another moment, and Bran sighed, then breathed in deeply and nodded, smiling now. Ranma clapped him on the shoulder then motioned the duo over to the archery range. "Alright Arya, you're aiming at the one on the farthest left, Bran the next right."

Above in a window, Ned had watched all this and Ranma turned his head to look up at his father, who nodded approvingly down at him. Ranma smiled happily then went back to instructing his younger siblings. Seeing that, Ned smiled and turned back to writing out messages to his vassals, sending them in small lots up to the Last Hearth, where they would then move en-masse to the Wall.



Later that day found Arya, Bran, and, surprisingly, young Tommen practicing with their practice blades. Arya was easily the best of the trio and she was working out one-on-one with Jon while Ranma instructed the other two. Ser Rodrick, who was still the official Master at Arms of Winterfell so had to be in attendance was also there, despite Ranma leading the majority of his sibling's instruction in arms. Rickon ran around with the direwolf pups, save for Lady, who was inside being pampered by Sansa and Myrcella.

"Bran, keep your shield up, don't let it drop like that or you're opening up your head to an attack!" Ranma shouted over the clangor of wood clattering on wood. "Good! Tommy, don't just try to hack and slash like that, remember that swords have points, too! Both of you aim your blows, don't just hack and pray!"

Tommen laughed at Ranma's nickname for him. It was a pretty obvious one, it must be said, but something no one in King's Landing would have dared to call him. Both youngsters responded with loud "Yes sir's!"

"What's this, the children's play area, or a training ground?" A sneering sort of voice said from behind Ranma. Both Ranma and Rodrick turned to see Joffrey standing there, a sneer on his pretty face. The prince wore simple, yet well-made armor and was carrying a blunted steel blade, the next step up from the wooden practice blades the youngsters were using. Behind him was his shadow, the swordsman called the Hound, Sandor Clegane, and a pack of other knights, the majority of whom wore Lannister colors, like the majority of the men-at-arms that had come north with the king.

One of them, however, wore the White Cloak of a Kingsguard, but it wasn't Jaime Lannister, much to Ranma's regret. The Kingslayer's skill with a sword was known to be among the finest in the kingdom and Ranma was eager to see how good he really was. Where Jaime was handsome, this man was somewhat plain, with short cropped orange hair and beard under a sallow face, with none of the sardonic humor that marked the Kingslayer. This face was marked with lines around narrowed eyes, which had a certain unpleasant glint to them.

"I wanted to come out here and practice, but I thought you northerners would at least divide the children from the warriors." Joffrey continued.

Ranma chuckled lightly, shaking his head, although out of the corner of his eye, he noticed how Tommen had shrunk in on himself at the sight of his older brother and how Arya was now glaring angrily at the prince. Nymeria had also separated herself from her siblings and stood next to her human. "If you must know, oh prince, the warriors have already practiced for a bit today. If you wish, you may wait a bit and Jon or I will accommodate you."

Theon, who had joined them halfway through the archery practice (and showed up both Arya and Bran, taking some pleasure in beating children) laughed harshly. "Are you sure you can still remember how to swing a practice blade, Ranma? It's been several years since you last did so, after all."

"I have no issues with using real steel." Joffrey shot back.

"I, however, do," Ser Rodrick said sternly. "There will be no live steel practice until you prove yourself able to handle it like what it is, a dangerous weapon that can turn in your hand, not some kind of toy."

"Why not let the lads practice?" Sandor grunted. "The young can learn more from a few nicks and scrapes than from hours of practice with blunted weapons."

"I am master at arms of Winterfell, not you Hound, and as such, I say no. I'll not be responsible for any scarring on either side." *Or deaths*, Rodrick added mentally. The Young Wolf was a blooded warrior, had been for years, and was easily the most dangerous warrior Rodrick had ever met. If he wanted to, he could carve the princeling into pieces.

"I am the prince, if some Northern lout can use it, so can I!" Joffrey declaimed angrily, as if he was not used to being told no.

Ranma again chuckled, not taking offense at the prince's posturing, seeing it as an example of a little dog barking the loudest. *We might be the same age, but that is where the similarities end*, Ranma thought. The prince almost sounded like a whiny, less physically inclined, version of Kuno. "If you are so interested in using live steel, your highness, I propose a wager."

"Oh, what kind of wager?" Joffrey asked, his eyes lighting up with interest.

"I will use a regular training blade, and you, with someone else of your own choosing, can try your luck against me, two on one. But if I win, you will stand up at dinner tonight and tell everyone that I beat you, and if you win, I will do the same, though making no mention about your companion." Ranma smirked jumping up and over the training

ground's surrounding fence to land lightly on his feet, then moved so quickly, only Jon could follow his movements. Suddenly, Ranma was holding Bran and Tommen's practice blades. He turned, now facing the prince and his followers, eyes alight with battle lust.

Jon chuckled, then motioned Bran and Tommen to join him while Arya grinned, looking forward to this.

Joffrey scowled but Rodrick shouted, "No! Ranma, you know I can't allow that. It's blunt blades or nothing, I know not how good the prince is and I will not allow something like that to happen on my watch."

Ranma shrugged unconcerned. "Then let it be practice blades but four of them instead of the original two, I care not."

"I think the Northern bumpkin needs to be put in his place," the man in the colors of the Kingsguard muttered in a low voice, his eyes alight with barely hidden glee, "and besides, your highness, you can beat someone black and blue with training blades and no one can say a thing."

That turned Joffrey's scowl into a somewhat eager, rather disturbing smirk and he nodded. "If the Stark heir is so certain of himself then let us see if he can back it up."

Ranma grinned and threw one of the practice blades to Jon, who caught it easily. Jon then leaped over the training ground's encircling fence, before reaching back over and lifting up the children one at a time, setting them on their feet outside the fence. He and Theon exchanged a smirk, united for once in the thought, *This is going to be good...* The rest of the Stark clan hadn't ever really seen how good Ranma really was, so were looking a little worried at the unfair odds.

Ser Rodrick frowned, but finally relented. "Very well, but no crippling or killing blows, I will be watching."

Joffrey strutted forward with the, as yet, unintroduced White Cloak, the Hound, and another knight in Lannister colors. They all grabbed practice blades, then entered the salle, grinning and stalking forward.

Ranma, however, didn't wait for them and jumped forward, his blade flashing out to catch the White Cloak's blade, which he had risen in a desperate parry to keep Ranma's blade from his chest. Ranma then ducked away, circling easily, his blade flashing out to cut the leg out from under Sandor when he tried to get behind Ranma.

The Hound went down, yet his sword lashed out automatically, but Ranma danced away, chuckling and circling the trio still on their feet, as if all the advantage was his, not theirs. Sandor's deep-set eyes had widened at Ranma's initial speed and he pushed himself to his knees, eyes narrowed, actually taking Ranma seriously now.

Goaded by Ranma's mirth like it had been a whip, Joffrey growled and charged forward. Ranma dodged aside, the flat of his blade catching the young prince on the rear. Joffrey fell to the ground face first, his pride and rear smarting.

Swift as a striking serpent, Ranma turned, charging the two left on their feet, leaping up and kicking out to catch Sandor in the chest as he tried to grab Ranma's legs with a quick lunge. Sandor was sent flying backward and Ranma's blade caught the Lannister knight's blade locking them as he ducked under the White Cloak's blade which had aimed for its head.

Arya and the other Stark men and siblings began to laugh at the display, while those wearing Lannister colors either gaped or cursed in turn. The bout lasted another ten minutes, accompanied by the heckling and laughing of the Northerners. None of the four southerners were able to land a single blow on Ranma, who was simply too fast for them.

This was especially galling for the Hound, who knew he was one of the better blades in the kingdom, not in the top five perhaps, but certainly in the top twenty, and this young puppy was making a fool of him and the others, as if they were no threat at all.

About ten minutes into the bout, Joffrey realized this and he moved back, wincing only slightly. Outside of that first blow to the rear, Ranma had been very careful to pull his blows. In fact, Ranma had simply dodged or otherwise ignored the prince, outside of landing one more blow that caught the prince on his side, in favor of beating the other three black and blue. "This is a damn farce, you're just dancing around, this isn't real fighting! I've had enough!"

Ranma stopped, negligently blocking one last blow from the still un-introduced Kingsguard, throwing him back on his rear easily. Ranma was rather amused. His initial thoughts on the Kingsguard had been proven correct, if this man was worth the white cloak they were not nearly as good as their reputation suggested. The Hound had been the most dangerous of his opponents and not even he was much of a threat. "Just remember to look before you leap from now on, prince."

Joffrey scowled, a somewhat mad light in his eyes. "If we were back in King's Landing, I would have your head cut off for your insolence!"

"But we aren't, nor would you be able to simply command an enemy to fall down dead in the real world," Ranma replied scornfully. "On your way, prince, and be glad you only have a few bruises and wounded pride. Many of my own lessons have been much more painful."

Joffrey growled, staring at Ranma hatefully and Ranma saw something in his eyes. For just a second, there was something more in his eyes than the normal teenage anger at someone who had just bested him. Unfortunately, Ranma couldn't identify it before it disappeared behind cold disdain. Ranma had hoped that this would teach the young prince to think things through or at least to assume that his opponent might be better than he thought, but it looked as if he hadn't learned either lesson.

After a moment, Joffrey turned and walked off, shouting at his retainers to follow him, forgetting, for a moment anyway, that his younger brother had been a witness to his humiliation. The three men who had fought with him stared at Ranma, but there was much more wariness and even a bit of fear in their expressions as they took up position at the back of the crowd of Lannister men. The entire group retreated, sent on its way all the faster by the barking laughter of the Starks and their men.

Ranma turned to Arya, Tommen, and Bran. "Now then, I believe you all were practicing before I had my bit of exercise." With that they all turned back, and Ranma moved to Tommen and Bran, walking them through some sword forms.

Above them, an old man wearing white enameled armor turned away from the window previously used by Eddard to stare out over the training area, a smile on his weathered face.

OOOOOOO

"Are you mad Barristan?! Did you learn nothing from Tywin and his response to Jaime being raised to the white?! Fucking hells, I want Ned to be my new Hand of the King, not throw my offer back in my face!" Robert bellowed, staring at Ser Barristan, having nearly spat out a mouthful of the wine he was currently drinking when the man told the king his intentions.

Barristan weathered his king's ire with ease, it wasn't the first time he'd been yelled at by his king, nor was Robert the first king to yell at him so. "I assure you, my lord, I am quite sane. I think I have never seen a more dangerous young man, not even Ser Jaime before he was raised to the White. The Kingsguard are supposed to be the best blades in the kingdom. What I saw today and the tales I have heard about the boy since we arrived make it certain that he is already such a blade. Nor is this the same circumstances as Jaime's being raised to the White at all. For one thing, Ranma is not the only one of Lord Stark's children that can take the lordship after Lord Stark's passing. Young Bran or even young Rickon could step up in time. After all, Lord Stark is not an old man, he could live for another forty years or more."

Robert paused and thought about it for a moment, but then shook his head. "I understand that, but given what the Queen was bitching at me for before you got in here, putting Ranma and Joffrey in close proximity would not be a good idea." He smirked, "The fact it would piss off the brat and my 'dear' wife is nice, but she's shrill enough at the best of times. Besides, there's no guarantee that he would accept."

The older man blinked in shock, as if the very idea of someone declining the honor was beyond his comprehension and Robert guffawed, loud and long. "Hadn't thought about that had you, oh Bold one, hahahaha!" After a moment, he got control of his mirth and shook his head. "No, if you want to ask you may, but don't be surprised if he says no. Starks learn duty at their mother's teats and the heir of Winterfell knows his duty."

"His duty should be to the kingdom as a whole, not just to his house, but I take your meaning your grace. I will try to pursue this subtly."

OOOOOOO

Catelyn stared down at the message, rather surprised that house Tyrell had responded so promptly and she wondered why they had. One thing Lady Olenna wasn't known for was hasty, snap judgments or decisions. Yet for now she had to go see her husband. This might change things tremendously, at least she hoped so, and as for the other message Maester Luwin had passed on, she really didn't know what to make of it.

As Catelyn suspected, she found Ned in the godswood. Ned always went there when he was deliberating on weighty matters. Today he was sitting silently, staring contemplatively into the deep, cool pool of water at the base of the heart tree. He looked up when her footsteps announced her presence and Catelyn's breath quickened as she saw that faint, small smile that Ned used only for family, with a certain lopsidedness added to it that she knew was just for her. "My husband, there is news."

Ned nodded. "I have news I would share with you as well."

Catelyn frowned at the tone in her husband's voice and sat down next to him. She never truly felt comfortable in the godswood but had learned to respect the religion of the old gods. "First, we have heard back from the Tyrell family. They wish to set up a meeting between Margaery and Ranma, to see if there is any arrangement that might be reached. But they want the meeting to occur in King's Landing at court."

That last bit caused Ned to wince a little but he nodded, as it wasn't unheard of to have marriage deals occur on neutral ground, so that both parties came to it as equals. "Ranma will not like the idea of leaving the North right now." That, Ned knew, was an understatement. As far as he could tell, his son hadn't yet realized that Ned himself might be heading south, but this on top of that news would not make for a pleasant conversation. If an alliance could be forged with the powerful Tyrell family however, it would be well worth it. **If**, of course, was the major question.

"Bran can reign here as the visible lord, with myself, Ser Rodrick and Jon as his 'advisers.' While Bran gains good experience, I can control the household and Jon can organize the whelming. He's taken all the lessons Ranma has and he is nearly as bright as Ranma, and he has served as your voice a few times as well." Catelyn responded. "While i realize it is unusual for the heir to leave as well as the lord, this is important; a marriage alliance with House Tyrell would strengthen our house's position tremendously. I think even the king would give his blessing. It would weld the most powerful house that remained loyal throughout the war to the Targaryen dynasty to the crowns strongest supporters in House Stark."

"True." Ned mused, but inside he was worried that removing Ranma from the North would allow the White Walkers to move against them. "Winter is coming." he muttered, thinking how true his family's motto was, a truth every man and woman, young or old, should heed. *But will this marriage help us stand against the coming winter, or take our attention from preparing to meet the forces of the endless cold?*

Ned put that aside for now, and looked at his wife. "Your news mirrors my own. The king has offered to wed Joffrey to Sansa, despite her still being young for it."

Catelyn gasped in shock. "But that is amazing! In one swoop we can go from being the least powerful of the realms to the most powerful!" She frowned, "Why do you sound so uncertain about this, the marriage would be a great honor. And from what I have seen, Sansa is enamored of the young prince and there seems to be interest flowing the other way as well."

"I am not so pleased with the stories we have heard of Joffrey coming up from the south. I know tales should not be taken as fact but they can have a kernel of truth to them. I would like time to get to know the lad before giving my blessing." He suddenly smiled. "I can use Ranma's coming along as a reason to put it off until I gain knowledge of Joffrey's character, first hand. After all, it would be unseemly to have the younger sibling married off before the older would it not?"

"That... that could work, I suppose, though it isn't all that uncommon Ned and everyone, especially the Queen, would say that Joffrey's marriage is of more importance. I think you are jumping at shadows, yet I would prefer to know as well that my daughter would be happy in her marriage." She chuckled. "And of course you would have Ranma with you to help you and vice versa. I doubt that Ranma will respond calmly to the news that his sweet sister is to wed."

Ned joined her in chuckling but after a moment he asked, "You were uncertain of the wisdom of my becoming Hand of the King leaving Ranma in charge, yet now, despite the news Ranma carried back from the Wall, you think you, Bran and Jon can handle even more responsibility, why?"

Catelyn shook her head with a wry smile. "Jon is nowhere near as impetuous as Ranma, as much as it pains me to admit it. If we tell him to only organize the whelming, he will stick to it, and he will back Bran in all matters as much as Ranma would. Jon is truly a part of this family, it is easy to see the connections between all the siblings."

That made Ned smile a bit, for it was true. Ranma acted on his feelings and intuition much more than Jon, not that they had steered him wrong yet, or at least, not too far wrong. It was also true that Ned had made certain both his oldest sons, regardless of Jon's true parentage he was Ned's son in all ways that mattered, had as much practical experience and book knowledge as he could. Jon would perform well in organizing the whelming, and it was high time

for Bran to start learning some responsibility. With Catelyn, Rodrick, and Jon backing him he wouldn't make too many mistakes. He looked at his wife, head cocked to one side. "You said this news from house Tyrell was the first of your news, what is the second?"

"I honestly don't know what to make of it." Catelyn confessed. "The raven I sent to my sister with my condolences came back with a small package, a small piece of worked glass for a telescope Maester Luwin is constructing. Yet inside the box which held the glass, there was a message to me from Lysa. I... it says, well you better read it yourself."

She handed over the letter. Ned took it, reading the short, somewhat hysterical message quickly. In it, Lysa wrote that her husband had been looking into something to do with the King's bastards, and that she felt that the Queen had been angry at this, then went on to point a finger at the Lannisters, saying one of them had Jon Arryn poisoned.

For a moment, Ned sat silently then shook his head. "Lysa barely sounds coherent in this, I would say that maybe there is something going on, but she doesn't provide any proof. Until we see some proof one way or the other, I think we should take this with a grain of salt, if that. I don't mean to sound disparaging, but this letter doesn't say anything concrete, so using it for more than a starting point would be foolish. I can look into what Jon Arryn was doing when I arrive in King's Landing, and I will take more men with me as well as a cook I can trust, but that is all."

"That is more than enough for me, my love. In all honesty, after reading that note I am more than a little concerned about my sister's sanity. I trust you will be taking those guards that have been trained by our son?" Many guards in Winterfell had trained with the Young Wolf, but only about twenty made it a point to train with him as often as they could. They all were markedly better than their fellows and also, younger in the main, since older guards were less willing to take instruction from (and be soundly beaten by) the young heir.

"Of course. I will take Ser Jory Cassel and all the others, as well as ten more. More than thirty men, I'm afraid, would show that we do not trust the guards with the King, or feel threatened by the idea of going south." A thought struck him and he smiled. "Could you send a missive to your father, my love? If he could loan us some more men from his household, they could meet us in King's Landing and join us there, where they would be most useful. It would also seem to be more natural that way, his knights and men taking the opportunity to get to know his grandson first hand."

Catelyn smiled somewhat sadly. "I will certainly do so, though I do not know if it will be my father or younger brother Edmure that sends them. My father is old, Ned, and I don't know how much longer he will be able to continue as Lord Paramount of the Riverlands."

The two talked about their plans some more and then exited the godswood arm in arm. They were intercepted by a furious looking Queen, trailed by a rather irritatingly smug looking Joffrey.

OOOOOOO

"You wanted to see me father?" Ranma asked, standing before his father's desk. He had been out with Arya and his younger siblings, save Sansa. Sansa, the perfect little lady, had made a firm friend in Myrcella and was happy to remain inside all day working on her latest project. It was a jacket with the Lannister lion and Baratheon Stag on either shoulder done in varied hues of red (Lannister) and brown (Baratheon) for Joffrey. Of course, Ranma had vowed to himself to get her training with Lady later.

Lady and Sansa missed out with Ranma leading the others in a rather impromptu learning session, bonding with and learning how to read their direwolves moods and sense their feelings. This was in no way an exact science, but with Ranma's vague feeling that they should be able to get something from their wolves like he had, they all were able to make some progress, though it was a mixed bag without Ranma able to give them any real instruction, having only the vaguest idea of what they were doing himself. It wasn't something he could go to the maester or anyone else for advice for after all.

For one, Bran's, as yet unnamed, wolf seemed to know instinctively what Bran wanted and was always friendly to everyone. Rickon's Shaggydog was at the other end of the spectrum. Rickon couldn't get any feelings or anything else from Shaggy, though he was quick to pick up some of the training words, thankfully.

Nymeria and Arya had a very good connection and Arya seemed to be able to get some feelings from Nymeria. What was better, however, was that Arya had already been experimenting with it, got Ranma's rather out there explanation of what they could do, and wasn't afraid of it. Bran was a little, though Rickon, at age seven, merely found it a fantastic idea, and spent most of the time on all fours following Shaggydog around and vice versa.

Ghost and Fenris however were head and shoulders beyond the others in endurance, training, power, size, and the

connection they had with their humans. They responded not only to verbal commands but also feelings, sent out along whatever link they shared with their masters. Fenris was larger by a full hands length than Ghost and was much more energetic and personable than the almost silent Ghost. Ghost, on the other hand, seemed to develop his own ability to blend in and disappear like his owner could at need, which was a little scary, frankly.

Ned looked up not smiling at his son and wordlessly gesturing him to sit down. When Ranma did, Ned spoke, his voice cold. "What possessed you to dishonor the prince so? You are a blooded warrior, you thrashing him as you did caused nothing but bad feelings." He held up a hand as Ranma made to interject. "I know that is not what happened, but it was the end result. The Queen came and complained about your behavior, calling it combative, discourteous, and unnecessary. There is enough bad feeling between her family and ours without you adding to it."

Ranma frowned but nodded. "I'll keep that in mind, I suppose, but I thought that four on one would be enough to offset any loss of dignity."

Ned's face became marginally warmer. "I can understand that my son, but try to get along with the prince, please, like it or not he is the heir apparent, and you will be dealing with him for decades to come." Ranma nodded stoically and Ned allowed his face to relax even further, sighing. "That was not the only reason I wished to speak to you, there are three other things I need to tell you. I am certain you have figured out by now that his grace was not just here to visit an old friend. He wants me to take on the position of Hand of the King and I have accepted."

That made Ranma start in surprise, for in fact, he had not spent much thought on why the king was here, since it had been only a day, after all, and he had been simply spending time with his siblings since he got back. "So, as your heir you're saying that I will have to fill in, I suppose? I can't say I'm pleased by the timing father, in many ways."

"No... that brings me to the second point. Your mother has been very concerned for the past year about how few marriage prospects of the right station there are in the North for you, and has been looking into other alternatives. Do you know of House Tyrell?"

"House Tyrell is the house of the Lord Paramount of the Reach, the largest and, in many ways, richest nation of the kingdom. Mace Tyrell is the current head of the house. He backed the Targaryen dynasty, and relations between House Tyrell and the throne have been strained, but peaceful since Robert took the throne." Ranma recited from memory, then asked suspiciously "Why?"

"Your mother has communicated the idea of having you and Margaery Tyrell, the daughter of the house, meet on neutral ground. So you will be coming with me when we go south."

For a moment, it didn't register, then Ranma's eyes narrowed and he leaned forward. "Father, don't take this the wrong way but are you insane?" Ned reared back in shock at the sudden discourtesy from his son, but Ranma continued. "You know the real story about what Jon and I ran into, you know what that could mean! You can surely see that this threat might be why I was allowed to retain my memories of my past life yet you want me to leave the North? That is utterly insane!"

Ned was about to retort sharply then clamped down on his temper with his habitual control before he said something they would both regret. After a minute he responded, his voice and face once more controlled. "Yet for all that you ran into, my son, you have no idea when the White Walkers will strike, nor what the wildlings are really up to. Unless the wildling woman has shared more with you and your friends than you have shared with me?" Ranma reluctantly shook his head and Ned continued. "The attack on you might have been a preemptive strike, when the bulk of their forces are not yet ready for war. If it was part of a larger plan, they would have continued to try to kill you and your friends rather than being happy with a single assault that showed their hand."

"Now, let us think about what you can do with that time. An alliance between us and the Reach would weld us to the most powerful realm in terms of military potential and the breadbasket of Westeros, something that will be incredibly important with winter coming. Moreover, as your mother pointed out, it will weld the most dangerous and powerful family that stood against Robert and our forces during the Rebellion to us, which would help the stability of the kingdom as a whole."

"I see..." Ranma mused, then shook his head again. "I still don't like it, but I suppose that you've thought about it and I will respect your decision father. I don't agree with it, but I will of course abide by it. And what is the third point you wanted to inform me of?"

Ned smiled internally, knowing that this would take away the last vestiges of discontent Ranma felt for going south with the King's party. "His majesty has offered his son Joffrey's hand in marriage to Sansa, and your mother and I have provisionally accepted. It will not become official until we all arrive in King's Landing, and even then we will be

able to use your own need for an arrangement to hold it off until we, and by we, I mean you and I, are able to put our worries about Joffrey's character to rest."

Fenris leapt up suddenly, his fangs barred in a surprisingly intimidating show of aggression, given the pup was barely five months old. Ranma reached down, rubbing Fenris's head comfortingly as he got control of his own emotions. Fenris subsided under his hand and Ranma let out a breath. "I am **not** happy about that, but at least we will be able to have time to get to know him better. And if we learn that some of those rumors that Theon shared with me this morning are true, we can pull back from the deal?"

"Yes we can, though I am not looking forward to telling Sansa, in that case. I told her not twenty minutes ago about this and I am almost certain you can still hear her squealing in joy, if you listen hard enough." Ned responded dryly.

"I'll do that, if you want," Ranma said, his face grim. "Something tells me that pulling out of this arrangement will be necessary. I don't like Joffrey. That may be my first impression only, and I'll try to keep an open mind, but there is just something... off about him."

"I find myself in reluctant agreement. There seems to be all the worst parts of his mother's line and nothing of his father in him, which is a pity." Ned was also wondering how Jon Arryn had come to die so suddenly and if there was indeed anything in Lysa Tully's hysterical letter. He hoped that, as Hand of the King, he would be able to look into that when he arrived in King's Landing.

Ranma nodded again, though in truth he didn't see much in Robert either, but he knew the man had been different in his youth. "May I be excused father, I feel the need to clear my head."

Ned nodded, and Ranma stood up, moving swiftly out of the study with Fenris padding at his heels. Ned chuckled a little. "That actually went better than I expected."

OOOOOO

After an extremely quick run, Ranma found himself in the godswood, as always when something was bothering him. He sat down eventually, leaning back against the heart tree, Fenris laying out across his legs. He wasn't there to seek advice or anything like that. Ranma had never really been the type to do that in his past life or this one. He was simply there to think.

From what he could remember of the vision he had been given in this very wood by the old gods, humans, human armies, and betrayal were some of the threats in the future, but Ranma wasn't really built for sniffing out traitors and he didn't like the idea of going south while the White Walkers were still out there. He wanted to face the threats he was here to face one at a time, defeat them, and then move on but he knew that was wishful thinking.

There was also the fact that he was possibly going to be getting married. He knew his relationship with Dacey was one that could never go anywhere. They both knew it. Despite this, the idea of marrying someone else did not interest him at this point. This was especially true, given his past life, where he had more than enough problems with arranged marriages and girls. He had generally gotten over his fear of the latter but not the former, which added to his current problems.

"I'm worried," he said honestly, leaning back against the tree, both of his hands rubbing Fenris's back as the beast lay on top of his legs. "I'm worried that I am heading into an arena where my skills will not be of much worth, where words are going to be the only weapons. I'm also worried about what the White Walkers will do in my absence."

Ranma closed his eyes, thinking hard. He couldn't disobey his father, it was his duty to go, and even his marrying was a duty because it would strengthen the family. *Yet, is that what I should be doing?* He thought to himself.

As he laid there, a soothing feeling came over him and he felt his worries fall away. That feeling seemed to say whatever his choice he would be able to face the challenges to come.

He suddenly smiled. "And it's not as if going south will leave the North entirely defenseless. The Night Watch is being strengthened even as I sit here, with more help heading north every day. My friends and Jon will still be here as well, and Jon is well up to leading the whelming. Bran might find he has a passion other than running around and climbing." *In fact*, he thought to himself, *Jon might actually do a better job at this point than I.*

There was nothing his instincts could latch onto here, no way to bring the White Walkers to battle. Well, there was one, he could simply march north of the Wall and dare them to come at him, but that wasn't really an option. Wildlings were dangerous at ambush and night attacks here in the North, on their own ground they could cut any army to

ribbons. No, now was the time to prepare, to gather supplies and prepare your lines of supply, something that Ranma, while having learned it from his father and Maester Luwin, wasn't really mentally put together to be very good at.

Jon could. He was much more methodical and a little better at numbers (and at writing, Ranma's handwriting was horrible) than Ranma. He had the same connections across the North. He had the friendship of the wolf-sworn who would aid him as they would Ranma in his place and of course Lady Catelyn. So really, Ned was right, there was nothing Ranma could do here, save for being a visible target and threat to the White Walkers.

Decision made, Ranma reached out to gently touch the bark of the heart tree in thanks before turning away and making his way purposefully out of the woods.

Ranma frowned suddenly, looking up towards one of the oldest towers in Winterfell, one that was falling apart and unused. What had caused him to frown was the sight of Bran climbing up the walls. But it wasn't just the spectacle of Bran climbing that had caused Ranma to frown but the fact that his brother had stopped and looked to have almost fallen for a moment but had caught himself. Ranma shook his head and started to move in that direction, ready to help or simply order Bran to come down, if need be.

A moment later he was much closer and, suddenly, he saw a flash of a hand from the window slit Bran was perching on and then Bran was falling, falling to the ground, so far below.

There was no time to think, no time to do anything but run. Pushing as much of his ki into his legs as he could, Ranma's body obeyed his mind's command, going faster, faster than any human could move unaided. Blue-gold energy appeared for just a moment around his legs as he rocketed forward. Even as the barrier inside him, which had held back his ability to use ki for so long, shattered under his urgent need, Ranma knew it would not be enough.

OOOOOO

Bran loved to climb. He loved to explore, to find secret nooks and crannies. He knew it drove his mother up the wall (figuratively speaking) but there was just something inside him that urged him out to explore and to learn. It was the same reason why he spent a lot of time of an evening in the library, reading far more than his siblings, even sneaking books out to read in his bedroom by candlelight, now that he was old enough to be trusted with a candle. Today, Bran was going up the Broken Tower's side. He had seen some birds nesting up on top, and he wanted to see if there were any chicks.

The Broken Tower had once been the largest tower of Winterfell, but had fallen into disrepair after a lightning strike decapitated it. It was almost entirely forgotten these days. Unfortunately that meant that it was an obvious place for someone to go to have some private time without being found.

This was how Bran came to catch the Queen in a heated tryst. But even more shockingly than the Queen breaking her wedding vows to the King, she was doing it with her own brother! The sight had so shocked Bran he had paused, one hand reaching out to the next handhold, and nearly fell when his other hand's grip failed under his weight.

The sound Bran made while scrabbling around desperately to stop himself from falling, had alerted the two lovers to his presence. Jaime, after popping himself back into his breeches, strode over grabbing his hands and pulling Bran up. Cersei rearranged herself, pulling her blouse shut over her pearly white breasts, glaring angrily at the boy all the while.

Ever after he fully recovered, Bran would never remember the words that were spoken, the promise he tried to make, the Queen urging him to keep her secret, until Jamie spoke a single sentence, which would forever burn itself in Bran's memory: "The things I do for love." Because it was after that, Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer, tried to kill him by pushing him out the window slit.

Yet, Bran had been trained by Ranma not only in sword techniques but hand-to-hand for several years and his hands quickly reached up to Jaime's one hand, threatening to break his thumb while the other gripped his wrist. It took all of Jaime's considerable finger strength to keep his thumb from being pulled back. They struggled for a moment, then Jamie, ignoring how his sister was shouting at him to stop, pulled hard up and to the side, slamming Bran's head against the side of the opening.

The pain from that blow caused Bran to reach up to his head crying aloud and Jaime completed what he wanted to do, pushing the boy out of the window, cursing all the while.

The push wasn't as strong as he wanted however, and Bran slammed his head into the side of the wall as he fell



twice more, then he knew only darkness.

The Queen stared at her brother, aghast. "You didn't need to do that! We could have..."

"He would've told eventually, no way a boy that age could have kept quiet long." Jamie said, wringing out his thumb and wincing a little, wondering how the boy had been able to fight him like that. Looking out the window slit, he gasped in surprise as from the wall surrounding the godswood jumped the Stark heir. More than six stories he leapt and landed safely on this side of the wall before rushing forward. He was moving faster than Jamie could follow and he hissed, wondering what how the hell the boy could move so fast. "We need to get out of here!"

Cersei didn't question her brother, simply turning and rushing toward the rickety stairs. The Queen growled low in her throat as she quickly and expertly made certain her clothing was once more immaculate. "From now on, let me handle this! That little abrupt moment back there might have ruined everything!"

"You weren't complaining when we..." Jamie drawled then broke off as his sister slapped his face.

"Fool!" she whispered fiercely, "that was not what I meant! You should never have pushed the boy, now we'll cover this up my way."

Jamie frowned touching his cheek for a moment then shrugging. "Very well, dear sister, though if it comes to it, I will protect you. You know that the wolves will respond badly to this."

Cersei sneered at him. "Let the thinking to me, dear brother, trust me I'll come up with something if needed." Thankfully for the incestuous couple, the actual entrance to the tower was away from the direction Ranma was coming, allowing them to leave without being seen, thus they were able to get back into the main keep and go their separate ways. This was helped by the amount of uproar occurring elsewhere in the keep.

OOOOOO

As fast as Ranma was, he had been correct that he would not be time. By the time he was halfway to the tower whoever was inside had already pushed Bran. By the time he was at the base of the broken tower Bran had smashed his head several times against the wall as he fell like a broken marionette down the side of it, though Bran would not finish his descent. With legs still infused with his ki Ranma jumped up, clearing half the height between him and Bran's falling body before latching onto the wall and snagging his younger brother as he came down.

He jumped back down to the ground landing easily and stared at Bran's direwolf, which had been nosing around at the bottom of the tower until his master ran into trouble, as well as Fenris, who had somehow kept up with him. Ranma would figure out how later, right now there were more important things. "Run!" he ordered. "Get Jon! Tell him to meet me at the infirmary!" Both wolves turned at his command racing away, though Bran's wolf was markedly slower in both obeying and his speed.

With that, Ranma zoomed off, heading towards the keep and already shouting for Maester Luwin and his mother at the top of his voice. It was a shout soon taken up by others as they saw him racing toward the keep with his brother's body in his arms.

They both met him at the doorway to the keep. At the sight of the bleeding, broken Bran in Ranma's arms, Catelyn seemed to freeze, her face going from concerned to appalled when she saw the bloody mess that had been Bran's head and face.

Ranma didn't mention the reason behind Bran's fall for the moment, simply saying to the healer, "He hit his head at least four times on the wall before I could get to him. He's still got a pulse, but it's fading in and out."

They both made way for him and the maester immediately began to work on Bran's head, walking next to Ranma. His hands felt around the boy's head and Luwin clicked his tongue in concern. "Lay him down, quickly!" he ordered, motioning toward one of the beds. Catelyn followed them, her hands over her mouth as great large tears appeared in her eyes. But she forced herself to stay away, knowing she would be more hindrance than help right now.

Out in the corridor Ranma could hear the sound of his siblings and possibly a few of their guests coming to see what had happened, but he ignored that, following the maester's instructions to lay Bran out. "Hot water!" Luwin ordered, "And some clean dressings."

Ranma nodded and made for the doorway only to find several servants turning and hurrying off for the water. When he turned back, his mother was already grabbing some bandages from the shelf.

After handing the wraps to the maester Catelyn looked at Ranma, wanting to ask what happened, yet pausing when she something in his face. Something that made her own face go from tear stained, anxious, and fearful, to angry. "He didn't just fall, did he?"

Her oldest son shook his head, too angry to speak for a moment. Jon ran up just then. He looked wild-eyed at Ranma and then into the infirmary staring at Bran then back at Ranma.

Ranma clapped him on the shoulder, pulling him close. "Take our direwolves," he ordered in a whisper, "head over to the Broken Tower and up it as far as you can, look for anything unusual, anything that could hint at who did this."

"Who did this'?" Jon asked his face going grim. "You mean someone pushed him?"

"I don't know who did it," Ranma said, nodding his head at both him and Catelyn, who had come close to listen to his words, "but when I looked up and saw him, I saw Bran fighting with someone's hand in one of the windowsills. If only I had been closer!" Ranma slammed his fist hard against the wall, cracking the stone there with the force of his blow. Only Jon noticed this, his eyes going slightly wide despite his previous knowledge of Ranma's strength.

Catelyn shook her head. "Don't blame yourself Ranma, Bran is always climbing every chance he gets, it's not your job to watch him all the time and it's not your fault that someone pushed him. Just..." her voice trailed off as she looked down at her young son, afraid that she would never see him smile again, never see him run up to her with an interesting plant or a tale of something he found or read. "Find who did this," she said her voice cracking as she looked up at her oldest, torn between a bottomless rage and an equally bottomless grief.

"We will," Jon said turning on his heel and rushing away. Ghost, Fenris, and Bran's unnamed wolf all followed him, for once not looking like oversized puppies but true direwolves on the hunt.

The servants quickly arrived with the needed hot water, helped in this by the fact that Winterfell had been built over a hot spring, both heating the castle and allowing for clean, disease-free, hot water.

Ranma made way for them, staring down as they began to work with the maester and his mother on cleaning Bran's wounds. He hissed angrily as he saw the large gash on the side of Bran's head, as well as the broken nose and another large cut over one eye that would need stitching.

He looked around as he felt someone touch his shoulder and turned to see his father with the rest of his siblings behind him, as well as their guests, even Joffrey. Both the girls looked a little weepy, though Arya was holding up better than Sansa. Ranma had to stop himself from yelling when he saw that Joffrey had taken the opportunity to comfort Sansa and had an arm around her shoulders. Rickon was crying, not really understanding why everyone was running around and shouting but understanding something bad had happened to his brother.

Theon, too, was there looking angry and worried. Ranma nodded to him and motioned over to the kids. "Get them out of here," he muttered, "We'll tell them later what happened, after that get back here quick." Theon nodded and started to shepherd the young children off, uncaring of which family they belonged to.

The Lannister guard, who had followed the two royal children from where they had been playing with Arya and Sansa, and Joffrey paled under Ranma's glare and the guard quickly turned and followed them away.

Joffrey however remained, while the rest of the royal party began to make an appearance, wondering what was going on. Robert was the next to arrive and he leaned around the door-jam looking inside. "The lad fell? You mentioned his love of climbing last night Ned, I suppose it was almost inevitable."

"He did not fall, your grace," Ranma growled, his hands clenching and unclenching and his eyes blazing, "he was pushed."

"Do you have any proof of that?" said Varys, who had followed the king, "Or are you simply guessing?" He was now standing well away from the doorway, unwilling to see what had happened to the young boy. Some said Varys had a soft spot for children or too much of a liking for them, and Bran was precisely the kind he recruited to be his 'little birds', the boy and girl prostitutes who were the most important agents of his spy ring. Though here in Winterfell, he had been completely unable to find any such to use and had been forced to use other agents.

"I saw him fighting with someone's hand in a windowsill of the Broken Tower, there is no doubt he was pushed. I've sent Jon and our wolves up to see if they could sniff out any clues." Roger and Dacey had just arrived and, at those words, both turned and ran off to join Jon.

At the back of the crowd, the Queen heard this as well and started, looking over to Jamie who was now **finally**

looking worried. She turned, quickly moving over to Sir Preston Greenfield and began to whisper in his ear, so low no one could make out the words. The man gulped and began to shake his head but the Queen continued to speak low and angry. Something she said seemed to change his mind and he finally nodded, whispering back something.

Only Tyrion noticed this and the Imp's eyes narrowed, wondering what his sister was up to.

The Queen nodded grimly and moved on to two of her maids. When she was certain Preston was no longer looking in her direction, she began to whisper in their ears. Both of them blanched slightly, but they both were loyal to her and her family, and had served her long before she became queen. Eventually one nodded her head, somberly.

"If all you saw was a hand, I'm afraid that's not much to go on," Varys said rather apologetically. While he had no family he understood the motivations that drove them.

"I don't care." Ranma said coldly, looking past his father at the eunuch before repeating himself, "I don't care. If I find even a hint of who was behind this, your grace, the barest piece of evidence, I will kill that person. I do not care about his or her station, I do not care about his or her family connections, I do not care about his or her gender! For this assault on my younger brother, he or she will die."

"Well said, boy." Robert grunted, wondering who the bastard was and why the boy had been attacked.

"Agreed." said Ned grimly. He wondered if this had anything to do with the message that Catelyn's sister had sent her, which suddenly was making much more sense than it had an hour ago. He looked over at Robert, wondering if he should tell him about the letter, but decided not to, since it didn't have any evidence backing its claims. The last thing the realm needed were the Queen and King to become even more at odds with one another without any visible cause.

About two hours later, the maester finished and he turned to the audience outside the door. "I've done all I can but I am still uncertain of the extent of the damage. I cannot feel any cracks in Bran's skull but he might be bleeding inside his head. At this point, my healing knowledge is at a loss; it is up to Bran now whether he will live or die. I have some poultices and medicines that can help heal the surface wound. I even have tonics that will speed the healing process and encourage his bones to mend faster. " he said, looking over at the now heavily bandaged head of the young Stark. "But if there's something inside his head that is injured, I cannot do anything about it but wait."

Ranma frowned, cursing the fact that he had never found out a way to use ki to heal other people. He knew it was possible, both Cologne and Dr. Tofu had done it a few times, but Ranma didn't know how to do it. He didn't even have a hint since they had never done it around him after he developed ki sight.

"I'll stay with him." Catelyn said, sitting down in a chair next to the bed, her hand reaching out to grasp her son's limp hand firmly. "I'll watch him and I'll feed him whatever medicines you make, maester."

Ned nodded grimly. He turned to see Ser Jory in the audience and motioned him over. "I want two guards stationed at this door at all times." he ordered. "If someone tried to kill my son because of something he saw, they might try again."

Ser Jory nodded grimly, and moved off to grab two of the guardsmen.

"Bran's direwolf will be back soon, he'll guard the infirmary as well father." Ranma said. Catelyn frowned at that. She always felt a little worried about the direwolves, but their affection toward her children could not be denied, and one of them could be useful.

The crowd began to break up into small clumps, but no one, save Tyrion and Varys, noticed Ser Preston staring hard at the door then at the two guards that were taking up position outside it. He nibbled his lips worryingly, then seemed to have a sudden idea and moved off.

Tyrion followed him with his eyes for a moment before deciding not to indulge his curiosity further, leaving to head to the library, which was rather extensive here in Winterfell. Varys too left, wondering, but his head was already filled with the desperate need to put a spy ring into place here in Winterfell, as there seemed to be many things going on that he was not able to follow.

At Ned's command, Sir Rodrick began to close all the gates of Winterfell, closing all the entrances so that no one could leave. Hopefully this would trap the would-be killer inside. Not fifteen minutes after the group broke up, Ned and Ranma met with Jon, Dacey, and Roger in Ned's study. Ned looked at his 'bastard son' anxiously. "Did you find anything?"

Jon and Roger shared a glance, and Roger spoke for them both. "We did my Lord." Jon reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a very small piece of leather which he opened to show a few short blonde hairs on its inner surface. "We found these up there, and..."

Both men looked over at Dacey, who let out a chuckle, amused by how embarrassed they were at not having recognized the next clue, letting it to her to mention it. "It smelled of sex my lord, that scent you get in a room after two people have been going at it for some time."

Ned and Ranma leaned forward to examine the hairs, and Ned frowned a little. "They're blonde and short but that's about all I can tell about them. They don't seem to match precisely the hair color of anyone I can recognize off hand." *Not the Queen's, thank the old gods. If this was because of some tryst of the Queen's, that would be a disaster for the kingdom.* "So, Bran caught someone having sex with someone they shouldn't and that was enough reason to assault my son?"

Jon sighed wearily. "From the height that he was pushed, Bran would've been dead or at best crippled for life. Ranma saved him from that, at least. Maybe he'll wake up and be able to tell us who pushed him."

"We'll see." Ranma said grimly. "Head wounds are tricky, remember how Edd was for weeks after that giant caught him a good one. If I've just saved him from instant death but not a slow lingering one, I'm not certain that's any better."

Ned looked over at his son, and frowned slightly seeing a tense readiness in the boy, the need to act, the wolf's blood rising in him with the need to avenge his family. Ned decided, again not to share the missive from Catelyn's sister containing her rants about how there might be something unusual going on with the Lannisters with Ranma. He could not, for the life of him, see any connection and knew that if Ranma heard even a hint of that, he would attack the Lannister party with disastrous consequences.

He sighed tiredly and sat up. "I'm going to go see your mother and Bran. I suggest you four get some sleep."

Ranma frowned, but nodded and Jon, Dacey, and Roger left, leaving him alone with his father. "Does this change your plans, father?"

Ned sighed sadly and shook his head. "No, we still have to leave in four days, though Rickon will now serve as official regent, with your lady mother behind him and Jon helping as much as he can until Bran recovers or..." Ned shook his head of such thoughts and went on. "To be frank, the King has been away from King's Landing too long already. He should never have made this trip or, if he did, it should've been quick, not this slow procession. By the time he gets back, Robert will have been gone from King's Landing for over six months and that is a dangerous amount of time to leave a power vacuum, even if he has a trusted regent watching the kingdom for him."

Ranma frowned a little. He had heard very mixed reviews about Renly Baratheon. He seemed a likeable sort but Ranma hadn't heard anything about his leadership ability. Still that didn't matter at the moment and Ranma nodded, then left the room.

OOOOOO

Ned remained with his wife for the remainder of that evening and well into the night. He didn't even leave the infirmary to have dinner with the King and his party. Under other circumstances, this might have been seen as a gross act of discourtesy, but Robert understood. He didn't like it, but he understood that Ned cared for his family, something Robert had never been able to do with his own children, disappointments the lot of them.

That very night, the Queen's plans began to move while the iron was hot. It was made all the better, in her opinion, because Cersei had merely set it in motion and left the rest of the plan to her pawn.

It was well past midnight when the crackle of flames drew the attention of the guards on the wall in towards the barn. They could see Hodor, who regularly slept out with the horses, racing around pulling horses out of the barn. All of the men who saw the flames began to shout, raising the alarm. Not a moment later, another fire started up in the library nearby.

Ned had been roused from his place by his wife and son by the shouts and raced out, followed by one of the guards, leaving the other behind to guard the door. The moment he was out he began to shout orders, and soon enough two lines of bucket carriers were in place, fighting the fires. The one in the stable set most of it alight, but thanks to Hodor's heroism, which earned him both many claps on the back and burns on his arms, none of the horses died.

The library fire was fought much more easily, and only a few books and a table were lost entirely. However, there was

a casualty, the Imp Tyrion. He had apparently been staying up reading in the library. During the work to save the library, he was found by his brother and a few others of the king's party. Tyrion had been knocked out and was bleeding from a gash on the back of his head in a corner when they found him. It was well away from where the fire started, though right next to an open window.

O O O O O O O

All the adults, save Catelyn and her guard, had run out to help, except for Ranma. Ranma was a very heavy sleeper once he got to sleep (a holdover from his past life, much like his liking for fish over red meat), so it took him a while to rouse even with the shouting going on outside. But once he was awake, his first thought was not of the fire, but whether or not the fire had been set by someone for some other reason. So instead of racing outside to help, Ranma made his way down to the infirmary.

It was well he did. The guard, one of the older guards, a fat man named Tomard, had been slain outside the door. Inside someone draped in an all-encompassing black cloak had smashed his mother to the floor and was wielding a longsword at Bran's direwolf pup.

Despite being only the size of a medium sized dog, the direwolf pup was game, snarling and leaping around, trying to get at the man with scant success. His sides were already bleeding from several, albeit superficial, cuts. Catelyn was getting to her feet woozily, her face a mass of black and blue, possibly her jaw broken when Ranma arrived.

The man turned as Ranma roared and charged, raising his blade.

Ranma knocked it to the side with one hand, his leg flashing out in a kick whose strength he had, alas, neglected to pull. His foot slammed into the man with enough force to literally rupture his insides and shatter his ribs while throwing the man through the glass window behind him with a cry of agony. That cry was abruptly silenced when he hit the ground below.

Ranma cursed under his breath, but had no time to spare for the man's fate, kneeling down and examining his mother closely where she had slumped against the side of Bran's bed. Her face was a mass of purple, but her eyes were tracking well, and she stared up at him through her tears, hugging him around his chest. As Ranma's arms went around her he looked over at the direwolf pup and nodded his head. "Good wolf." he murmured reaching out and rubbing the little pup's head affectionately.

The pup subsided, knowing that the alpha was here and would protect him and his chosen partner. He twisted around, licking at his wounds, noticing that his larger brother had now taken up position by the door.

O O O O O O O

By this time the King's men had joined in with the effort to stop the fires and Jamie had found his concussed brother. The Imp looked up at him a little woozily and asked, "I think I had some bad wine brother, do find the innkeeper and flog him for me, would you?"

Jamie chuckled a little dryly at that. "I think not brother, come, we'll get you fixed up." Inside, however, Jaime was wondering what his sister had done or who had set the fires at her behest and why. Further, he wondered when he would get the chance to kill whoever had done this deed for attacking his brother.

The cry from the keep and despairing wail of the man ejected from the infirmary's window, drew the attention of several of the people at the back of the group working on the fires, including Ned and a few others. Ned, fearing the worst, ran inside to check on his wife and son, followed by Dacey. Roger and Jon hurried over to the body of the man who had come through the window quickly, then stopped, staring down at the body. "Bring a torch over here," ordered Jon, looking up as Jaime, carrying his concussed brother and followed by a few others, joined him.

A torch was quickly brought and the group stared down at one of the Kingsguard. His face was a rictus of agony, the chest of his breast plate shattered and warped by a great blow, caving in the chest under it. Jon knelt quickly touching his throat. "Dead." he muttered then stared at the man's head, which was full of blonde hair. "What was this knight's name?"

"Ser Preston Greenfield," Jaime said grimly, "a landless knight from the Stormlands, he was raised to the white for courage shown in the Greyjoy Rebellion." Jaime's free hand, the one not holding his brother up, twitched searching for his sword, which he had left in the barracks set aside for the guests. "He must have been the one who set the fires, and attacked my brother for some reason. Maybe he didn't want witnesses."

"I see..." Jon muttered then nodded over at Roger. "Grab some men and take the body somewhere, I think we just found who pushed Bran from the Broken Tower."

Jaime almost couldn't help himself and nearly sighed in relief as Jon jumped to that conclusion, much like, he was certain, his sweet sister had wanted. Yet, for all that they had been brothers in the Kingsguard, he could not find it in him to mourn Preston's passing. No, the only thing he felt was relief that Cersei's plan seemed to be working, despite the assault on Tyrion.

OOOOOOO

The very next day one of the Queen's hand maidens named Fiona Mescarny, a married woman from a minor house in the Westerlands, came forward with a tearful tale. In front of Lord Stark, his heir, the King and the prince, with the Queen staring hard at her, Fiona explained through tearful sobbing what had happened. She and Ser Preston had been having an affair almost since the king and his party had set out from King's Landing. She had cheated on her husband with him because her husband refused to move to King's Landing with her years ago and it had finally got to her. She hinted however that Preston had broken his vows to take no woman well before their dalliances began.

They had been getting together more and more often, despite her wishing to break things off and that day he had accosted her and taken her up to the tower for some privacy. Bran had come upon them and Preston had panicked, promptly trying to push the boy off the tower, but he had fought back. Fiona had tried to stop him, but Preston had succeeded in pushing the boy off the tower and the two had escaped back to the keep about five minutes before Jon and the other searchers had arrived. She knew nothing about his activity the night before, but it was obvious Preston had attempted to kill the boy who knew his secret.

Cersei promptly dismissed her from the Queen's service, ordering two of the Lannister knights to go with her back to the Western lands that very day. The knights were also under orders to tell her husband of her shame, or so Robert and the others at Winterfell were told. In actuality, Fiona wasn't married, and the two knights would bring her to the Casterly Rock, where she would enter her father's service with a very handsome stipend for lying to the King and everyone else. She turned to the others shaking her head. "I had no idea those two were involved, Fiona has always been most level headed, this affair on her end is quite a shock, though I have had concerns for some months about Preston's reliability."

"He was one of your father's suggestions," Robert growled. "And now look where we are."

"My father knows fighting men, my husband, but he doesn't know how men can weaken overtime when deprived of pleasures of the flesh."

"True, that man isn't one to enjoy a good frolic, I doubt it would even occur to him to think that a man would miss it." Robert frowned, then laughed. "You sure as hell'd never catch me swearing to the white and the whole 'no women' thing!"

The queen smiled thinly, then turned back to look at Eddard and his family. "I hope, Lord Stark, that your son will recover from Ser Preston's mad attempt to keep his name clean."

Ned nodded his head, his face set like stone. "He will survive, though Maester Luwin thinks his brain might be damaged in some way. It could range from short or long term memory loss to becoming as damaged mentally as our stable boy, Hodor. He, he feels it will be closer to the second option than the first." That was a lie, Luwin had no idea where on that spectrum Bran's wound would fall, but Ned feared the worse. That way, he would be pleasantly surprised if anything better happened and prepared for the worst.

Robert sighed sadly as the Queen, hiding her elation with ease shook her head in sorrow. "I'm sorry Ned, I wish we could have seen this coming." He looked at his friend, and shook his head. "It might be kinder to the lad to..."

"Don't," Ned barked. "Don't even suggest it, Robert." He knew where Robert was coming from, but hope sprung eternal, and that was one decision that Ned would never make.

The King subsided, still shaking her head, and the group broke up moments later.

Later that day Ser Preston Greenfield was stripped of his cloak during a ceremony that hadn't been used in over a hundred years, and his family was sent a raven describing his disgrace. His body was burned, a horrible punishment under the Seven, something that was only done to the bodies of oath breakers, then his ashes scattered to the winds in dishonor.

OOOOOOO

Things began to calm down after that, though Varys, for one, was still wondering about why Preston had gone insane. Catelyn, too, was wondering about his guilt, since he was a knight who owed his loyalty originally to house Lannister, the house her sister's message warned her of. Still, no evidence had been found of some larger conspiracy and, that, plus her own injuries, made Catelyn unable to peruse things.

While Ned took Robert out on hunts, the announcement of Sansa and Joffrey being engaged was announced. Ranma tried to get to know the Southerners with scant success, though Ser Barristan seemed to be as interested in him as Ranma was in trying to figure out if there was anything but childish arrogance behind the somewhat mean streak Ranma saw in Joffrey a time or two. In the end, however, he was unable to make a decision just yet, though he kept an eye on Joffrey whenever he was around Sansa.

Ranma was very busy during this time. He spent time with Arya and the other children during the afternoon and trained with Jon and his friends during the mornings, now that Dacey and Roger had recovered. During the evenings, he was forced to join the nightly meals with his father making nice with the King and his party, watching unhappily as the affianced pair of Joffrey and Sansa became closer under the watchful eyes of their families. And at night, he regaled the children with his tales, taken for the most part from simplified versions of his past adventures. This and spending time with them during the afternoon, finished the job of solidifying the younger two royal children's admiration and friendship toward the Stark heir.

But while everyone else slept, Ranma would stay awake, working with his ki. He still wasn't certain what that final barrier had been but he felt maybe it had something to do with need and the body's ability to truly push past its physical limits. After all, a normal human's body couldn't really handle the amount of energy Ranma could put out, so it made sense that the first time you needed to actually project ki there would be a final barrier to it. It was only his desperate need to save his brother that allowed him to finally break through it.

His ki abilities however were still a little strange. For one thing, while he could mold it much more easily, shaping it in his hands and across his skin in a way he had never truly seen before (outside the Sneaky Thief technique, which really wasn't the same) he couldn't project it very easily. Even projecting a single mini Moko Takabashi, a small ki ball the size of his fist, took a lot out of him. What was more, it dissipated quickly, so quickly it very nearly didn't impact the fall wall of his room.

Yet, at the same time, Ranma could imbue any weapon he carried with ki, something that he hadn't really experimented with before this, leaving weapons use to whenever he needed it rather than as a normal portion of his repertoire. In this world of course, that wasn't the case, so he was glad to see it.

In discussions with Maester Luwin over the years, Ranma had discovered that magic was known here, though most in Westeros didn't really put much truck in it. Still, projecting magic was known, even if it wasn't normally seen or believed here in Westeros. That told him the magic users here were just that, magic users, not ki users. He still wasn't certain why, what power the wizards called on, or how it differed from his own, but chalked it up to a difference in the way energy worked in this world.

There was one ki attack however that didn't dissipate, primarily, Ranma thought, because it wasn't a simple ki attack, but something that changed from ki to something else the moment it left his hands. The vorpal scythes of the Bold Thief certainly worked, and Ranma caused a bit of a minor mystery among the smallfolk by practicing it out in the woods. As deadly as they were, the blades would be something he would only use as a last resort, but they sure as hell were a nice ace to have, just in case.

Ranma came up with several new techniques to work with the 'limitations'. He also worked with Fenris, trying to figure out their connection. After four days Ranma had figured out what their connection was, and even what it was called: warg. The library had several copies of old tales and odd magics that had been known to the Starks in bygone eras, and the ability to project your consciousness into an animal, warging, had been well known at one point and, indeed, revered before the coming of the Seven. Yet that was only a part of it. A warg's bonded animal, and Fenris was certainly that, took on some of the aspects and personalities of the warg. In Fenris's case, this went even farther, giving the direwolf some of Ranma's abilities, which would make him into a very dangerous animal indeed in the future.

Despite all this, Ranma couldn't help his younger brother. Bran had not yet woken up, though his head wounds seemed to be healing. Catelyn, despite her own injuries (thankfully, her jaw hadn't been broken, but her face was still a mass of bruises) rarely left his side, though Rickon often joined her there.

Yet there was a bit of joy for the family despite Bran's continued convalescence. During his examination of her the

day after the attack, Maester Luwin announced that Catelyn was pregnant once more and even through the bruises on her face, those around her could tell she was radiant with joy at the prospect. Sansa and the others were all happy about the idea of having another sibling. Ned, however, was sad at the idea of missing the birth, but Robert had promised he would have time off when the moment came.

Ranma looked away from his mother, Sansa, and Arya gleefully speculating with about what gender the baby would be. When he did so, he noticed the Queen, who was staring at Catelyn. Just then, her eyes were not a pleasant sight, and Ranma wondered why.

Dacey and Jon had taken over watching Rickon outside the training area where Ranma had begun to put Arya through even more training. When Ranma left Dacey and Jon would continue Arya's training.

Seeing that Bran hadn't woken, Robert had made the decision to return to King's Landing, and Ned and Ranma would be with him. Four days after everything with Preston had happened, the King's party began to make preparations to leave, while more and more men began to arrive for the trip to the Wall.

Eventually a thousand men of House Stark and their vassals would head north, under the command of Ser Kyle Condon, who would bring a further eight hundred men of House Cerwyn with him. Cerwyn was the closest noble house to Winterfell (their castle was actually only half a day's ride away), and despite the fact that had no heir of an appropriate age to have joined the wolf-sworn, the relationship between Cerwyn and Stark had been close for centuries. Cley, the young son, was Brandon's age, much like Jojen Reed, and would be coming to Winterfell with Lady Jonelle, the only daughter of Lord Cerwyn. She would remain with Catelyn and provide another mothering figure to Rickon and Arya, with their own mother too preoccupied with Bran to watch them.

Others too were preparing for both trips.

OOOOOO

"So here you are, dear brother. What in the world has you so fascinated in this library? You're usually too busy studying practical anatomy to waste on actual book reading. After that incident a few days ago, I would think you would distance yourself from it." Jaime smirked staring down at his younger and far smaller brother, who was sitting in front of three open books and had a large pad of parchment in front of him covered with sketches he had apparently made himself.

Tyrion looked up at Jaime and laughed lightly, though his eyes were unwontedly serious. "Ah, I can always take up my favorite field of study whenever I wish, though at this point I am more the maester than the student. As for my attack, well, Ranma Stark put paid to my attacker and the reasons behind that attack are simple to see." He shrugged. "I merely was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Jaime saw something in his brother's expression, something that told him that Tyrion had his own ideas about why Preston had done what he did. Still Tyrion wasn't saying anything and Jaime decided to let sleeping lions lie. "So, what are you here searching for?"

"Purpose." Tyrion said, enigmatically. At Jaime's confused look, he smiled but went on more seriously than normal, baring more of his soul than he would to anyone else. "You know that I am not in line for Casterly Rock, no matter what all happens. I've always sort of followed you and Cersei around, trying to keep you out of trouble." Jaime laughed loudly, and Tyrion smirked. "And getting into trouble on my own, it must be admitted. Yet, I haven't ever really done anything with my life up to this point, nothing that would have people look at me and see beyond the Lannister name and see me as more than the Imp. I might be able to, if I go to the Wall."

Tyrion gestured at the papers in front of him, where he had sketched out hundreds of designs for various siege weapons, including one whose size and scale made Jaime's eyes widen. "The library here had a copy of the siege weapons the Wall has; all of them are old, most will probably break if they are actually used, and none of them are able to be aimed outside of a very small area. I'm good with designing, with fulcrum and levers. I can possibly update the Wall's weapons, so much that maybe, if the wildlings do attack, we can slaughter them so badly they will never attempt to attack the Wall ever again. And maybe that way, I can be known for something other than whoring or japes or being the Imp of the Lannisters."

Jaime frowned, but couldn't say anything to that, and at last sighed. "So I take it, you mean to continue on to the Wall as you wanted back in King's Landing?"

"I do." his brother replied firmly. "I'll be heading up with the men Lord Stark is sending from Winterfell in a few weeks." He smiled suddenly. "Of course, until then I'll be able to continue sampling the wares of the whore house here."



There's this one woman, my god the thing she can do with her tongue..."

The Kingslayer laughed as the conversation turned to a much more familiar topic. Yet somehow, Jaime knew that once they parted, it would be many years before Jaime and Tyrion saw one another again, if they ever did.

OOOOOOO

Lord Varys frowned for a moment before dismissing the maid who had just passed on an 'interesting', bit of information. She was one of only two agents he would be leaving here, his efforts to recruit local talent having failed miserably. The smallfolk and servants of Winterfell were almost nauseatingly loyal to House Stark, and not a one of them was willing to spy on them for him.

Moreover, he hadn't been able to recruit any of the whores in town or even find any urchins to recruit. There were very few urchins at all here in the North, where if you didn't have a home, a roof over your head, you quickly died from the weather. Added to this children were precious, and any foundling was quickly taken in by one family or another. The whores, however, had simply refused him flat out. The ones born in the North shared in the same belief in loyalty, and those from farther south knew that their fellows would rip them apart should they try to spy on House Stark for him.

That wasn't good, yet on the whole, it was possibly better than what the information the maid had just given him implied.

"The prince is hiring a footpad, to what end? And is it part and parcel with why the Queen was talking to Ser Preston before his aborted attempt to finish the task he started on the boy? Or was it someone else that was seen by the boy?" Varys muttered to himself, then shook it off. *Regardless*, he thought to himself, *things are shifting and I mean to be on the winning side, whatever happens.*

OOOOOOO

The night before the King's party (and additions) was set to leave Winterfell, Jon and Ranma sat in his room, sharing a skin of ale and a plate of roasted chicken instead of being down at the last feast. Both of them were rather feasted out, and Ranma, who had excused himself from his position as host as soon as he could, shook his head. "I don't envy you or the castellan the task of figuring out how much putting the King and his party up here cost us."

"I don't envy **you**, having to keep dealing with him. I had heard so many stories about Robert as a young man, what's become of him is rather sad to see." Jon replied then took a gulp from the ale skin, staring across their plates at his brother.

Ranma saw his look and shrugged. "Unless you see some way of convincing both our parents that I shouldn't go, I don't see a way I could get out of it. Both going south at all and the whole marriage thing." That still left a bad taste in his mouth, given all the problems he ran into in his previous life through arranged marriages. Part of him had thought to use that as an excuse to at least get their father on his side, but it would have been cowardly and probably not worked in any event.

"No, there's more to it than that. There's a... it's..." Jon faltered, trying to put his feelings about the King's party, all of the party into words. "There's something wrong, I can't describe it better. It's like there are undercurrents all the time, and we can't see them, but..."

"I know," Ranma replied. "I can feel it too at times, I just wish I knew where it was all coming from." Ranma had an idea it came from the pretty obvious discord between the King and the Queen, but was that all of it, or were there deeper currents here, deeper meanings or ambitions at play? Ranma just didn't have the ability to tell. "And then there's Varys the eunuch, who's playing his own game, at least I think so, and Joffrey being an utter little shit, and the fact the Kingsguard are packed with scumbags. Yeah, this trip will be a real barrel of fun. At least Tommen and Myrcella are nice, good kids. And I'll be able to see Meera and Jojen again on the way down. Maybe even make a side trip to see grandfather Tully, I've never met the man after all."

Jon simply stared at Ranma through narrow eyes and eventually Ranma sighed. "I know, don't worry I remember the vision all too well. Betrayal and human enemies were a part of it. I'll be on the lookout."

His brother nodded, and then asked, "What do you want me to do here with the whelming and backing up Arya? Any special suggestions or ideas?"

Ranma frowned but then nodded decisively. "Once we're gone, make certain that any of the men and women from

the King's party that have decided to stay are what they say they are. Varys the Spider was along for a reason and just because he serves the crown doesn't mean shit to us. In regards to the whelming, concentrate on making certain the logistics of providing for the Night Watch and the men sent north are as good as we can make them. Be ready for anything is the best I can tell you outside of that. My gut is telling me that the Wall will be hard pressed but the real blow may come from somewhere else, so be prepared to react somewhere else just in case. Still you'll have our friends to help there, and of course, Tyrion too."

"That wasn't as much advice as I could have wished. Still I actually like the Imp," Jon admitted. "He's an amusing fellow and extremely quick-witted even outside of his jokes. I wasn't prepared to like any Lannister, but for him I'll make an exception."

"I like him too, though I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw the king, that man's mind and tongue make him dangerous out of all proportion to his physical size. Still, he wants to prove himself, that will probably make him trustworthy as long as he can make an impact on the Wall's defense. But putting that aside... there's something else you and our other siblings should know, about our connection to our direwolves, something I found out recently. You know how I was trying to train you and the others to sense out your partner's feelings? Well it turns out..."

That conversation lasted well into the night, and while Jon was more than a little freaked out by the idea of being a warg, he was also intrigued by it. He vowed to try and see if he could figure out how to do it consciously, like Ranma was trying to do. He also vowed to keep up his exercises and training Arya, then, as it was late bid his brother a good evening.

Ranma had spent about five minutes clearing up the refuse of their late repast when he looked up smiling faintly but warmly at a very quiet knock on his door. He moved to it swiftly and opened it silently, bidding Dacey to enter.

She had to wait until everyone, even the King was ready to leave the party, causing enough confusion so that no one would be able to realize she had made her way up to the Stark's personal quarters. She had nearly been caught a few times, but had made it without anyone spotting her.

Ranma smiled and moved back to sit on the bed, looking at her as she moved around his quarters, smiling faintly at the small items and pictures, many of which she could tell were made by his siblings. The rest made by the smallfolk, either commissioned by his father or gifts. "Did you and Jon have a nice talk? You exited the feast so quickly it was rather amusing to see, though thankfully the King was too far into his cups to take offense."

"We did, I hope you and the others are able to help Jon through the trials ahead. He'll have my lady mother as an adviser of course, as well as Ser Rodrick and others, but he'll need you all to lean on. Just as I would've if I were staying."

Dacey smiled, but her mind was on other things. "And with you going south this is our last night together, possibly ever, if you come back married." Her breaches and shirt quickly fell to the floor, leaving her standing there naked facing him. Despite being a warrior Dacey had full, heavy breasts with dark nipples. Besides her breasts, there was little in the way of softness about her and her body was covered with the scars of battle, yet for all that she was still extremely attractive.

Ranma smiled, standing up and moving toward her, his eyes showing his desire clearly. "Then I think we should make the most of it..." After that his lips were on hers, and there was no more talking that night. No coherent talking anyway.

OOOOOO

The next day, Ranma sat on a horse next to his father and surrounded by fifty of their guardsmen, staring back down the road to Winterfell. Catelyn hadn't even left Bran's side to wish them farewell as she normally would if her son or husband left, but she had been tearful in her farewells in the infirmary, putting up with considerable pain in her face from the tears as she hugged them both farewell.

Ranma, his friends and siblings had wished each other farewell, though thankfully, only Rickon had cried and that when he learned that both Ranma and Ned would be leaving. Theon looked a little worried for Ranma going south, and worried too about staying, with Jon being given so much responsibility without Ranma there to provide a buffer between them. Arya was sad to see Ranma and her father leaving as well as worried about Bran but was consoled by Ranma whispering about a present for her hidden under his bed, that she should retrieve and under no circumstances show their mother. It was actually from both him and Jon, with Jon having paid for it, but Ranma having designed it, and Jon would be training her in the use of her present in the days to come.

Dacey and Ranma hadn't bothered with anything more than the handclasp between warriors in front of the others, much as he had with Roger and Jon. Both of them had known that their relationship would never go anywhere. Neither had been romantically interested in one another, it had been merely a physical thing, more an offshoot of their friendship and Dacey's interest in Ranma's physical abilities.

Roger would be leaving for his family's castle that afternoon with Osha going with him. With the decision to leave House Ryswell mostly out of the whelming being sent to the Wall, she didn't actually need to but the two of them had come to something of a... 'understanding'. With Roger being the second son of the family, he was somewhat freer to make such arrangements than his brother Rickard. Rickard was three years older than Roger, and while nowhere near the warrior Roger was, he was a consummate manager of both land and people and was well up to ruling their house's land after their father passed.

That had been over an hour ago, and now the King's party passed the two Stark men as they sat on their horses, unable to look away from their home. Sansa didn't have the same trouble, and was in the carriage with the queen and the two younger Baratheon children. Joffrey rode at his father's order, an attempt to, in Robert's words 'toughen the brat up'.

Fenris whined a little, a sound that made several of the horses around them shy away from the direwolf, whose head was now on the level of Ranma's waist standing on his own two feet.

Ned looked down at the wolf, smiling faintly. "I think your friend there doesn't like the fact you're riding rather than running with him."

"Oh, I have no doubt I'll be running at some point during this trip. Before or after I meet my prospective bride is the question. Or maybe after we get to court. I'm not really built for court intrigue or politics you know." Ranma smirked, looking over at his father while leaning down to pet Fenris's head.

"Ha, and you think I am? Besides lad, Margaery Tyrell is supposed to be a beautiful young girl."

"It wasn't her looks I was worried about." Ranma replied dryly, and father and son exchanged shrugs, neither of them knowing anything much about Margaery, though Ned knew her father somewhat. He just hoped the daughter was her own person rather than a female version of her father.

*Even a younger version of Lady Olenna would be better than that, Ned thought to himself. After all, Ranma will need to marry to someone who has a good grasp of politics. As much as I hate them, I know that politics and diplomacy are important.* "Well on that score, we'll just have to see. Hopefully things will work out."

There Ned was talking about more than the possible match between Ranma and Margaery. He once more vowed to talk to his son about his concerns in regards to the Lannisters if they ever found any evidence that the crazy message from Lysa had any basis in fact. He couldn't afford to have Ranma act precipitously, and he knew that Ranma would act if he had even a hint that the Lannisters were planning anything that could harm his family.

"NED!" Robert bellowed, laughing loudly from the front of the column. "Quit your wool gathering and get over here!"

Ranma and Ned looked at one another, then back at Winterfell, before turning away, wondering when they would return, and what the future held for them and their family.

End chapter

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Here is my second chapter of this story, which has continued my changing of canon, and expanded on some points raised in the first chapter. Expect the White Walkers to be major players, though they will keep their visible forces to a minimum, husbanding them until the coming of winter, which will be long and dark indeed.

I should warn you all that I might be kinder to Cersei than to Jaime, but the Lannisters are going to be slowly wiped out (just like in canon only the Starks don't join them). I have always felt a little sorry for Cersei, and in this work she won't be as blind to Joffrey's insanity as in the original, but will be unable, as in the original to truly control him. 'It must be hard for any woman to realize she birthed a monster.' And well, Joffrey will be Joffrey, 'nough said. Jaime on the other hand, I've never liked.

Her other children however are just that, children. Here you see them respond to an older brother figure that doesn't care about being seen as childish or anything like that, and who treats them kindly. Myrcella is too young to be in the pairing, but she will develop a crush on Ranma. In terms of age, btw I added two years to everyone's starting age.

The very idea of kids as young as thirteen being married off offends my modern sensibilities. I know that in terms of the story being set in the equivalent of the Middle Ages this is wrong, but I just can't write lemons for characters that are that young, sorry to all you purists. On the other hand, I might be open to a well-reasoned argument that can convince me to replace Arianne or Margaery with Myrcella in the far future. After all there is far larger difference between 10 and 16 than there is 18 and 24 (objectively speaking obviously). But like I said, it would have to be a **very** well- reasoned argument.

To recap, the North is more united and stronger in the main than in the original, but will have divided priorities which will force it to keep more of it's strength home whatever happens south. Stannis will have no need however to head to the Wall to aid the Night Watch. Jon will be the unofficial arm of the Starks for a time, and have his own issues and adventures (no learning ki for a few years at best, sorry) so that I can make him stand out in his own way rather than being in Ranma's shadow, and Tyrion won't be returning south anytime soon and will play a major role in the battles of the Wall, though he won't be seen for a chapter or two. Theon was left behind too, and whether he'll be making trouble or what have you is still up in the air. Very much waffling on what to do with him, but leaning towards **not** redeeming him. Again, if you have strong feelings either way, tell me.

Ranma has gone with his father south to King's landing to meet his fiancée. Oh, and no Arya coming south with them, I always felt her reason for going south was so stupid it isn't even a very good plot device no matter what adventures she had later on. So no Arya the assassin, which I have always despised, Arya the warrior fine, not Arya the assassin, the killer in the dark. Going forward she will start to be a 'perspective character' just like Tyrion and Jon, don't worry Arya lovers. She just needs a bit more seasoning. She and Jon and even Tyrion for a bit will become prespective characters in the next chapter.

No, Ranma won't be joining the Kingsguard. I have other plans in mind for him.

Now a quick question: Should I kill off Gregor Clegane quickly and publicly or wait to kill him of in battle? Either or, he is going to die by Ranma's hand.

Lemons? Yes/no? Honestly could go either way, though don't expect me to attempt to match the original style or the times.

## \*Chapter 3\*: Chapter 3

I don't own ASolaF or Ranma 1/2, too much pointless plot twists (and deaths) in one and too much Tsundere in the other.

I have changed a bit of the story going forward thanks to a discussion I had with N0mster: to wit, that Jon, a bastard, as official regent would be seen as both an act of insanity, weakness, or simple stupidity, plus bringing far too much attention down on Jon. I have gone back to correct this in the last chapter, and going forward in this one it will be made clear that he is in charge of the whelming and the logistics of said rather than all of Winterfell.

Thank you for all your reviews, as I stated, I have started to respond to them via PM like in A third Path which might be out this coming weekend, don't quote me. I especially liked the way everyone argued for or against Theon betraying Ranma, but refuse to say yea or nay there. Would also like to give thanks to my proofreader, the irreplaceable Jessolt, for making this chapter far better than it would have been otherwise.

Want to give a shout out to Kiwifan7 for his/her/don't know story *A different Path*, which is a Bleach story with the pairing Ichigo/Tia haribel/ female Kyoko Suigetsu – it is fantastic and OH MY GOD, why aren't there more stories with Tia as a main character? She is bloody fantastic! If anyone knows any **UNMARKED** stories with this pairing or with Toshiro/Haribel (still unmarked), I would be grateful. Also, are there any stories **off** this site that anyone would recommend in this pairing, a Harry Potter/crossover, specifically X-men with a Jean Grey or Emma Frost pairing, that IS NOT Megamatt09 stories? No offense, but those stories have been taken over by the harem. Alas, no other site I've been to is as easy to navigate as , so I don't know many.

Be warned this chapter is a little ... boring. Yeah, transport times from Winterfell to King's Landing is irritating, but necessary for the building of the characters and their interactions, though even there that only begins in this chapter. On the other hand there's Jon and a few others...

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### Chapter 3 Journeys and Darkening Days

The rest of that first day out from Winterfell was unutterably boring for Ranma. Robert was in an ebullient mood, telling war stories and holding court, as it were, and Ned had quickly indicated to Ranma that he had to stay close and listen. This was about as interesting to Ranma as watching trees grow. Ned, on the other hand, was in good spirits, sharing the tales of his youth with his boyhood companion.

For Ranma, the only amusing thing that first day was his partial attempts to warg with Fenris. It was only partial because he had to keep at least some of his attention on his actual body, ready to respond to a question during the conversation. It was well he had, because he was asked several times by Robert to tell him about hunts he had gone on with his friends.

The large direwolf pup loped at the side of Ranma's horse easily, with Lady by his side. Even as his body continued to sit on his horse, Ranma could sense his bonded direwolf's amusement at how slow and out of shape Lady was. Added to this, Ranma could somehow sense a bit of Lady's irritation with said amusement, through some kind of pack connection he supposed. This was much more interesting than listening to his father and Robert wax on about adventures from their time as wards in the Vale.

Inside the carriage the atmosphere had been rather stilted at first, but eventually Sansa became used to the Queen's presence and Cersei allowed herself to thaw enough to let the conversation move more naturally. After Sansa had finished the tale of how the children came to have such unusual pets, the Queen had mentioned how her father had once had a real lion in a cage at Casterly Rock when she was younger. Sansa then engaged Myrcella and the Queen about life in King's Landing.

Through this discussion, Cersei carefully plied the young girl with questions about her older brother, trying to sift for real information among the dross. Ranma was an enigma, and enigmas were dangerous, she learned that long ago. It turned out that Sansa believed everything she heard about him and, in fact, had seen Ranma perform some of the great feats of strength that local tales attributed to him.

Cersei knew to take those tales with a grain of salt but she remembered Jaime mentioning how Preston had died from having his chest caved in from what looked like a single kick, which also warped and crushed his steel chest plate. She decided, however, that the sister's perception wasn't the best way to figure Ranma out, too colored by a younger sibling's admiration. Cersei also knew that as a young noble lady, Sansa was not kept in the loop about

important events outside Winterfell, such being the purview of lords and men, a way of thinking that Cersei despised.

The Spider too, was interested in Ranma, although in Varys' case, it was his his decision-making as well as his general character. What made him tick interested Varys rather than his physical skills, which the master of whisperers felt he had a handle on, though he in no way actually did. Varys went about his investigation with all his normal cunning, first attempting to ply the northern men-at-arms with drink and tales of his own, then listening intently, guiding the discussion with the ease of long practice to the topic of Ranma.

Yet he was unable to find as much information as Cersei had gotten. The men of the North were not the most trusting and all of them knew better than to be loose lipped or even drink that much. Their lord might have been at the head of the column and them near the back at that moment, but that didn't mean they were going to take chances.

What he did get was informative but not really what he was after. He learned more about the rather egotistically named wolf-sworn, the bond between heirs of the Northern noble houses that was so close. The soldiers from Winterfell told him that Jon 'Twinblade' was held in high regard among their number, higher than any save Ranma. He learned that the men of Winterfell trusted Ranma and Jon implicitly; both as warriors and as leaders and that the impression he got back at Winterfell was correct: the bastard born was treated almost like part of the Stark family by practically everyone at Winterfell. This was astonishing to Varys, given the history of bastards attempting to grab power from their better born brothers in the past. Bastards were rightly derided for their origins throughout most of Westeros and Essos and feared for the same reason.

In the North, it was slightly different. Bastards were somewhat more accepted in the North, where life was so much harsher, so much colder than elsewhere, where children were precious. Yet even here, bastards were almost never as welcomed as Jon was by the family. It was even more bizarre to give a bastard the power to direct a whelming like the Stark lands were in the process of doing. Catelyn's reaction in particular was astonishing in the extreme, not just in not protesting his being there at all, but in her treatment of Jon Snow.

*For a woman to welcome her husband's bastard like that is unheard of save in cases where the woman is barren, but that is most certainly not the case with Catelyn. Indeed, the number of children she's had while still retaining her beauty is astonishing. It is easy to see why Littlefinger is so taken with her even to this day. Hmm... still, I'd best make certain that the boy and Lord Stark are not making a mistake there. Also, I need to figure out Ranma's place, in particular, in the great game. Lord Stark is predictable; his sense of honor makes him easy to plan for and, in some cases, manipulate. His son, on the other hand, surprised me several times while we were at Winterfell. The humiliation of Joffrey and the other three, the speed with which he responded to his brother's fall, his ease with the two younger brats, and his easygoing charisma; all of these I did not see coming before we arrived in Winterfell. There is nothing more dangerous in the game of thrones than a piece whose moves you cannot foresee, Varys thought.*

That night, they were forced to camp out beside the road. Thanks to extra horses and pack mules plus fewer stops, they were making better time than the King's party had made on the way north. They hoped to shave at least five weeks off the trip.

The Queen had her own tent with three of her maids, all women who she knew and trusted as much as she trusted any. Myrcella, Sansa, Septa Mordane, and young Tommen shared one somewhat larger tent right next to hers. Joffrey obviously could not share a tent with his betrothed, no matter either child's feelings on the matter, so he bunked with his Uncle Jaime, an arrangement made by his mother. The King, rather obviously, had a smaller tent all to himself, well away from his family. While the children, the Queen, and Joffrey turned in after dinner, Robert and Ned spent several more hours carousing. In actual fact, beyond his normal carousing, the King was trying to take his friend's mind off leaving his family (the majority anyway) with some success, though not as much as he hoped.

Ranma was all for parties but when two girls who he had thought were maids arrived to join the king he retreated, as did his father. Ned withdrew to a tent with Ser Jory Cassel rather than with the king. Ranma, on the other hand disappeared from the camp entirely, showing a surprising amount of stealth, leaving with no one knowing he was there.

Fenris met him eagerly at the edge of the guard's patrols around the camp. The two of them stared at one another for a moment, as Ranma sat in the lotus position and Fenris sat on his haunches in front of him. "Alright Fenris, we've been circling around this whole warg thing, let's see how far we can go..."

OOOOOO

Cersei never slept well when they were roughing it, although once she did get to sleep it took quite a bit to wake her. None of her children or Sansa snored and, even more fortuitously, her 'loving husband' never even tried to share a

tent with her, so it was peaceful at least.

The morning, however, did not get off to a peaceful start for the septa and the kids in the tent next to the Queen. A maid, assigned to wake the children that morning, entered the tent and almost immediately gasped. "EEEEK!"

That woke up Tommen and Myrcella both although Septa Mordane was only groggily aware of what was going on, not being of an age any longer where waking up was a simple process. Sansa woke up quickly then groaned aloud at the sight of what had caused the maid to gasp. "Fenris, Lady! You two shouldn't be in here! Bad dogs!"

Lying on either side of Sansa on the ground next to her cot were Lady and Fenris. Tommen woke up, rubbing at his eyes with both hands for a moment then looking at the large wolf lying there. Right inside the entrance, which was towards the foot of the cots, the maid stood with one hand on her chest as she gasped in air from the fright the direwolf had seemingly given her.

Sansa's Lady wasn't nearly as large as her litter mate, still looking like a largish puppy rather than being almost the size of a regular full grown wolf. She was on Sansa's other side from the maid, facing into the tent from the entrance flap, between her cot and that of Myrcella. The younger girl, too, had woken up at the maid's shout. Now she began to giggle, one hand rising toward the friendly and demure Lady to give her a scratch behind the ears. "Oh Sansa, Lady probably just missed you. Didn't you say she always slept on the floor in your room?" Lady's tail wagged, her head lolling to one side under the scratches, causing Myrcella to giggle even more.

"That might explain Lady's presence but not yours, Fenris." Sansa glared at the large direwolf, inwardly wondering how the wolf had grown so large so quickly. Ghost was larger than the others as well, but Fenris was going to be a giant if his growth didn't slow down soon. Sansa hadn't actually realized how large all of the direwolves were going to grow, but she was right: Fenris was going to be a giant even among his breed.

The direwolf looked at her with a surprising amount of intelligence in his eyes. With his tongue lolling out for a moment, he put his paws up on the cot and leaned in. Sansa gasped trying to back away but failing. "Don't you dare?!" Fenris ignored her and began to lick her face. "Gah, Fenris stop it! Get off you big lug!"

Tommen and his sister both laughed, then watched as Fenris backed away, huffing in such a way that it was clear he was laughing at her. "Grrr," Sansa growled a little, then got up. "I just know my brother is somehow behind this."

The maid had gotten over her initial moment of terror and now shook her head in amusement. "Don't worry about it milady, he seems friendly enough at least, not like the pets this one madman from the Summer Islands brought in once. Lizards, ugh."

Sansa looked interested but didn't ask any questions of the maid, who moved forward swiftly into the tent, picking out clothing for the three children while Septa Mordane finally finished waking up, now glaring at the two direwolves. She had never liked even Lady, feeling that a wild animal wasn't a suitable pet for a proper noble young lady. She had never gotten any headway in convincing even Sansa of that, however. The less said of Arya's reaction to that belief, the better.

With a final glare at the two wolves, Mordane pushed herself to her feet with a groan. When the three youngsters began to change, none of them saw Fenris turn away to stare at one of the tent walls.

Outside the tent, Cersei had finished the laborious process of waking up from the large, specially made, cot she used and, upon dressing for the day, exited the tent. As the cold of the morning hit her, she scowled. She **hated** being cold and, up here in the North, it was always cold. There was even some snow on the ground even in summer. She scowled further when she saw the Stark boy sitting in some odd pose in front of the children's tent. The sight of him simply sitting there, his eyes closed, taking away his most Tully-like feature, brought all Cersei's old hatred against the Starks roaring back to her mind. She moved forward to ask him what he was doing when his large pet rushed out of the tent, followed swiftly by the young Stark girl who proceeded to take him to task.

Ranma broke out of his warg state as Fenris ran up to him, idly cracking his neck, and, only then, began to tune in on Sansa's harangue, which sounded like she was trying to channel the septa, who stood behind her nodding her head with each word. "And it is utterly unacceptable to have your great wild beast in there with us! I know he isn't nearly as wild or dangerous as he looks, but still! And if you think you are going to simply loom in the background to try to scare the Prince off sitting outside our tent like this, you have another think coming!"

The eldest Stark sibling caught his sister's hand as she waved a finger in his face, kissing the back of her hand with a chuckle. *If only you knew dear sister.* Fenris's native abilities and the strength he seemed to have taken from their bond had made Fenris a **very** dangerous direwolf already, so much so he had taken out a medium sized bear last

night by himself while Ranma was warging with him. A part of Ranma could still feel his teeth ripping out the bear's tendons, then the taste of its meat as it slid down his throat.

He shook it off however and simply smiled at his sister. "Heh, that wasn't my intention Sansa, but now that you say it..." Sansa glowered at him, fighting back a smile at his affectionate gesture and Ranma laughed. "Forgive your brother, dear sister. I'm not really trying to scare Joffrey off." *Not really anyway, that just a pleasant bonus.* "I just wanted to sleep out under the stars for the evening, and decided to sleep here, that's all."

Sansa frowned at him but Ranma stood up, rubbing her head for a moment. "Now, may I escort you three to breakfast?" Ranma turned quickly, having sensed someone else moving near his side. He bowed gracefully, smirking at the ground before lifting back up, his face composed. "My apologies, Your Grace, I, of course, would have included you if I had noticed you were awake."

Cersei nodded coldly at the boy, though inside she had softened slightly at seeing the two siblings together. Her eyes drifted over to Jaime, who had, as usual, been guarding her own tent during the morning and who was smiling as well. She scowled a little inside, she didn't want to like the Starks or to see them as people, as individuals, rather than the hated enemy. She knew eventually that it would get in her way and she could not afford that. "Very well young man, let us be off."

Ranma's eyes too, had tracked to the Kingslayer for a moment. His eyes locked on Jaime for a moment, sizing the man up, but the moment passed quickly. The two Baratheon children claimed a hand each when Ranma held them out. Sansa followed, walking alongside Myrcella demurely, looking around for her prince.

However, Joffrey had woken up but had not approached them, having been intercepted by his father, who had ordered him to once more ride over the princeling's objections. He was in a very bad mood because of this. After all he was a prince! He wanted to spend time with **his** fiancée in the carriage but his father had nixed that idea. He also knew that Ranma was somewhat suspicious of him, for some reason, and didn't want to come anywhere near Ranma until he had gotten control of his temper.

Later, after a rather nice meal, the party began to prepare to move on. This was an arduous process given the number of soldiers and servants in the party but still relatively quick, given how organized the servants were. The majordomo for the royal family was a very organized man and had everything running smoothly, despite Robert and his normal group of drinking buddies/hanger's on getting in the way. The Queen, too, got in the way more often than not, though in her case it was her attempts in trying to control the party. Cersei tried to order everyone around, but she ended up simply messing up the order of the packing and the party's controlled chaos.

Robert needed help getting up onto his horse but despite his habitual hangover his eyes were still sharp enough to notice that Ranma wasn't mounting his own horse. "What's the matter lad? Surely you don't need any help to mount, as young and limber as you are."

Ranma rolled his eyes at the question, looking over at his father, who sighed and nodded. "Yes, Ranma you may run."

"Oh thank god." Ranma actually sagged a little with relief. "My legs were going to atrophy at the speed this lot travels!" With that, he reached out, pulling his blade and sheath from his saddle, and strapping it to his back.

"What's this?" Robert asked, looking over at his old friend. He also noticed out of the corner of his eye that the young Stark also had a short hafted warhammer strapped to his horse's saddle. He resolved to see if the boy could use it later in this trip.

"My son gets bored easily and has rather too much energy, which we let him work off by running alongside us." Ned said resignedly. *Of course this will also show my son's physical abilities. A show of force can sometimes dissuade your enemies before they act, and I am not so foolish as to assume that all in this party are allies. Most especially not after what happened to **Bran and Catelyn!***

Ned was, quite frankly, icily furious at the dual assault Ranma had interrupted. He was also grimly certain there was more going on than just his son seeing Greenfield's assignation with a married woman. He didn't honestly think that the Lannisters had anything to do with it. The Queen had too much to lose if she failed and turned the King against her, for no good reason that he could see. They had no real proof of a connection there, despite Lysa's nigh-on insane sounding letter. But Ned felt there might be something else going on, something he couldn't see, and he wasn't about to turn his back on any of the southerners.

"Hah, well, if you want to exhaust yourself, be my guest lad!" Robert laughed.



"You're joking, at this pace? I might just fall asleep anyway." Ranma shot back. Robert laughed again and set off, with the rest of the party starting off as well.

Four hours later, Ranma was still jogging along, easily moving in and out of the column. The reaction of the others in the party was split in vastly different ways along easily discernible lines. The Winterfell men took it in stride, calling him the Young Wolf and other nicknames, laughing and treating it like an everyday affair.

The men-at-arms from the south and the Kingsguard were astonished and amused in turn. Although as the hours wore on and Ranma showed no signs of tiring - or even sweating at all, that turned to more awe and shock. This amused Ranma, after all they were only traveling at a fast walk, which was a rather slow amble to him.

The knights in Lannister colors, however, scowled and muttered amongst themselves, remembering all too well the humiliation that Ranma had handed out on the training grounds to a few of their number. Even the Hound, a pragmatic, hard bitten warrior with no truck with honor or appearances, still seethed quietly from the memory.

The servants were also amused but they had gossiped with their fellows in Winterfell and simply took it in stride. Many of the womenfolk began to wonder about whether that endurance translated to other things, something that had become a favorite topic of speculation among the servants of Winterfell.

Jaime was amused, but not really interested, after all endurance wasn't everything in a fight. He would take speed of hand and eye over pure endurance any day. He resolved to watch the young Stark more closely, but that was all he thought, secure in his position as one of the best blades in the kingdom, a mindset he had fallen into shortly after the end of Robert's Rebellion.

His superior, in every sense of the word, Ser Barristan on the other hand was more observant. He saw the way Ranma ran, every step sure, every movement controlled. The older man simply added this to his growing list of observations. He wondered once more what it would take to get Ranma into the Kingsguard. It had become obvious over their stay in Winterfell that the youth had a lot to offer not just in terms of skill but also in his sense of honor and general demeanor.

Varys, too, watched this and wondered where the endurance came from but didn't care overmuch about it. He wasn't a soldier so didn't think of any of the implications of Ranma's endurance. After all, no matter how dangerous a warrior was, he could only deal with the physical dangers in front of him.

He moved through the column, moving toward where Ranma and his pet were running along easily along the side of the party. "So tell me, young Stark, are you sad to not get the chance to see if you could fill your father's shoes while he was gone?"

Ranma looked up at the fat eunuch on his horse and Varys started, realizing only now that he was close enough to see, that Ranma wasn't even breathing hard. "Not particularly, Varys, though I am more than a little worried that I won't be there to persecute the campaign I can see coming against the wildlings."

The eunuch smiled blandly, not responding to that. He had long come to the conclusion that the youth in front of him and his fellows at least believed the tale of something stirring beyond the Wall. If there was anything behind that, he had yet to discover it. "You must be jealous of your bastard half-brother then." Varys said, choosing his words with malice aforethought. "After all, he is back there getting experience in leading men that should rightfully be yours as he controls the whelming and even the supplies for the campaign. I hear that your father treats him as if he were almost your equal in any case." That part was a lie, there was no hint that Ned had gone that far, Jon was most certainly the follower of the two. But it was true that Jon was treated like part of the family.

Ranma cocked his head, looking up at the eunuch on his horse trying to understand what the man was getting at. "At this point without any chance of battle in the near future, there isn't anyone else I would trust to organize the logistics effort as much as I trust Jon. He's damn good with numbers, he's got a good grasp of geography, and our friends to help him, if he needs them."

"And you have no concerns or worries about him reaching beyond that scope of responsibilities?" the Master of Whispers asked. "There is no one so ambitious as those who stand close, but yet are not, nobility."

Ranma laughed. "Historically that might be the case, but I trust Jon, besides," he leaned forward a little lowering his voice low so that the soldiers around them couldn't hear. "He's absolutely terrified of my mom, we both are. She does this thing with her voice you know..."

Varys continued to listen, frowning thoughtfully internally at how he hadn't gotten much of an answer there. Yet the

boy's relationship to his bastard brother was only a small portion of what he wanted to know. This was the first time he had gotten the boy relatively alone, so with the ease of long practice he moved the conversation back to the topic of what might be going on beyond the Wall.

Yet for all the eunuch's subtlety and probing questions, he didn't learn anything new. There was no hint in Ranma's manner that the buildup of the northern forces was for anything but what Lord Stark and Ranma had said from the very beginning, an attempt to reinforce the Wall against wildling invasion. It almost caused Varys to believe them, but he couldn't quite get over his suspicions, coupling the call to arms across the North with the reinforcement of the moat.

*It wasn't as if Moat Cailin needed more reinforcement after all, the Spider thought to himself a little morosely. He was no general, but he had eyes and ears, and had heard Robert, Jaime, and Ser Barristan having a conversation about the Moat before they arrived there. Going by what those three said, I would rather take my chances against Harrenhal than attack the Moat. Harrenhal could probably hold out for far longer without reinforcement, yet that's the point, House Reed can reinforce the Moat no matter what an invading army could do. Harrenhal is designed to defend itself, Moat Cailin is built to slaughter any army attempting to attack the North. Why did they reinforce a position already so perilous rather than reinforce an actual weakness such as Deepwood Motte? There must be more to it than simply transport and money issues.*

The Master of Whispers was paid by the crown to be mistrustful and this whole thing made him suspicious. On the other hand, the fact that Lord Stark and his heir were coming south actually lessened his suspicion as did the upcoming marriage to the royal family. Still, it worried him. The North hadn't really changed for so long, neither its power structure nor its people, and now they were changing in many ways.

He turned his attention back to the boy and tried to steer the conversation to topics about the boy himself, trying to get a feel for him beyond the tales, stories, and secondhand information he had gained previously. He came away with the impression that the boy had very little in the way of political acumen but he had a certain guile and cunning. Certainly, the boy realized what the Spider was fishing for and began to respond by changing the subject, not giving away any real, concrete information, save for that he was physically skilled above and beyond the norm by a wide margin.

He didn't talk much about the battle against the Boltons when Varys asked. Of his own part in the battle against the wildling ambush, he gave a very brief account while waxing poetically about his friends. Ranma was so adroit at dodging Varys' questions, in fact, that the Spider didn't even realize that there were very large gaps in the tall tale of the battle or that anything supernatural had even occurred.

Ranma looked up after fielding a question about Smalljon's injuries to see in the distance that Castle Cerwyn was now visible over the trees in the distance. "Excuse me," he said politely bowing his head, "but I have to speak to my little sister."

With that, he turned to race back down the column, moving towards the middle of the column where the coach carrying the ladies was moving in stately majesty, or as Ranma saw it, sloth. Ranma shook his head, if they were going to go at this speed the entire way the Kings Landing, it would take them months to get there. *And I'll probably die from boredom about halfway*, Ranma thought sardonically. *I know armies are supposed to go slow but, as many of us as there are, we aren't an army.*

Ranma hadn't been very interested in, well, **anything** taught at school in his old world but he knew one thing hadn't changed between there and Westeros: the speed pre-industrial armies could move. A good, well organized, and provisioned cavalry unit this size with accompanying carts, which was what this cavalcade resembled, should be able to do sixty leagues a day. That was, of course, on a road like the Kingsroad for the carts, which here was an actual cobbled road with strips along the edge with soft ground for the horses' hooves, not the bare dirt path that it was from Winterfell up to the Wall.

He knew that speed was probably pushing things, but fifty leagues should have been doable, yet Ranma didn't think they were doing more than forty. Thus, a trip that would have taken him barely two hours had taken them two full days, traveling from before sunrise to just after sunset. He had been to House Cerwyn's seat several times so he knew that for a fact. The sun was going down now and they weren't quite there yet. So their speed wasn't bad but was in no way good for a group this size, a little under five-hundred people.

Ranma raced up to the side of the carriage, easily dodging around horses and carts. He ran next to the carriage for a moment, before reaching out to gently knock on the side of it.

One of the windows opened and the Queen looked out at him, one eyebrow raised in shock at seeing Ranma still on

his own two feet and running easily. Before she could speak however, Ranma said, "Sorry, Your Grace, but we're coming up to Castle Cerwyn and I believe that Sansa has a present for the lady of the castle. I just wanted to make sure that she had it out and ready."

The Queen kept her eyebrow raised, then regally nodded and turned back to the interior of the coach. Sansa had heard her brother and reached underneath her seat, pulling out a square wooden box about the Queen's arm's length on a side and a hand's width deep. She opened it, and inside was what looks like a very nicely made and well embroidered dress.

Cersei estimated its worth in a single glance. While there were no gold or jewels involved and despite it being made of wool and cotton instead of silk, the work on it was exquisite, far better than she herself could've done, even better than most of the professional seamstresses she used in King's Landing. It was done in tones of light brown and red with white stripes here and there. It looked both warm and beautiful. "Did you do that all by yourself?" she asked, letting her mask of regal distance fall for a moment.

Sansa looked down shyly, but nodded. "I spent most of the last two months working on it and the month before that working on the design and gathering the materials."

For a dress of that caliber and only a single person working on it that was actually very fast work. Cersei nodded in approval. "It looks magnificent." She said candidly, for once not having any ulterior motive in complementing the girl. She was interested, however, to see how the gift was taken and what it meant. The young Stark girl blushed under her praise. They entered into a discussion on styles and materials with Myrcella joining them. Tommen fought back a bored groan, staring down at the small book of fairy tales he had read so often since this trip began.

Outside the coach Ranma continued on, easily catching up to the head of the column. He bowed his head to the King before taking his place next to his father. On the other side of the King, the Prince sat on his horse, trying to look regal and failing, in Ranma's opinion.

But then again, he wasn't really the best judge of such things and he had yet to see anything to make his suspicions about the boy have some basis in fact. *I've heard a story once or twice from a few southern men-at-arms about Joffrey and some furry little demon, but they simply mentioned it once and then clammed up, as if it's a secret.* Of course Ranma was still laboring under the mental problems caused by the Cat Fist so he had made tracks as soon as the word 'cat' was mentioned. *I need something concrete to go with my feelings and the fact Fenris wishes to rip the boy's throat out every time he smells Joffrey if I want to convince Father to break off this stupid agreement between our families.*

"Still going strong, lad?" Robert laughed. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it! We've been going since morning, the sun's nearly down now, yet you're still going on! Where do you get your energy?"

"Hard training, Your Grace." Ranma replied loping along easily with Fenris by his side. He shrugged. "Besides, this whole group is moving about as slow as molasses to me."

Robert laughed. "You best get used to moving slow. Large bodies of men always move slow, even if they can live off the land."

He didn't notice how Ranma frowned at that phrase. He knew that the phrase 'living off the land' meant taking what you could from the people who worked it. He also knew that, despite what the king said, an army living off the land actually moved slower than an army that could carry its food with it or supply itself through other means, such as river barges or partisans. Indeed, he had taken the time to work with the maester about logistics in depth and knew that his father had approved of that greatly, given his own experiences during the rebellion. Ned could only too easily remember the gaunt faces of children and other smallfolk who went hungry while his army fed on their fare.

However, what bothered Ranma most about the practice wasn't just the fact it left so many innocent smallfolk hungry if you practiced it but the atrocities that were committed along the way. Destruction of property, murder, and rape were all part and parcel of what occurred when an army had to forage for its own food, even in allied territory. When it was in enemy territory, it became far worse. Ranma had passed through China and Korea many times, after all, and had heard many tales about what the Japanese army had done during their occupation.

Rape was far more accepted in medieval times, such as the era he was currently living in, than in his previous life. But Ranma had **not** fallen into thinking in the same way as most warriors here. He loathed that act with all his soul, not just as someone who had once changed gender when he was splashed with water, but as a warrior sworn to use his strength to protect those weaker than himself.

"So how fast do you think you could get to Kings Landing alone, boy?" Robert asked, bringing Ranma's mind back to the here and now.

Ranma scowled at being addressed as 'boy', but let it slide for now. He counted on his fingers for a moment, trying to remember distances and geography. "I could probably get there by myself in about three weeks, Your Grace. As it is, it'll probably take us at best three months to get back. I just hope we can go faster, is all."

Robert guffawed. "Trust me lad, if you think the journey's boring, it's nothing compared to the destination. Too much damn talking, not enough drinking, or hunting in Kings Landing. Though, the variety of prey available to another kind of hunt is greater there than on the road!" Robert laughed again.

Ranma bit his lip to keep from saying what he wanted to say and looked over at his father, who sighed with a shrug. Ned, unfortunately, was far too used to Robert's personality quirks and hungers, so took it in stride rather than condemn him. That didn't mean he was going to watch however and had made himself scarce the moment the camp followers began to move towards Robert the evening before.

About two hours after the sun went down, they were finally in front of castle Cerwyn. The castle's gates were opened and the King and his party were greeted warmly, if formally, by the Lord of the Castle, Medger, his daughter, and grandson. His son-in-law was a Flint of Widow's Watch and was away visiting his family.

As soon as the formal part of the greetings was done, the Lord of House Cerwyn turned from the King, reaching forward clasp his Lord's arm. "Ned!" Medger Cerwyn was a slightly older man, four years older than Ned, and shorter with slimmer shoulders. Despite this, he wielded the axe that was a part of his family's symbol.

House Cerwyn and House Stark were so close together geographically both houses knew their friendship had to be strong and every Lord had made it a point to keep it that way. Thankfully their interests lay in different areas and their lands moved away from their castles in different directions. House Cerwyn was more interested in woodcraft, lumber, and moving into the wolfswood to the west. The majority of their holdings lay south and southwest of their castle while House Stark's land lay north and east of Winterfell. The houses did a brisk trade, which had been showing a marked profit from both houses for centuries. The profit had improved even more lately due to suggestions from Lady Catelyn and Ranma.

Ranma had come up with a few ideas of how to transport goods and a way to use water to power saws that House Cerwyn had grabbed with both hands since it had a tributary of the White Knife River only about an hour away from its castle. They used it to send lumber down to White Harbor, the seat of House Manderly and only real city in the North. House Manderly had built over a dozen new ships with the extra lumber, a fleet they added to their trade fleet as patrol ships and trade caravels.

"Lad." Medger reached out to grasp Ranma's shoulders, shaking him slightly. "You're looking fit, as always." He laughed, looking over with a wink at his daughter, Jonelle. "If only you were a few years younger, my dear, all this business about you going south for your bride wouldn't have ever come up, Ranma!"

Ranma blushed slightly but Jonelle came forward, smacking her father on the shoulder. "Enough of that." she said mildly. Jonelle was a comely woman, very much in the mold of a proper lady, with a gentleness about her that called to Ranma, speaking to him of memories of Kasumi. Thankfully, she was also married and happily so. Indeed, she was halfway through her third pregnancy. She had lost her oldest son as a baby to a wasting disease but her second son, Cley, was hale and hearty. Cley was of an age with Bran, and he stood next to his mother smiling widely at Ranma as he came forward to exchange greetings with him and Ned.

When Sansa and the Queen came out of the carriage, all of the lord's people bowed to them, somewhat more deeply than they had for the King. But it was very obvious to the Queen that their admiration and respect was charged with more than a little bit of affection for the Stark girl.

Sansa moved forward, exchanging welcoming kisses on the cheek with the lady of the house, nodding with a smile at Cley, who she had met several times. After greeting the lord of the house, she reached behind her to Jeyne Poole, her best friend/handmaiden, who was holding the box with her gift for Jonelle in it. "A, A gift Lady Jonelle, to celebrate the upcoming birth of your child."

The Lord laughed, looking at the dress his daughter held up, shaking his head in wonder. "I'll never get over how good you are with the needle, little lass."

One of his men, a heavily scarred man, yet, with a kindly smile on his face, laughed quietly. "A scarf from the lady is a treasure worth fighting for, but what should be said about a whole dress?"

Sansa blushed a little at that, even more so when all the men-at-arms from Winterfell and Cerwyn as well as the servants of both genders murmured agreement. It had been an idea of Ranma's to give Sansa something to actually do with her skills, and she had given her scarves and other works to many people as gifts and as rewards for outstanding deeds. These deeds were not just for acts of valor in battle, however, they were given to people of all walks in life for performing above and beyond, and had spread well beyond Winterfell. The men of the North disdained frippery and softness, yet Sansa's work was not only beautiful but practical, making them dearly coveted and her much beloved.

Needless to say, the Queen saw all this. There was honest affection there, both in the eyes of the men at arms and the Lords as well as the smallfolk. She had seen it in Winterfell, of course, that all the Starks were well loved by their servants and the smallfolk in the town about the Castle, but she hadn't thought it had extended elsewhere, believing that tale mere exaggeration.

Now, Cersei moved towards her son, leaning in slightly to murmur in his ear. "You see? The girl is not just pretty, the North seems to love her. Marry her, and the North will love you as well. And look at the smallfolk." She nodded her head towards the servants slightly. "If she can create the connection she seems to share with the smallfolk here elsewhere, then the common people will come to love you far more than they do your father." She had to work to keep the sneer out of her voice when she said that last word. After all it wasn't technically true, and, oh, how she **loathed** Robert.

Cersei had married the man with hope that the match would eventually be, if not love, then at least affection. She had even felt that, maybe if it did, she would stop sleeping with her brother, who she had loved since they had experimented with one another in their youth. She had even gone so far as to orchestrate Jaime's rise to the Kingsguard, so he would never marry and be available for her. But that dream of a true marriage ended swiftly. It ended on their very wedding night, when Robert called her Lyanna as he fucked her. It curdled further when he broke their vows within a week, and she welcomed her brother back eagerly into her bed in revenge.

That evening, while the others caroused and feasted with the King, Ranma and Eddard sat talking with Medger at his table, going over what Ranma had passed on. Of course, there was no chance of House Cerwyn not sending its troops North with those from Winterfell, as close as they were that just made sense. Medger was sending his right hand man, the landed knight Kyle Condon with them as their commander, though of course, overall command of the Wall's defenses would remain with commander Mormont.

Yet, it surprised Varys, who was listening in, when Medger didn't raise any objection to Jon commanding the logistics aspect. Medger seemed to catch his expression and shrugged, laughing slightly. "The Twinblade is well known to us and he's acted as Ned's voice several times. Not as often as this one," he clapped Ranma on the shoulder, "but enough times for us to be used to listening to him. Regardless of Jon's heritage, we trust him." That last was directed at Ned and Ranma, who both nodded.

The Spider frowned, then shrugged and decided to move on from that line of thought. It was obvious that the Northerners felt they had reason to trust the baseborn Jon. Whether or not they were right to do so was something that they would discover in due course.

Ranma wasn't concerned about that at all, of course. Why would he be concerned about what his brother would do, the person who he trusted with most of his secrets. Hell, almost all of his secrets save for the nature of his past life. No, what Ranma was worried about was whether or not Jon and Theon would get along or if Jon would simply kill the Iron Born if he mouthed off once too often. He'd thought of bringing Theon with him, but when he broached the subject with his father and the King, Robert had shot it down. The King didn't want one of 'those pirate bastards' anywhere near him for any long stretch of time.

He'd also brought up the notion of taking Dacey along, with the idea of leaving her with Sansa as a female guard, but his mother had shot that one down, staring at him with one eyebrow raised in such a way that Ranma decided not to bring it up again. It was obvious that Catelyn at least knew there was something going on between Dacey and her son, even if she had no proof. Bringing her along was in no way in keeping with the reason for Ranma's journey south.

House Cerwyn supplied the group with several more wagons, as well as drovers and teams of horses to pull them, greatly aiding their speed heading south to King's Landing. They would be turning back when they came out of the Neck, since here in the North, carts and the animals to pull them were important commodities.

The next morning the King's party set out quickly, giving their farewells and moving on as the sun was rising. Robert wasn't actually in that much of a hurry but Ned wanted to get to King's Landing as fast as he could, the better to begin his duties and look into Jon Arryn's death.

It was a cold morning of course, it always was in the North, but Ranma didn't seem to feel it, standing next to his horse, which again had his weapons on it. He looked up at the horse thoughtfully, then shook his head. He reached out and patted Fenris on the head, shaking his head again. *I might have to ride when we get south of the Neck, I doubt southerners would take me seriously if I simply ran along as I'm wont to do, but before that I'm going to make do with my own two feet, thank you so much.*

Robert looked over at him, laughing again as he noticed that Ranma was making no move to get into the saddle. He grunted a little as he himself slipped one leg over his mounds back. He nodded his head at the warhammer that hung from Ranma's saddle. "Is that just for show, boy, or do you use that as well as you supposedly can your sword?"

Ranma grimaced yet again at the 'boy' part in that sentence. Genma had called him that far too often, and there was too much of Robert that reminded him of the fat panda as it was.

Quickly he reached forward, pulling the warhammer loose from its holster and swinging it around. He moved to the side, away from the horses around him, and then he began to **move**. There was nothing in his motion that told of the weapons weight; there was nothing that showed the normal 'smash and bash' style most men who wielded warhammers or maces used. He almost danced as he wielded it, up, down, around, under, over, the warhammer making the air whistle as it moved through intricate shapes around him. Then Ranma stopped easily with the warhammer outstretched, his arm not even shaking under the strain of holding it there, before lifting it straight up then laying it on one of his shoulders.

He then handed it headfirst to Robert, who took it right behind the head, grunting a little under the weight in surprise. "Yes," Ranma said blandly, "I think I can."

Robert lifted the hammer and looked at it, laughing quietly, and then handed it back. "Hah, interesting display, lad, but there's more to the warhammer than being able to make pretty patterns in the air. Let me tell you, I..."

To the side of this, Cersei had watched, her eyes slowly going wider at the display. Jaime, at her side as always, smiled a little caustically. He had always felt that the warhammer was a weapon for those who couldn't grasp the subtleties of a blade but Ranma had made that thing sing, which gave his thoughts the lie there.

He moved forward, clapping Ranma on the shoulder, leaning in slightly so as to whisper, and not interrupt Robert's tale. "Once we stop for the evening, we might want to test those skills of yours. It might be interesting to have a new training partner."

Ranma looked over at Jaime, one eyebrow raised. Jaime somehow felt that the boy was taking his measure, but simply smirked roguishly back. Ranma eventually nodded. "That might be an interesting spar, yes."

He moved off quickly, however, to help the children into the carriage, grandly bowing in such a way that Sansa began to giggle along with Myrcella while Tommen grinned. Joffrey, who was nearby, once again on horseback, bit back a sneer at the sight. Instead he smiled, moving over as if to listen to his father's story, not saying anything but making it seem by his manner as if he felt Ranma and his antics were childish. Behind him loomed the ever present shadow of the Hound, who glared at Ranma, although inwardly he was hoping he would never have to face the boy in a real fight.

Soon the group set off, with Ranma once more easily loping along like the direwolf of House Stark's banner, waving farewell to House Cerwyn.

The cheers for the King and his family were intermingled with a few cheers of 'Young Wolf', and 'House Stark'.

Varys once more resolved to find out what levers the young boy had. It was obvious he was a symbol for the North and, if it spread elsewhere, he would be a powerful tool in the game of thrones.

Cersei heard all this from inside her carriage and frowned slightly. Legends could start anywhere and Ranma's physical skills almost screamed that he was indeed capable of becoming a legend. It remained to be seen what kind, but there was much she could do with such a legend. *If I can somehow suborn him... It might be a long shot given he's a Stark, however, it would be well worth it. But first I need to learn why Barristan is so interested in him. If it's for the reason I think, it could represent both a major opportunity and a major danger.*

The party continued on their way for about three hours, going somewhat faster thanks to the added carts and horses along with some rearrangements, but not fast enough to keep Ranma from getting bored with the whole affair. *Hmm, if I'm bored, Tommy must be catatonic in there with only the girls and, ugh, Mordane the Uptight, for company. Oh, and let's not forget one of the girls is Jeyne the gossip queen.* To cut down the number of carriages, which couldn't

travel as fast as carts, they had gotten rid of one of the two carriages. Jeyne and Septa Mordane had moved in with the Queen and the youngsters while the other servants had moved to the new carts that House Cerwyn had supplied.

With that thought, Ranma moved backwards through the column, heading towards the carriage at its center. Once again he knocked on the Queen's carriage. The Queen looked out at him and Ranma grinned up at her. "I'm here to rescue your son."

"What?" Cersei asked coldly.

"Well," Ranma replied with a shrug, "he's the only guy in their after all, and I know my sister and her friend. He must be getting bored."

The Queen glared at him, not liking the idea of her son getting any more involved with Ranma, yet at the same time unwilling to shoot it down entirely, seeing it as a way to bring Ranma closer to her sphere of influence. Still, Cersei shook her head. "Under no circumstances am I going to let my son out of my sight."

"In that case, your grace," Ranma said bowing even as he continued to run along, "I'll stay right here beside the carriage."

Cersei looked over at her son, who had been trying and failing to look anything but bored. The girls had dominated the discussion from the beginning, which the Queen had rather enjoyed, especially since she had convinced Sansa to make a dress for her. The young girl had a true talent for it, and she was wondering what the youngster would do with southern styles. Cersei was slowly convincing the girl that she was her friend, to confide in her, and to listen to her while also gently steering the girl's infatuation with her eldest son. Whatever else she may be, Sansa was not a political animal nor was there much guile in her nature. Cersei fanned her infatuation with Joffrey easily.

Yet, Tommen was but a boy of seven, and he had read and reread the books they had brought with them. He was staring at his mother now hopefully. Eventually she sighed. "Very well, but will you be all right carrying him along while running?" Cersei rather liked the idea of a Stark being a beast of burden to one of her sons. Such was the way it should be, of course.

The door to the carriage opened while the carriage and the rest of the King's company continued to move. Tommen looked a little leery for a moment but Ranma quickly reached his hands forward grasping the youngster under both arms and lifting him easily while still maintaining his running speed and set Tommen on his horse, which he had been pulling along.

With that he swung up easily into the saddle, shaking his head down at Fenris. The direwolf was a little irritated that his bond-mate had once again begun to ride on one of those large edible creatures but Fenris put up with it for now.

"Now, Tommy, would you like to hear a story as we go along?" Tommy nodded eagerly. Ranma smiled then began this story as he did most of them. "In a land far away there lived a pigtailed warrior, whose father was not the most honorable sort..."

OOOOOOO

The moment that Ranma and the others were out of sight, Arya had turned and raced back into Winterfell, heading straight through the keep an up to Ranma's room to find the present he had left her. Jon had seen this and nodded over to Dacey. "We'll be right down, get ready to head out now. I doubt Arya's going to want to wait a single moment." Dacey nodded, sipping at a large steaming tankard of something, possibly some kind of tea, while Jon looked over at Theon. "Are you going to join in?"

Theon shook his head. "I volunteered to go out with the hunting parties to restock our larders." He laughed. "The King might've been fun, but he damn near ate us out of house and home."

Jon groaned aloud. "I know that well enough, I'll have to work with the seneschal and Lady Catelyn most of today to add up the cost of it all."

"Better you than me." The Iron Born said rather cheerfully, enjoying Jon's discomfiture.

To one side, Roger and Osha were on a pair of horses, both of them heavily armed. There had been some mutters about that, allowing a wildling spear-wife to go around armed, but the connection between the two of them was as visible as it was surprising. Osha sometimes muttered about it being against the wildling way for Roger not to have to steal her away but it was obviously a front. She seemed to greatly enjoy being 'romanced' by the younger man rather than ravished.

Jon smiled at the two of them. "So you're leaving now then? I would love to be a fly on the wall when you introduce your new bride to your lord father."

The wildling woman scoffed, muttering about silly soft squatter's ways, but she did so with a smile on her hard, experienced face. For whatever reason, the older woman was quite taken with Roger, possibly his youth and enthusiasm appealed to her, or possibly it was the fact he took the time to please her rather than take his own pleasure. Whatever the case, they were together, and still heading further south, which suited Osha just fine.

Roger laughed. "Ah, but as a second son, I can marry whoever I wish, my father will just have to lump it." He reached down to clasp hands with Jon. "I'll tell my father the tale of what we faced and, also, that our house isn't a part of the whelming. Regardless, if we can convince him, we'll be calling up our men-at-arms and preparing, just in case we are called upon."

House Ryswell was the noble house of the Rills, the somewhat verdant area between the barrowlands and the Stony Shore and they were looked to for protection from both those areas with the decline of House Dustin. With no issue or chosen heir, the future of Dustin had been in flux for years and Ryswell had grown in strength to fill the vacuum, since Lady Barbrey, the widow of House Dustin, was Lord Rodrick Ryswell's daughter.

Ryswell was known for superb light cavalry and decent heavy cavalry, matched in the North only by Houses Manderly and Dustin, the last of which could no longer field the numbers it once could. As such, even if called, they would be of little use on the Wall in the initial stages of what both Jon and Roger felt was going to be an extensive campaign.

"That's good to hear, but keep them home for now, I pray you." He paused, thinking how to put his feelings into words. "There is much opportunity in turbulent times. Ranma and I both got the impression that there might be... something going on down south, although we have no idea what. Keep them at home and ready, just in case, but don't be stuck on the idea of sending your forces to the Wall."

Roger blinked at that, not having spent much time in the presence of the southerners, outside of the nightly feasts. Still, he nodded. "I'll trust your judgment on that, but I don't think my father will be moved by vague warnings and feelings." With a final farewell Roger and his bride-to-be turned and rode out of Winterfell, making first for the town of Torrhen's Square, and then home to House Ryswell's seat.

Jon watched them go for a moment then walked away, entering the central keep. He paused a moment on his way after Arya to check in with Lady Stark in her vigil in the infirmary. Rather than the one guard or two that had been assigned there during the King's stay, they were four men at arms outside the doorway now. This might've been something like locking the door after the horses had all fled but no one was taking any chances with Bran's life or the life of the Lady and her unborn child.

Catelyn motioned him closer, her jaw was still sore so she was barely able to open it in order to speak and even that movement bothered the bruises she had taken to her face. "When you start your work with the seneschal, bring the work here and we will go over it together."

Jon bowed his head. "I'll do so right away." he said correctly interpreting her look as a 'this is something important' look. "I have one small task to do first however."

Nor was the King's stay the only drain on Winterfell's normal resources. They were also home, at the moment, to nearly two-thousand men-at-arms called up from around the family's lands and more from House Cerwyn would be arriving with Ser Kyle and Lady Jonelle tomorrow.

Rickon was looking forward to seeing Cley again, as well as seeing the Lady, understanding that she would be taking care of them for a while as his mother healed from all the bruises on her face. The sight of that had made the youngest stark **very** angry, which translated into Shaggydog being very angry, snapping at all and sundry, causing the other wolves to sit on him hard, literally, in Fenris's case when he was around.

With a final nod, Jon sped off, wanting to grab Arya before she could race off with her gift.

O O O O O O O

Arya had quickly made her way to Ranma's room, ducking underneath the bed, eagerly looking around, almost immediately finding what she sought. She pulled out a long slim wooden box, a little shorter than a grown man's arm. She almost bounced excitedly in her position on the floor as she pulled it out, opening the top quickly.

She gasped aloud at the sight of what lay beneath. Within was a sword, the style of which she had never seen before.



The blade was very long and flexible looking, curved just slightly, and had a wickedly sharp looking edge and point. The hilt was large enough for both of Arya's hands at the moment, but she knew she would eventually be able to wield it in one. She pulled it out reverently, noting the lines on it and the heft, staring down at the barely perceptible swirls of color in the metal of the blade.

The sword was designed from Ranma's memory of the kodachi style of katana from his old life. The name had meant nothing to anyone here and he hadn't used it, of course, but even so the thought of it had often brought a wry smile to Ranma's face, remembering the crazy martial arts gymnast who had dogged his steps so often.

Arya had been doing strength training with Ranma for nearly as long as she could walk and she was **much** stronger than she looked, almost as strong as a trained man-at-arms. She whistled, whipping the sword around ecstatically, first with both hands and then with one, getting a sense for it, loving how it felt in her hands. "I name you Fang!" she shouted excitedly, looking at it.

"Ranma designed it." Jon said from the doorway, leaning against it with his arms crossed smiling despite his rather stern demeanor at the moment. "I paid for it, Ranma designed it, and we both chipped in to purchase the various metals for it."

It cost both boys a lot actually, simply because Ranma had been very finicky on what he wanted and how he wanted it done. Ranma didn't know very much about metallurgy or what was necessary for blade, but he had read at one point that the Japanese used a different mixture to create their blades than anyone else did and some of the mixture had stayed with him. All three of them, the two of them and the blacksmith, worked together to create the blade in secret over the last few months, getting it ready for Arya's birthday.

It had taken them that long to get it right, the heat needed, the constant folding and hardening, the fact they had to experiment to get the mix of different metals right, all of it had taken a lot of time. It had been a very interesting experience for the blacksmith and he had taken to experimenting with different mixes of metals to see if he could create broadswords with the same basic premise, although the folding, tempering, and annealing aspects took far too long to make it viable for most weapons. Still, the final result was almost exactly what Ranma had envisioned and Jon had already commissioned him to make two other blades of like size for him.

Jon strode forward quickly as Arya began to swing the blade again, grabbing her hand where it held the blade, his face stern. "It's not a toy. It isn't something you're going to be allowed to whip out and threaten someone with, okay? This is a weapon, a tool for killing other people. So long as you treat it with the respect that task demands, you will be allowed to keep it. But if you do not, if you play with it, brag about it, or otherwise misuse your 'Fang', I will take it from you."

Arya looked a little rebellious, but eventually nodded. Ranma always went on about the duty of the Lord to his people as had their father, and this was simply an extension of that. "So will you be training me?"

"Eventually yes," Jon nodded in reply. "Unfortunately, today I have to do the paperwork for the King's visit." He scowled a little. "No wonder he was so fat, all those damn feasts cost us more than we use in a year in a matter of days. Dacey, however, is going to take you out to the woods on a hunting trip, just the two of you. That shouldn't arouse anyone's suspicions. She'll start training you in this blade this morning."

Arya nodded, that made sense. Dacey had become her confidant in many ways. She was a warrior woman from a warrior clan who knew that she was unusual, yet refused to be cowed, something Arya respected a lot. *Besides, this would give me a chance to grill her again about her relationship with my big brother.* She smirked a little at that, she wasn't one for gossip but she was dying to know the answer to that one. Although why everyone was so concerned about it, she didn't know. All that mushy love stuff sort of went right over her head, really. "Do you know how many days it will take for a new septa to arrive?"

When she had heard Mordane was going south with those sent with the Starks to set up their household down in King's Landing, Arya had danced a little jig in the privacy of her room. In public, she had tried to keep her elation inside but had failed miserably to anyone who knew her. Luckily, her mother was so busy with Bran that she hadn't even noticed that the septa had left.

"We're not going to bring in another teacher for the time being. Lady Jonelle will moving here in a few days. She'll be arriving with their portion of the force that's going North and will stay here while Ser Kyle takes command of the men we're sending to the Wall. Lady Jonelle will take over your womanly studies."

Arya's eyes glittered at the idea of what was going to be happening soon further north and a part of her desired to go with the army. Jon read her mind however and shook his head sharply. "No! Not only no, but no chance in hell! In

point of fact I'm going to check and make damn certain that you are in your room or wherever you are needed to be when the troops leave. The Night's Watch is not made up of honorable, decent people, Arya. Most of them are thieves, cut purses, bandits, and rapists. Remember the song 'Brave Danny Flint! You're strong, and I'm not saying you can't defend yourself against one person or maybe even two, but what about ten or twenty? Even Dacey had some issues while we were there and her great uncle is the commander of the Nights Watch."

Indeed, Dacey had been accosted several times and, once or twice during their brief stay on the wall, had been cornered by a group of the Night's Watch but her skill with the sword was such that she had been able to fend off the few forceful advances. The fact that her great uncle was the commander had stayed most of them.

Arya looked rebellious but under Jon's stern glare nodded. "Fine," she muttered, "should I go and meet Dacey now?"

"First, figure out a way to hide your sword." Jon said with a laugh. "And by all the gods old and new, please keep it a secret from your mother!"

Arya nodded fervor in agreement that and looked around, wondering if she should grab one of Ranma's cloaks and use it. Jon patted her on the head and walked out, still chuckling.

Moments later, Arya left as well, heading out to meet up with Dacey, who had already readied two horses and was standing giving some orders to Hodor, patting the simple giant on his shoulder. "The horses we rode here from Hornwood look good. One or two of them need their hooves reshod, however, so if you could take them over at some point to the blacksmith and have that done?"

Hodor smiled brightly. "Hodor."

"Good." Dacey smiled, patting his shoulder again and turning to the youngest Stark girl. "I hear you have a new toy you wish to try out? Why don't you grab your bow and arrows, that'll add to the deception. Is that it?" She nodded her head at the bundle of what looked like one of Ranma's cloaks that the girl was carrying.

"Well," Arya responded in a loud voice, sounding a little defensive, "I like it, besides its cold out, and he's not here to object, so..."

Dacey smiled appreciatively at the girls attempt to cover the reality of what she was carrying and simply reached over. Arya seemed a little reluctant to pass her sword along, but eventually did so then ran off to grab her bow and quiver. When she came back Dacey raised an eyebrow in query. "Do you need help getting up onto the horse?"

Arya glared at her, grabbed the saddle and jumped up, swinging herself upwards even further, and into the saddle. She threw her hair back, glaring at the older woman. Dacey laughed, then flicked her stirrups, urging the horse to begin moving.

OOOOOOO

"Ah, there you are, Quartermaster Bastard!"

Jon turned and stared at the man who had just shouted that title, Tyrion, the Lannister Imp. Where in the mouth of anyone else the word bastard would've simply been a curse, coming from Tyrion it was both a curse and a strange sign of respect, for some reason. There were stories about how the Imp had been treated by his father, who apparently blamed him for the death of his mother. It seemed to have given him a more neutral stance towards those of baseborn birth.

Moreover, Tyrion had a sense of humor that was starkly at odds with the contemptuous, cold disdain the rest of the Southerners often times showed those of the North when the King wasn't around and they had to be on their best behavior. Most of his jokes were bawdy in nature, which is probably why Theon got along with him much more than Jon did, but even so Tyrion was a surprisingly likable sharp tongued devil. "Where did you get the rank from, and if I am Quartermaster Bastard, does that make you General Imp?"

"Not a rank I would be qualified to, unless of course it was an army of whores. General Whore-master that's me!" Tyrion chuckled then stood in front of Jon, his face becoming serious. "When are we leaving for the Wall?"

Jon scowled. "I won't be going to the Wall, unfortunately, but Ser Condon will be arriving in a few days, after that you all should be leaving almost immediately." John felt he had a right to be angry, he wanted to go to the wall, but he had to stay here thanks to his promise to look after the family. He honestly didn't think that there would be any danger here in Winterfell for them, but a promise was a promise. "I will say you should be prepared to make yourself useful both on the march and on the Wall. Here in the North we don't have much truck with people who cannot do their

share."

Tyrion nodded, still far more serious than was his wont. "Oh, don't worry about that, I've thought up quite a few little toys I think the wildlings will positively **love** to play with." One of Jon's eyebrows rose in surprise, and Tyrion took that to mean he should explain. "You see, I've thought up a few new designs for..."

OOOOOOO

After his discussion with the Imp concluded, Jon spent the rest of the day with Lady Catelyn in the infirmary going over the paperwork and bills from the King's visit. The larder was badly depleted, even though the King had loved to go out and hunt for the evening meals, and the wine cellar was barely a quarter of the size it had been beforehand. This included most of the expensive wines but luckily none of Winterfell's residents were big wine drinkers. The ale was more of a loss, but one they could make good, over time.

That was easy enough, the wages needed for the servants and smallfolk that they had brought in to help out the normal castle's servants was another matter, one that the Lady Catelyn had several very **firm** views upon in many cases, pointing out many that should have their pay docked for various infringements, and passing on the tale of two thieves that had been caught by the majordomo.

When called in about those, the man replied firmly that the Lady Catelyn had remembered it correctly and also suggested a few others be added to the castle's full-time staff. A few were given full-time jobs, but Jon noted down their names as people that he might wish to have investigated in the future on the sly. He well remembered Ranma's injunction to search out any possible spies and get rid of them.

The job was interminable but thankfully it was finished by the time the sun was going down and Jon was able to greet the returning hunting parties, smiling faintly at seeing the amount of game they had brought in. Rickon stood next to his older brother, absentmindedly leaning on Shaggydog's side, the puppy was growing far faster than Rickon, which the boy thought rather unfair. He smiled up at Theon. "Take me with you next time?"

Theon shook his head, smiling a little condescendingly at the younger boy. He hadn't really made any time for any of the Stark youngsters, concentrating on Ranma almost to the exclusion of everything else. *Not*, he thought to himself darkly as he looked over at Jon, *that it actually seemed to change my position in the pack as it were*. "I don't think so, sprog, you're a little short for this work."

"A good hunt." Jon nodded cordially. He moved over to help unload Theon's horse, which bore a dead stag on the back. Jon wondered idly if that was a symbol of anything to come, just like the dead direwolf bitch and the corpse of the stag that had gored it. For the moment however, he put that aside and leaned in to whisper, "I have a little job I want you to do this evening, one that I think you are uniquely suited for."

Theon growled a little, not liking the idea of being ordered around by the baseborn boy. But he knew that Ranma had given him some kind of task plus he was also in charge of the whelming and organizing the logistics aspect. He wouldn't go with the troops of course, that task would be led by Ser Kyle Condon of House Cerwyn, who would command a third of the wall's defenders, under the overall command of commander Mormont. One of the other two commanders would be Greatjon's uncle, an old man with a lot of experience, the patience of a rock, and a hatred for all wildlings. Added to this, Lord Karstark was sending his firstborn son up with his own ready force, a mix of seven-hundred infantry and archers, a powerful force indeed, one which only House Umber and House Stark equaled, or in House Stark's case, exceeded.

As well-known as Jon Twinblade was, they still couldn't put a baseborn son over the command of a seasoned commander from a noble house or the firstborn son of one of the most powerful noble houses in the North. He was still in charge of the logistics, however, at least in Stark land, which had in recent years become something of the breadbox of the North. He had helped both Ranma and Ned set up that portion of the campaign and hoped to receive, in a few days, a positive reply to a message Lord Stark sent the night before to Lord Manderly.

"Tonight," Jon murmured, "I want you to go around and search the rooms of all of the servants that came with the King or that house our new hires. In fact, search some of the older ones as well, if you think you need to."

Theon looked at him quizzically, for once putting aside his dislike for the bastard born to ask quizzically. "Why? What am I looking for?"

"You know that Varys the eunuch is Master of Whispers, we never learned why the hell he was here. Both Ranma and Lord Stark were rather suspicious of that. I don't want any spies here, regardless if they're for the King or some faction of the court."

Theon nodded and quipped, "Never trust a spider."

That evening Theon got to work, moving through the keep as adroitly as he ever did when going out to wench or meeting one of the servants in the castle for a tryst. He knew precisely where he was going, too, seeing as he had flirted with two of the three new servants and knew exactly where their rooms were, as well as their work schedule. Right now, all three of the new servants were supposed to be in the kitchen or the larder so their rooms would be unoccupied. Of course, they shared the rooms with a few of the servants brought in to help with looking after the Kings party, but the locals had mostly already left for home.

Theon opened the first door quietly, looking around the corridor to make sure he was not being observed, then moved in, opening the door quietly and making as little noise as he could. Once inside the room of the first servant he was investigating, Theon looked around, moving swiftly now. He looked underneath the bed and in the one dresser as well as behind it. Carefully he brought up a small thief's lamp that he had taken from the stables. This special kind of lamp only let out a small sliver of light, blocking out the rest of it behind metal sides.

It and the small stream of light given off by an opened murder hole high up in the outer wall of the room, which was on the second story of the keep, allowed him to see what he was doing. Revealed by the light of the lamp, wedged halfway up the back of the dresser between it and the wall, there were a few papers, stuck there by what looked like a tiny bit of wax. He had to actually move the dresser to do anything more than see them down inside the crack which he did reluctantly, moving it as quietly as possible. One done he took his belt knife, peeling off the wax that held the papers there.

Once that was done Theon held up the papers underneath the beam of moonlight, reading them quickly. They were in some kind of code, but the placement of them made them suspicious all by itself, so he reasoned it really didn't matter what they said. He stuffed them into his jerkin.

A sudden thought however made him lay down for a moment on the floor, looking underneath the dresser as he very carefully tipped it back. Revealed underneath was what looked like a large stack of coins, tied tightly in cloth and stuck there by some more wax.

Theon smiled tightly, and reached forward quickly, whistling a little at the weight of the roll of coins as he broke the wax holding it in place. The roll was longer than his two fists pressed together, and by the diameter held gold dragons. Once he put it in his pouch, Theon carefully moved the dresser back to its former position before exiting the room, moving onto his next target, a smile still on his face.

The next target didn't have anything in the room, one of the larger servant's quarters which was the living quarters of eight male servants, all of whom were busy at this point in time. He made a thorough search, and found nothing, or at least, nothing incriminating. Theon found a few amusements, including what looked like the lace pantie of a highborn lady stuffed behind one of the dressers, but that was all.

His third stop, however, yielded the most incriminating results. This room, which four maids shared, was in one of the corners of the keep with two larger murder holes up high on both of the outer walls. This allowed Theon to see much better. They also let in the air, which was probably a good thing considering what he found. Underneath the bed closest to the arrow slits, was a small cage with three doves inside it. Looking at them with the light of his thief's lamp Theon frowned, seeing that one of them already had a small roll of paper stuck to one leg. "Never trust a spider." he muttered, chuckling now as he moved out of the room carrying the cage under one arm, heading straight for the infirmary.

Within an hour, the two servants had been rounded up, and brought to stand before the Lady Catelyn, who nodded at Ser Rodrick, the master of arms. The older, slightly rotund man began to question them sharply with the aid of the majordomo, an acerbic and thin-faced fellow with a very stern manner. Presented with the evidence, neither could explain themselves. After several minutes of being questioned, one of them came clean, saying who had paid them. "We weren't supposed to look for secrets or anything, just general information. Lord Varys just wanted to know what was going on here, you know, keep an eye on things, make certain the whelming was doing well, make certain nothing big happened that could worry the country as a whole." Despite trying to put their spying in the best light, this went over about as well as a lead weight in a swimming contest.

Ser Rodrick moved over, leaning down to listen as the Lady Catelyn whispered into his ear, then turned to them. "Needless to say your employment is canceled. By all rights, we should be taking this money from you and kicking you out with nothing but the clothes on your backs. But we won't do that, if you can tell us if there are any more of the Spider's 'little birds' here."

The woman who seemed to be the spokesperson for the duo shook her head. "Lord Varys tried to set up a more

permanent group, but he couldn't suborn any of his normal targets, and your regular servants are extremely loyal."

Jon and Theon exchanged a glance and Jon shook his head slightly. They weren't going to take the woman's word for that and Theon would continue his searches. The Iron Born sighed a little dramatically, unhappy at having to give up his nightly wenching for this.

Again Sir Rodrick leaned in to listen as lady Catelyn whispered to him, manfully ignoring the fact that she was wincing as she did so, as any movement of the mouth or face paining her. He turned back and replied formally. "Very well, I will have two of the guards show you out of the castle. Where you go from there is your own concern and we will be taking two-thirds of the gold we found. The rest you can split between you, we care not how."

After the duo was escorted out, Jon turned Theon. "It's well known the Spider normally uses two groups for his spying normally, whores and beggar boys. We don't have many beggar boys in the North but check with the whores, just in case."

Theon laughed. "I'll do that gladly but I don't think he'll have had much luck. The whores here in the North are mostly Northerners, after all, and they don't have much truck with Southerners." They hadn't liked Theon at first either, even as a client, but the amount of coin he was willing to lay down to lay down with them, had changed their opinions of him.

"Do it anyway." Jon said shrugging. As Theon left with a jaunty wave, Jon turned back to Lady Catelyn. "So, what was that about? Normal politics, the eunuch just doing what he sees as his job, or something else?"

Lady Catelyn frowned, then shrugged, and glanced over at Bran. The boy hadn't stirred even once since the maester had worked on him and seeing his younger brother like that made Jon's eyes narrow in anger. Still he kept a level head. "I'm not certain that there is a connection there, my lady." He continued hastily as Catelyn glared at him. "I'm not saying there isn't but we don't have proof."

The worried mother held his gaze for a moment then sighed and nodded her head, looking away as she began to gently stroke Bran's hair. Jon caught Ser Rodrick's eye, nodding his head towards the door, and the two men made their way out.

Theon had actually waited for the two men outside in the corridor. "I had a thought, it's pretty obvious that something or another is going on down south. Is there any way we could set up a spy network of our own?"

Jon paused, considering. "Honestly, the idea is a good one, but I have no idea how we would go about doing that. We don't have anyone here who has that kind of skill set."

The master-at-arms nodded. "You need to remember, also, that rumors and tales are one thing, sifting through to the truth is a skill that can only be developed by doing. We could contact the Lady Catelyn's father, he could pass on anything he learns, but other than that..." The older man shrugged.

"Maybe Lord Mannerly might have a better idea," Jon shrugged in turn, "but for now there's nothing we can do about that. It's not as if we're suddenly going to meet someone who'd be willing to help us set up a spy network of our own, is there?" The trio of men laughed at that, and moved off in separate directions.

That evening, Jon called Arya into his room, along with Nymeria. He had decided not to have this discussion with Rickon just yet, the boy was so young, his mind and will so unformed, Jon feared what could happen if he warged with his direwolf. "I have something to tell you Arya, something that Ranma passed on to me before he left. You see..."

OOOOOO

Dominic looked up from strumming his balalaika as Viserys asked him a question. Since he had become part of the exiled Targaryen's 'court', the bard had become used to being asked questions randomly. The fact of the matter was that the Targaryens hadn't lived in Westeros since Viserys was a babe, so didn't really have a handle on how it had changed since their father's death and Robert Baratheon's successful rebellion. And as much as Illyrio had aided them in terms of money, food, and a base of operations, he also, didn't have a good grasp on the people of Westeros or the power brokers, beyond the most powerful. He had been with them over a month now and every day for two hours or so, he would tell them what he knew of Westeros, from its customs to its towns, although most of what he relayed was about King's Landing and the court

They showed an appalling lack of understanding, in point of fact, though Daenerys was quite a bit better at

overcoming her ignorance than her older brother. Viserys seemed to be under the impression that what he already knew was always spot-on, so that when Dominic agreed with him it was obviously correct and if he disagreed, it was the bard that was wrong. Thankfully, he also seemed to realize that there were certain areas where he was completely ignorant and in those areas he was willing to listen to actual advice.

This hadn't changed Dominic's initial opinion of him, however. He still felt that Viserys was an opinionated, self-righteous, embittered ass with far too much anger and hate fueling his bursts of rage that were all too easily seen as something coming from the Targaryen line.

Daenerys, on the other hand, had surprised him. Yes, she was mousy, yes, she was quiet, but there was a bright sparkling intelligence behind that and a hard will just waiting to come out. She listened intently and he could see the gears in her head moving sometimes.

That wasn't helping Dominic figure out what Viserys had asked however. "I'm sorry, your grace, my mind was elsewhere. What was the question?"

The boy scoffed, but didn't comment. He had become somewhat used to Dominic saying that line in order to gather his thoughts before answering, although sometimes it was just fact rather than a desire to retain more time. He hadn't yet figured out the trick to tell which it was. "Are there any houses among the Stormlands that we could call upon, any who remember the line of their true king?"

Dominic went back to strumming his balalaika, but his eyes were still locked on his interlocutor. "It would depend on what you mean by 'call upon'. There are a few houses in the Stormlands that are not as loyal to House Baratheon as they should be, though whether or not that is because of lingering loyalty to your house or because they chafe under the somewhat distant and rather... soft rule of Renly Baratheon I cannot say."

"Tell me about him," the boy said eagerly leaning forward. "Have you met the youngest Baratheon?"

"Actually, I have once, during the Iron Born rebellion. I met all three Baratheon brothers really, albeit at different times." Dominic smiled thinly in remembrance. "Renly always struck me as a bit of a popinjay, more concerned with words and appearances, he's no real warrior, nor a general. Mind you, he has access to many such and does have a certain charisma and likable nature that can draw others to him. The upper ranks of the Stormlands nobility are loyal to him, the middle rank and the smallfolk, not so much. When I was there, I got the impression they sort of hold him in mild contempt or dislike, simply for how much time he spends at court and in the Reach. If you can produce a strong enough showing that he can be convinced facing you would be disastrous, he may bend the knee easily enough. I am uncertain how loyal he will be, however, unless you can make it personally profitable for him. As long as Robert is alive even that won't happen."

Viserys nodded thoughtfully, his eyes going to Illyrio. The magister was stroking his oiled and trimmed for a moment, then he nodded, agreeing with what Dominic had said. Viserys turned back to the bard. "As long as we are on that cursed family, what of Stannis?"

"Stannis is a very stern, unyielding sort of man, very much a bitter person I felt at the time. Law-abiding as well, yet I also think somewhat ambitious. Don't quote me on that." Dominic finished hurriedly. "It was just an impression I got. He always seemed angry, I presume because he was shunted aside to Dragonstone. I can see his point really, as the oldest he should have been made the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands, not Renly. Dragonstone is small and almost unimportant despite it's strategic position. He is also somewhat unhappy in his marriage, although that is more rumor than most information I share."

He directed his next words at the merchant, looking over at the fat man who was lounging on a divan with a glass of wine in one pudgy hand. He kept a careful eye on the man, wondering how this next part would be taken. "Besides that, he's still the Master of Ships and, if you intend to invade the Western lands, you might have to deal with him one way or another. I would say regardless of what force you bring to bear, meeting him at sea would be a recipe for disaster. If the Iron Born, sailors and raiders all, could not do that, then you would have little chance of succeeding. Dragonstone as well is a tough nut to crack. I am uncertain what forces you have at your disposal but throwing them at such a fortress would be a poor first choice."

"Such talk is months in the future." the master merchant said blandly, sipping at his wine. "I have been discussing where to find a force we can call upon to aid our liege's eventual triumphant return, yet such plans are like wines, they need time to mature. "Now, what of the Reach? It is well known as possibly the most powerful of the lands of Westeros."

"There you will once more have to take my words with a grain of salt." Dominic replied shrugging. "I haven't been

there in several years and I only stayed there for a few months. I will say that the noble house that rules it, the Tyrells, are well loved by its people, both of their own house's smallfolk and the rest of the Reach. They have a distinct level of animosity with those of the House of Dorne, however, which could possibly be exploited if the Dornish Marches were not now counted among the Stormlands. I think one or two of their houses along the borders with that land chafe under House Baratheon's rule, but I am uncertain if that is the case. House Swann, for example, is an old and very powerful house, with a very cautious ruler, yet his sons are both known to be personally ambitious, so perhaps some headway could be made there. But in the Reach itself, House Appleton is one, but House Florent is possibly the most important... **target**. They believe, like House Tyrell, that they are descended from the old Reach kings, and they are a powerful house. Ambitious as well, though a daughter of their house is married to Stannis, her name escapes me at the moment. Still, something could possibly be done there..."

Illyrio nodded understanding what Dominic was saying. Ambition was exploitable and, if nothing else, backing that house might force Tyrell to look closer to home than was otherwise the case. Dominic went on. "I would also tell you to fear House Tarly. Its lord, a man by the name of Rendyll, is known as one of the most dangerous generals in Westeros, and a ruthless one as well. Tarly is loyal to Tyrell, but if you can sway Tyrell..." He shrugged.

"Is House Hightower still the most important of the noble houses of the Reach?" Daenerys asked quietly. She wilted a little under her brother's glare for speaking out of turn but Dominic noticed that she didn't wilt nearly as much as she had when Dominic had first met her.

"I was just getting to that and yes milady." Dominic nodded his head. "House Hightower is **very** important, as is Oldtown and the Citadel it guards. I think that they can field something like six thousand men-at-arms alone and that is without the manpower of the town. Moreover, their reputation is an honorable one. The White Bull was from that house and they still well remember the honor that he won them. I have never heard any say that Ser Gerold was anything other than an honorable knight, and his example is held in veneration in Oldtown."

"Bah!" Viserys scoffed. "If he was so honorable, why was he not with my older brother at the Battle of the Trident?"

"No one knows my lord, save he fell in Dorne somewhere and had something to do with guarding the body of the kidnapped Lyanna Stark."

"She was not kidnapped!" Viserys exclaimed angrily. "My brother wanted to practice the ancient right of polygamy allowed to House Targaryen! The Stark bitch went with him willingly!"

"Again, my prince," Dominic replied sternly, biting back angry words at the disrespect laid on Lyanna, who was still hailed as one of the fairest of ladies to ever grace the North, "I am simply saying what all men of Westeros know. All the lands know that he was besotted with Lyanna and stole her away in the night. The fact that she died under his care is a mark against Rhaegar your highness, though how that came to be is not known."

"In your opinion," the merchant cut in before Viserys could blow up further, thoughtfully sipping at his wine between words, "would the Reach welcome the Dragon Dynasty back? It's well known that they were loyal until the last, so all this talk about secondary houses is premature."

"To deal with House Tyrell, you must deal with the Queen of Thorns," Dominic said shaking his head. At their quizzical expressions he laughed. "Your pardon, it is a nickname for the family grandmother, Olenna Redwyne, who is ambitious in the highest degree and very active in the political scene. Mace Tyrell is simply a figurehead for her in many ways. You would have to convince Lady Olenna that there was profit in it for the family. I don't believe she is a particularly loyal individual, she looks towards the bottom line as it were."

"So it should be with all people." the merchant replied blandly, the light of the candles in their sconces glittering on his gold rings.

Viserys on the other hand, growled a little angrily, slamming his hand down on the table in front of him setting the cutlery of their nightly snack to rattle. "They should be loyal to my family! All of them should, we were their rulers for centuries. It was our dragons that united Westeros, which created the Iron Throne in the first place!"

"And you did so through fire and the sword, which is how Robert took the crown from you in turn." Dominic said blandly, getting tired of this argument. "Yes, that was a long time ago but you don't have dragons now, do you?"

For a moment, he thought he saw something in Illyrio's eyes, a certain hidden amusement, but whatever it was, he couldn't discern its cause. Instead he turned his attention back to Viserys. "You won't be able to appeal to the righteousness of your rule, not after the mad King did all he could to ruin your family's name."

Both Targaryens stiffened a little at that. Daenerys looked almost sad while Viserys looked apoplectic. Yet, he had learned not to argue with the bard. At the moment, he was still a necessary evil in his mind, having a lot of knowledge that they could use.

Dominic went on, seeming not to notice their varied reactions. "There might be a few houses here or there, even outside Dorne, that would declare for you. You'll have to appeal to their loyalty, personal loyalty. For the rest, you must appeal to their self-preservation instincts or self-interest. Self-interest means you would have to appeal to them and their need for power, although I would hasten to say that friends bought are often times enemies down the road."

"Outside of Dorne, where could I look to for allies?" Viserys asked, looking a little surly but still continuing the discussion. "Allies, I mean, who would be loyal to our house."

"The lady touched on one," Dominic said bowing his head towards Daenerys. "House Hightower is one major possibility. There are a few minor houses of the Reach and certainly in the Crownlands that you could appeal to for loyalty's sake, although how much of a force they would be I don't know. Ambition-wise," he paused thoughtfully, "that is a dangerous road, but several houses minor could be used in such a way. I have already mentioned Florent. In the Stormlands, perhaps the Footes could be interested in monetary gain. House Buckler as well, and more than a few will simply follow the strongest claimant to the throne."

"The Stormlands are the weakest of the lands of Westeros, despite Baratheon coming from there. They don't have the lands or the men the others do. What about the other kingdoms?" Viserys asked.

Dominic turned his gaze to his balalaika, gathering his thoughts, but before Dominic could speak Illyrio replied. "The power structure of the Vale is no doubt in flux. I have no doubt that there are many houses there that chafe under the Lady Lysa, and her sickly, puling son." He sneered a little. "A baby born that far into his father's dotage will never be very strong."

"True, and it is far more open to invasion by sea than it would be from the interior of Westeros." the bard agreed. "I would not recommend it, however, not because of any weakness in the house that controls it, but because of the land itself, which is mountainous, well defended, and with a warlike people. Moreover, there are bandits there, mountain clans, and they would make it hell on any invader even if you won the loyalty of the lowlanders. To put it bluntly, I think that the Vale will follow whoever it is the most powerful. Lady Lysa is a nonentity as far as I know. I don't know anything about her personally one way or another but her dislike for her marriage and for those who forced it upon her is well known."

"We already have agents in the Vale as well as in the Riverlands." the merchant said smiling blandly. "You are correct, of course, that friends bought through ambition are not dearly sought, but they can be useful. My information however on the Westerlands and the North is practically nonexistent, though for very different reasons."

"Not surprising." Dominic replied his voice opaque, leaning back now and looking over at the trio. "My countrymen are not welcoming of any foreign influence. The story of the late Lord Stark and the former heir, Brandon, as well as the treatment of Lyanna has hardened the North against the Targaryen Dynasty."

He raised a hand again to stop Viserys' predictable outburst, sighing internally at the boy who had literally no self-control. Daenerys, on the other hand, was simply gazing at him, her eyes for just a moment carrying a message, commanding him to go on. *There's a lot of real steel in that girl beyond her mousy exterior, just waiting to be brought out.*

"The North is separated more by its culture than anything else." Dominic continued, pushed by that look in the young girl's eyes more than anything else. "We follow the Old Gods, we believe ourselves to be descendants of the First Men rather than the Andals and, outside of White Harbor, we have no real trading center. We have our own concerns, our own beliefs, and leave the rest of the kingdom to its own devices."

"How likely is it that the North would stand aside if we return and begin a push to reclaim our crown?" Daenerys asked before either of the others could get a word in. Her brother glared at her and she quailed a little, but her eyes kept going back to the bard.

"There, alas, we go back to the personal loyalty question. Lord Stark is **personally** loyal to King Robert and if King Robert calls, he will answer."

"How important would that be, really?" the magister said, waving his hand rather airily. "Surely, the North doesn't have as many troops to field as the other kingdoms."



"We don't keep as many men-at-arms on hand, if that is what you mean, although we do tend to have more men trained in weapons craft than the other lands, at least in terms of bowmen and those who can swing an axe. Many more families in the North than in any of the other kingdoms need to hunt for their food, after all, since there is so little arable land in comparison to the size of the North. Life is harsh up there, a constant fight against the elements in most places, and if you are not tough you will not survive. And any impact can be a bad one, especially given that as a defensive position the North is practically unassailable from the rest of the continent given Moat Cailin and the marshes. From Essos there is White Harbor, Widow's Watch, Oldcastle, and Ramsgate. All are tough nuts to crack, in fact, nearly any castle in the North is tough to take by siege or assault. White Harbor is a major city, taking it would be an arduous undertaking."

Illyrio was a merchant and, even though he had been a swordsman during his youth in Bravos, had no real understanding of warfare or defensive positions. Viserys, on the other hand, was well versed in the importance of said, along with the general geography of Westeros. So when the magister scoffed at Dominic's assertion, Viserys waved him to silence. "I've heard of the Moat, one of the most dangerous positions defensively in the kingdom. You would need an army to even try to get past it and even then you would probably fail unless you could get behind it or cut off the Moat from the rest of the Neck, which geographically speaking is impossible."

"What forces will you be bringing to the table, anyway?" Dominic asked, cocking his head quizzically. "As I said, you can't expect to be able to call upon any in Westeros to provide you with the majority of your force. Mercenaries and suchlike are well and good but, unless you can employ the Golden Company or those Unsullied in sufficient numbers, they won't be enough."

"Oh, we have a certain plan in the works." Viserys smirked, looking at his sister who looked back at him with her head cocked to one side not having heard anything concrete of their short term plans just yet. "If it goes through, we may have a horde of Dothraki raiders and, with them, we'll be able to ride down any enemy."

Dominic's face blanked at that, and he too glanced quickly at Daenerys then away. He could see where that was going, and he did not like that idea, no, not at all. "What about the Westerlands?"

"Ahh." Dominic shook his head, wincing slightly. "There I don't think you'll find any aid whatsoever. The Lannisters rule that lands with a grip of iron. Or perhaps gold is a better way of phrasing it because they buy so much loyalty with their gold, yet it is also fear that keeps their lands loyal. The 'Rains of Castamere' is a well-known tale everywhere but it's practically a writ of the Seven in the West. Unless you can severely weaken the Lannisters, don't expect to see any aid from that area."

Viserys looked over at Illyrio rather startled by how firm that declaration came out. Oh, he knew how traitorous and vicious the Lannisters were, but surely that should have made their people chafe even more under their rule?

But the magister merely nodded. "That matches well with what my factors have reported. The Lannisters do not rule through loyalty, save in a few cases, but there is quite a bit of fear. And the Lord of that House, Tywin, is among the most dangerous opponents we will face. Do not doubt that, my prince."

From there the conversation shifted, going over the geography of the land once more as well as the different ports. They also discussed the feelings among the smallfolk towards the ruling houses, which the merchant didn't have nearly as good a handle on as he had the movers and shakers. Dominic, as a wandering bard, knew exactly what people thought in all the lands he had moved through. Eventually, the group broke up, with Viserys and the merchant leaving talking quietly to one another heading out the door and away.

Daenerys stayed, along with two maids that Illyrio had assigned to her as chaperones. Whether or not she had such before arriving at the merchant's house was a question but not an important one to Dominic, although judging by the looks that he had seen Viserys occasionally give his sister, he doubted it. Oh, he was certain that the older Targaryen sibling wouldn't have done anything to spoil Daenerys' marriage price but incest was well known in the Targaryen Dynasty after all...

Dominic continued to play with his balalaika, waiting calmly for the girl to speak. Eventually she did, blurting her words out, a mix of excitement and chagrin. "I looked up what you said about our father, Aerys, and about our brother Rhaegar. I didn't believe it at first but the maester here in the mansion and the history books agree that you were telling the truth. I... why did he do that? Why did he burn all those people?"

*Evidently the love of fire hasn't yet taken root in this dragon*, Dominic thought rather sardonically before replying. "Sometimes madness can grip a person, sometimes ambition can change a person. If you're asking me for the King's thoughts I cannot tell you. As I said, I was but a squire in the Stormlands when the rebellion occurred. I will say there had been signs of madness for years before the rebellion actually occurred, the fact that he refused to let anyone

armed with any kind of blade into his presence, not even using a nail file for his nails, as well as other stories. He wasn't the first Targaryen to show signs of insanity, of course. In the Stormlands, it was hoped that Aerys would die soon and hand over the reins of the family to his heir Rhaegar."

He started strumming his instrument's string, then paused, looked up at Daenerys for a moment. "There is a reason why I say 'I know what all people know' about Rhaegar's kidnapping of Lyanna Stark. Before that, there was never even a hint of what everyone called Targaryen madness in him, and possibly if he hadn't done that, the rebellion would never have occurred."

In point of fact, the Rebellion would almost certainly never have occurred, because it was the kidnapping of Lyanna Stark that brought Lord Stark and his heir, Brandon, to King's Landing where they were killed. It was their deaths and the deaths of most of their companions which brought in the North and made Jon Arryn rebel.

He sat silently looking at the girl whose face showed what she was thinking for a moment before closing down. "I see."

"Power can corrupt," the Bard went on, "something to remember whatever your station in life and even a tiny bit of corruption can call to those evil desires and thoughts most men have inside them."

Daenerys abruptly changed the subject. "Why do you think that Magister Illyrio's plan will fail?" At the bard's raised eyebrow, she waved a hand. "I could see it when my brother mentioned Dothraki, your face went blank as if you were trying to stop yourself from saying something you knew we wouldn't like. You do that around him a lot but not so much about my brother, why?"

"I'll answer your second before your first might I?"

At the younger girls nod, of impatience in all likelihood, he went on. "Viserys doesn't control this house, your brother in point of fact has no power at the moment other than what his name can garner him in very limited circles. While Illyrio will probably do whatever he asks, it is the magister who holds the real power. That is why I am more respectful to him than to your brother, who frankly, needs a few smacks upside the head."

Daenerys frowned at that but nodded. It was true after all, they had been alone and friendless for so long that she was used to it, used to being powerless and to her brother's growing rage and fury at their situation.

"In answer to your first question, I've been here in Essos for a while, and I know something of the Dothraki, specifically they are terrified of the ocean. How exactly do you intend to get them to agree to cross the ocean?"

"I don't know." Daenerys murmured, cocking her head as she thought quizzically about it. "But surely the idea of looting Westeros would be enough to get them over their fears?"

"And if you do that, how will you be able to call upon the loyalty of your new subjects? You will not be liberators or returning royalty. You would make it not a thing of nobles battling for a prize but an invasion. A crown bought by the sword needs to be protected by the sword. You'll never be able to let up, never be truly welcome. You'll always have to be looking over your shoulder for the hidden dagger or the poison in your food."

Daenerys nodded thoughtfully and the bard went on. "Also, what does Illyrio get out of backing you and your brother? Remember what I said when I first met you, question everything and everyone."

"Including you?" Daenerys asked, one eyebrow raised.

Dominic shrugged. "I'm here because this looked interesting and I was getting weary of walking on my own two feet. Not so much the travel but my feet were getting worn and it's nice to not need to watch my purse or sleep with one hand on my sword. My loyalty is to myself, my house is gone, destroyed by its own hubris, and then its land broken up and added to our neighbors by Lord Stark as was right. My loyalty to Ranma, the Stark heir is solid enough, after all he saved me from an, albeit probably short, life of torture. So if ever you invade the North I will face a tough choice. At the moment, this is all speculation and rather fascinating. It's interesting to hear Illyrio's views, as well as teach you and your brother about Westeros."

What Dominic didn't say was that he knew one way or another that history was going to be made here with the two Targaryens and the fat magister. He didn't know in what manner just yet, which of them would be the one driving that history, but as he watched the intelligence of the young girl and her growing sense of self, he began to think that it might well be Daenerys.

Daenerys nodded, understanding and appreciating Dominic's openness. He was also correct, why exactly was

Magister Illyrio, one of the most powerful men in the city, willing to put up with her and her brother? They had nothing to offer him right away, the name might help him eventually, but right now it was more of a burden. She vowed to keep her eyes open, on the lookout for anything that showed he was setting them up for something.

She also resolved to check and see what he was willing to sell the Dothraki for their loyalty. What could they offer, after all, that would be worth the loyalty of such a horde of barbarians? *I think I might have to sneak around a bit, something I wish I could have learned to do quite a bit earlier*, Daenerys thought to herself, standing up then perfunctorily bidding farewell to the bard before turning and leaving to head to her rooms. *I'll also have to figure out how to ditch my minders as well.*

OOOOOOO

That evening when they stopped, Ranma helped Tommen off his horse, smiling as the carriage door opened, letting out the ladies within. Sansa, Myrcella, and Jeyne were still giggling about the last story Ranma had told, as was Tommen, though the Queen seemed to be controlling her own amusement far better, if indeed she felt any in the first place. The tale had been about the pigtailed warrior trying to fight off the crazy foreign man with the froglike mouth in an eating contest, something all the younger set had gotten a kick out of. Though Ranma found Varys' interest in it a little strange and oddly disturbing.

"Here you are, Your Grace, your youngest, returned unharmed." Ranma bowed grandly, ruffled the youngest Baratheon's hair, then walked off, searching for an area that was either being set aside as a practice area or simply a clearing, where he could burn off some steam.

Before he could turn away completely, however, the Kingslayer's voice stopped him. "I think, young Stark, you owe me a bit of a spar. Unless of course, telling tales has sapped all your energy for the day."

Ranma turned to find the older man smirking at him, one hand already resting on the pommel of his sword. Ranma smirked, his eyes lighting up with eagerness. "Certainly, Ser Kingslayer, I'll be right with you."

Jaime twitched a bit at the mode of address, as did the Queen, while Sansa merely rolled her eyes and the other children began to plot how to get their mother to agree to let them watch. This proved in vain, however, as the Queen and the septa ushered them away.

As she turned away, Cersei sent one warning glance at her brother, urging him to take this seriously. She didn't have much hopes in that however. Jaime rarely took anything but true life and death situations or threats against his siblings seriously. She was also afraid his ego would get in the way of seeing how much of a threat Ranma really was.

The two men moved through the camp, ignoring the number of men-at-arms who immediately began following them, already making bets as to who would win this bout between the blade of the Lannisters and the Young Wolf of the Starks.

Ranma shucked off his jacket, standing there in plain chain mail down to his waist over a jerkin, a small smile on his face as he held the sword he had been gifted from House Glover loosely at his side. It was a simple blade, unadorned save for a small wolf's head imprinted into the somewhat larger than normal pommel. The blade was battered, the hilt worn, but the way Ranma held it showed how familiar he was with its weight in his hands.

Stepping out of the growing circle of soldiers, the Kingslayer moved to stand across from him, wearing a breastplate with white enamel, arms covered similarly. He held his blade resting lightly on one shoulder, smiling condescendingly, though his eyes were much more serious and calculating, as he stared across at Ranma.

Robert and Ned moved through a hole in the crowd, which opened for them, the King smiling widely. "Ha, this should be good, huh, Ned. Though your son might have bitten off more than he could chew. I might not like his family, or him, but Jaime Lannister is one of the top five best blades in Westeros."

"We will have to see," Ned said philosophically, wondering internally what would be better here: his son pounding the Kingslayer into the ground, thus showing his skill for all to see and become even more wary of, or to have the Kingslayer win, thus making people underestimate him. Still, either way it was out of his hands now.

The two combatants stared at one another, with the Kingslayer bringing his sword off his shoulder to hold in front of him, point toward Ranma. then suddenly he took a quick two step, first thrusting his blade forward, then bringing it into a slash. It was a quick, economical attack, with no tells before the first blow was launched and Jaime had used it to beat several of the current Kingsguard when he felt they were getting to big for their breaches.

It did not surprise Ranma, who dodged back, then brought his own blade up to block the follow on slash, beating it aside and pressing in quickly. Ranma was careful to keep his speed and power down to 'normal' levels, just a little bit more than his opponent. Yes, he wanted to see how good the so-called best blade of the South was, but neither did he want to show off all of his physical skills. Ranma wanted to have people underestimate exactly how beyond the norm he was in ways beyond his endurance.

The two traded blows, Ranma being careful to look a little harried, but not giving ground, pushing back when he could, getting a feel for Jaime, who was indeed as good as Ranma had thought; not quite up to the wolf-sworn's current level, but very good all the same. To Ranma, however, the entire fight was like watching a man move in slow-motion. It was actually tougher to not show how much he was holding back than anything else. As much as he wanted to humiliate Jaime, he wanted to keep his abilities secret much more.

After about ten minutes, the two had danced around one another, neither being able to land a blow on the other, although Jaime had come close to tagging Ranma a few times, and Ranma had come close to Jaime three times. It was enough, Ranma decided, to make the Kingslayer think he was the better of the two, but enough so he would respect Ranma.

With that thought, Ranma backed away, moving Jaime subtly in the direction of a large ice patch on the floor of the clearing where a puddle had frozen. Jaime continued to press his advantage, but then Ranma pushed back, suddenly. When he stepped back to gain some distance, his foot slipped just a little on the ice, and before he could recover his footing, Ranma's blade was gently laying across his shoulder.

Ranma moved back, rubbing his arms as if they were in pain, smiling despite what everyone saw as him being in pain. "My win, I think, Ser Jaime."

Jaime smiled, knowing the youth knew what Jaime did, that Ranma had won through chance rather than skill, and saw Ranma's more respectful address a sign of this. "A good match lad, we might want to do this again in the Riverlands where its warmer. Now go put on your coat Stark, you're making me cold just looking at you."

Around them, cheers and groans began and there was many shouts of 'Young Wolf' at the result of the fantastic match. Robert smiled, slapping his childhood friend on the shoulder. "Your lad got lucky there, the Kingslayer was pressing him hard before that lucky break. Still, a damn good bout."

"I agree completely." Ned replied, though he meant much more than the physical bout itself. All around him, none of the men, even those from Winterfell, could tell his son hadn't given his all, which meant that Ranma's skill would be both respected and underestimated. He gripped his son's hand smiling a small smile of approval at him.

Ranma nodded, seeing his father had noticed what he had done, though he didn't think anyone else, other than perhaps Ser Barristan, standing like a white-cloaked shadow at the King's back, had noticed. "So, what are the cooks charring for dinner tonight, that actually worked up an appetite."

OOOOOOOO

Three days later, Jon greeted Kyle Condon. Kyle was a tall, handsome man with thin shoulders, black hair, who wore a very good suit of chain mail armor, his surcoat blazoned with the axe of House Cerwyn. He arrived with eight hundred spearmen, joining the two-thousand infantrymen, a mix of archers and swordsmen that House Stark had raised, organized into ten companies of two-hundred.

This was neither House's full complement. If push came to shove they could both field upwards of six-thousand if they called in all the men of their minor Houses and pulled men from the fields and crafts. But it was the amount they could field and still retain a decent enough force at home and not rely on levies. With the defensive position of the wall multiplying every man by a factor of 100, this plus the other forces moving north should be more than enough.

After getting their men situated, Lady Jonelle and Ser Condon paid their respects to Lady Catelyn. Both of them came out of the infirmary rather grim faced, despite the good news about her pregnancy. Jonelle immediately went off in search of Rickon with her son, intending to take over looking after the boy as long as Bran was still comatose. It was obvious Catelyn wasn't going to leave the boy's side until he recovered, or passed on.

While he needed a workspace to do all the paperwork necessary to direct the whelming and everything that entailed, Jon had not taken over his father's study, thinking that was a sign of disrespect. Instead, he had taken over a table in the dining hall, with Ghost lounging on the stone floor beside him. He and Ser Rodrick were there now, putting together a final tally of the men going north as well as how much they would be paid during the trip. The party would also be carrying supplies for both itself and for the group from Hornwood, which would meet it on the road up to the

Wall.

House Stark was the bread basket of the North these days, the only Noble House that actually had a surplus of food to sell beyond its borders, so it made sense for it to send a large amount of the supplies up. Though this would only be the supplies the companies would be using on the first leg of the trip, the second half would be supplied by Umber and Hornwood. Moving as many men as they were sending over such a long distance, it would take them months to get to the wall, possibly as long as half a year.

The castle's larders would once more be emptied when the army left tomorrow, especially of things like breads and cheeses, but they would be able to make do for a time until they could bring in more from the surrounding farms and holdfasts. Jon was determined to both send as much supply as they could up North and, also, bring in as much food as they could. Something, some instinct at the back of his mind, was telling him it would come in handy.

Ser Conton's handsome face was thunderous as he sat down across from Jon. "I didn't realize Lady Catelyn's injuries were so... nasty. I hope her face heals up soon. Lord Stark was worried for her, but you know how your father is, his face gives nothing away at times." Jon nodded and the older man went on. "It's good that you have men guarding her and young Bran, my instincts, and those of my lord, are telling me that there might be more going on there than we think."

"You and Lord Cerwyn are not alone in that supposition," Jon replied dryly, leaning back and smiling faintly. "Southern politics and the motivation of those who thrive on it are murky at best to us here in the North. We still don't know what Bran really saw so I am willing to think there was something else involved there. Still, we can only defend ourselves against the enemies we can see in front of us. That means sending more troops up to the wall."

Kyle nodded, then began to question Jon closely about the ambush that he, Ranma, and the others of the wolf-sworn had run into. After that, they turned their attention to the order of the march and went over the logistics aspect of it. While House Umber had sent up the first group of its soldiers and a large group of peasants to move into the Gift, Houses Stark, Cerwyn, Glover, and even House Flint of Flint's Finger would be sending up groups of settlers to repopulate the Gift. The other major Houses and those minor Houses sworn to them wouldn't be, either unable to or using their sparse excess manpower for other things.

Jon's tale of the emptiness of the Gift brought home to Kyle the seriousness of what was going on even more than his discussion with his Lord, Ranma, and Ned. While the Gift was as underpopulated as the rest of the North, what population there was centered itself along the Kingsroad. The fact that it was so empty was disturbing. That plus the fact that it happened so quickly, within a year, since that was how long it had been since the last time a Nights Watch recruiter had been sent south, was astonishing. "So once we get to the Gift should we prepare for ambushes? That will slow us down some."

"I would advise it, but I honestly don't know," Jon replied. "I think given the size of the force you will be leading by that point, with some of the mountain clansmen joining you, the group from Hornwood, and possibly even from the Flints of Widow's Watch, you should be far too large for any groups of wildlings that could've gotten around the Wall to attack. My advice would be to use some of the mountain clansmen as skirmishers around your main force to sniff out any trouble."

Ser Conton nodded, sipping at a glass of wine that a servant had given them halfway through the discussion. "And I'll be taking the runt of the lion's pride with me? He's higher born than me, will he try to push for command?"

Jon nodded again. "I doubt it, besides, I think Lord Hornwood is sending Daryn up with his force, so he will assume overall command, with you as his chief advisor, I would say. I would also advise you not to judge Tyrion by the rest of the lions, he's actually a pretty amusing fellow. And much more intelligent than the tales speak of, he's not just a jester." Jon reached over to a piece of paper and brought it over, urging Kyle to look at it. On it was a large ballista and a trebuchet of advanced design. "These are some siege weapons of his that he basically thought up, all with numbered parts and plans to actually build the things. Put him in charge of that aspect when you get there and I doubt you'll be disappointed. I will say from my own experience up there that some knowledge along those lines is needed. The siege weapons along the Wall are either frozen in place, defunct, broken, or simply so old I wouldn't entrust the timber of them. Most of the time it's all of the above, frankly. You get away from Castle Black and that's just the way it is up there."

Kyle scowled. "I hadn't realized it had gotten so bad. It's been what, a hundred and fifty years or more since the last major wildling incursion, so I suppose it makes sense that the upkeep has fallen behind."

Jon shrugged his shoulders, not mentioning the fact that the Wall wasn't there to block out the wildlings, or at least, not primarily. No, the Wall was there to block out the White Walkers. He wasn't certain if the Wall itself was

weakening or if they had figured out a way around it but Jon knew that the White Walkers were the real enemy. *Still, unless you see them with your own eyes, see the wights coming for you, even men of the North will have trouble believing they still exist. On the other hand, once we do see they exist, our lore and legends will make us able to combat them. Fire is your friend, and so is Valarian steel, and, what was it, some black rock or other? Must remember to look that up.*

"And you don't think Tyrion's a spy or anything like that?" asked Kyle, pulling Jon's mind going back to the original topic of discussion. "I'll admit that if he can actually help us build siege weapons like this he'll be useful, it's not an area I know anything about, nor do I know anyone who does outside of simple siege towers or battering rams. But if he's going to also spy on our forces or make trouble in other ways, is it worth it?"

Jon paused for a moment, thinking about the conversation he'd had with the Imp the evening after his father's departure. "There is a... a hunger in him, a hunger for recognition. Not from anyone in particular, but just the world as a whole." *Something I could see myself sharing with him had my life been different.* "I think he wants to be recognized as something more than the youngest Lannister or the Imp or the whore master or anything like that. He wants to be known for something real, something meaningful in his own right. And I believe he is earnestly sad about what has happened to Bran and the Lady Catelyn. All I can advise, is try to get to know him as a person rather than an extension of the Lannister family."

Ser Conton nodded his head, deciding to try to put aside his bias against those from the Westerlands and **that** house in particular. It would be tough, but he would try at least.

The very next day the troops left, with the Imp going with them, heading north to the Wall to face whatever threat was gathering beyond it. Jon watched them go, then turned back to reenter the main keep. He might feel a connection to the Wall, but he knew his duty, and right now his duty pinned him in place, here in Winterfell.

OOOOOO

"The pressing of the wild humans goes well. Is the expedition prepared to do its part?" The voice coming from the depths of the cave was cold, colder than the bite of winter, cold as death. This was in keeping with the location, a cave deep in the Land of Always Winter, so far north that no human would survive outside no matter how much clothing they had on. Even giants would die swiftly outside this cave, and few indeed were the animals that could live here.

"A few of the lower orders are in position to begin work on temporary domiciles already and our magics have begun to work, though both tasks will take a full moon at least. The lower warriors are uneasy of course, but they will do their duty."

"Their feelings matter not." another voice replied, sounding somehow deeper, older, and with a bit of contempt leaking through the words. "It is unusual, yes, but it is only through the use of the ocean that we can get up round the cursed barrier the cursed Stark put up so long ago. For all the ages that have passed since the Builder raised it, the cursed barrier has lost only a little of its power. It was only because we are able to go around it via the water that we were able to lay the trap that nearly caught the Weir-gods' Chosen. That, and our human agents."

"It has always confused me about them." A fourth voice sounded out from the darkness, this one sounding almost quizzical. "They are always so easily blinded by the shine of the yellow metal they call 'gold', as if the base metal has some magic all its own over them. It is incomprehensible."

"A mystery, but one that makes them easily control. Our agents have nearly reached the cursed house of the Builder. The creature of changed fate has left. We have an opening there, which they can exploit."

"And even if that gambit does not succeed, there is nothing there that will indicate our involvement." another voice murmured, chuckling in tones that sounded like ice cracking. "It will also force them to keep some of their forces at home."

In point of fact, it was too late for that to work. The race whose leaders were speaking at present, those which the Northmen knew as White Walkers, had never gotten used to how quickly humans could react as a group to dangers directed at them, nor did they have any idea about siege weapons, logistics, or really making war, as most humans thought of it. They were masters of skirmish, of small unit tactics, and sleight of hand, but full on warfare wasn't something they understood as well as humans, who had, on every world they propagated, made it their second favorite pastime.

That didn't mean the White Walker's couldn't learn of course. That was the problem with throwing a boulder into a

stream to divert it, you could never truly control how the water flowed afterward.

"And while they look within and towards the Wall, while the wildlings are pushed by the lesser orders towards it, the island will fall. We will have a secure base of operations around the cursed barrier's side." The first voice spoke again, its tone showing amusement and triumph in equal parts.

"Agreed," said several voices. Cold laughter rebounded around the cage.

OOOOOOO

They came out of the forest, tall and thin, their faces impossibly fair to look upon. That was almost impossible to tell at night with no moon in the sky, the only light coming from the being's slightly glowing blue eyes. They wore armor, looking like a strange mix between frozen ice and a black kind of metal, molded and shaped to have spikes and cruel hooks on it in different places, as much weapons of terror as it was a defense against harm. Their ears were pointed, their faces almost fox like from what could be seen, and their fingers inhumanly long as they rested on the hilts of weapons.

Most seemed ageless and yet young, speaking quietly from one to another while following the two who seemed to lead as they moved out of the forest and onto the endless ice. Farther south this area would become an ocean, but here in the dead, frozen Land of Always Winter, where no human could dwell, the salty sea froze, kilometers thick ice in places even where it became water once more.

A gesture from one of the apparent leaders and they all fanned out, moving around the huge mountain of ice and snow that was in front of them, putting themselves between it and the land. Others came out of the woods carrying bags and other items, and they began work on the massive mountain of ice, carving out caverns and crevices. It would be the work of many moons but that would allow the winter to move south, freezing and making their craft even stronger. Soon this mountain of ice, which would have eventually become just a random iceberg, would be habitable. After that, it would be sent south with a force to attack their target.

OOOOOOO

"They're pushing us harder than they have in the past, far more." Mance Ryder, the King beyond the Wall said, frowning as he rubbed his face, closing his eyes briefly. *What the hell is going on? Before this past month, there'd only been a sighting every few months of the Others, enough to terrify and to make me think of going south, but now? Fifty sightings of their wights and four of the Others themselves?! They're trying to exterminate us piecemeal. Nothing made by man can harm them and fire can only do so much to keep them at bay with winter coming on.*

He opened his eyes, staring thoughtfully at the map on the table before him and his closest advisors. It wasn't very detailed, wildlings didn't have much use for maps, but he had been raised from a young age on the Wall, a babe taken after a group of raiders had been put to the sword. He'd even been to Winterfell as part of the escort for the former Lord Commander. That was over a decade ago now, before he turned his coat over the infringement of his freedom to wear a coat that had colors of his own choosing.

Mance was a middle-aged man of middling height, long legged and lean, with broad shoulders. In the light of the cooking fire his sharp face and brown eyes were visible, though his long brown hair was now mostly gray. He wore black ringmail, a holdover from his time as a brother of the Night's Watch, shaggy fur breeches, and wore a cloak of black wool and red silk, the same cloak he gave up his life in the Night's Watch to keep.

"Tormund, how many men have we lost since this push of the cursed Others began?"

"A little over 300 scattered over the last few weeks. They're getting more and more open in their assaults, Mance." said the man so addressed, whose gray beard reached his chest. He was taller as well as broader across the shoulders than the other men in the room of the longhouse and his face was creased with smile lines as well as signs of age. On his arms he wore golden bands marked with runes of the First Men.

Yet, for all his apparent toughness, there was fear in his face and eyes. "None of the survivors of the attacks can tell us anything about what they look like but one thing is clear, their powers are getting stronger despite the fact that winter isn't on us completely. When the dead fall, it's usually taken them longer to revive as wights, now it's almost instantaneous. The night belongs to them, Mance. Not even the boldest of our men will leave the light of the fires any longer. It's not just here at our main base either, every clan is probably falling under the same attack. The ones allied with us have passed on reports of that, including," his eyes cut to another man, equally tall but bald and earless, "Thehn."

"I had hoped to wait until winter reached the Wall at the very least." Mance murmured thoughtfully. "Allow a few more of the clans to fall under our sway, and get our logistics, such as they are, to be set up."

"We'll have to take the chance of moving now." said another man, who didn't have a beard on his face and was much shorter than the other two. He had a knobby chin, thin mustache and pinched cheeks, with a widow's peak and dark black hair. What really set him apart, however, was the fact his armor was made of loosely tied bones, which rattled with every little movement. At his side he wore a thin bladed bronze longsword. No wildling, certainly no wildling of the power of these men, would go anywhere unarmed, even here in the longhouse of their King.

As Mance turned to him, the shorter man went on. "We do have more clans joining us even now, including a few that I would never have expected. They're all terrified of the Others and they think you're the best chance to get through the Wall and away from their influence. But at the same time, the more time that goes on and we don't move, the more they think that you're too scared to attack the Wall."

Mance frowned thoughtfully, but didn't otherwise respond for a moment as he considered options. After a moment he nodded. "We'll have to move in stages. Get the word out to the clans now to get them moving, but we'll take a force straight south ourselves to set up a small forward base, take that old bastard Craster's Keep maybe. It's not much, but it's near a river, and it can feed and house the first group of raiders, and we can then start to ambush the rangers and scout the Wall's defenses. Pity, I wanted it to be set up directly in front of the center of the Wall. That way we could feint at the center while sending troops around the edges at the weakened sides, then take each of the still manned castles one after...."

Mance looked at their blank faces and shook his head. "Never mind. The Wall should be barely manned according to our last reports. If we can sweep aside the rangers before they know we're there and have the element of surprise, we can probably overcome the squatters with one good push anyway." All three men, even the one with no ears, who had a man next to him signing the words at him, cheered at that.

While Mance had some reports of the Wall itself and, indeed, a few observers close by the Wall who were good enough to evade the rangers, he didn't have any spies beyond the Wall. Else, he would've known that this was a very bad idea and that the Wall wasn't going to be 'barely manned' for very much longer. In fact, House Umber troops had already arrived and the first shipment of supplies was on their heels. Smalljon was leading the group of settlers for now, with orders to join his granduncle on the Wall after. House Karstark's troops would arrive in three more weeks, well before the wildling's larger clans could get there, with Lord Karstark's oldest son and heir, Harrion.

OOOOOO

As the King's party traveled south along the Kingsroad over the next few weeks, covering the distance from House Cerwyn's castle through their land and along the borders between the barrowlands of House Dustin and the lands of House Manderly, moving toward Moat Cailin, the days fell into a routine, besides the movement of the party, that is. Ranma would wake up, spend time with his father for a few hours, trotting alongside his horse and the King's at the front of the column, then move back through the column to 'rescue' Tommen from the carriage, and then would tell stories to the young boy for the rest of the day. They alleviated the boy's boredom from the trip plus the servants and men-at-arms nearby liked them as well. Even the Queen did to a certain extent, certainly the ones about the Ice Queen. They were amusing at least, plus had the added benefit of keeping Ranma in close proximity to the carriage which allowed her to speak to him whenever they stopped.

They also served to completely disarm Varys. For some reason, the eunuch was particularly fond of the stories of the warrior cursed to change genders with a splash of water and turned his attention for those weeks to plying Ranma for more stories of that character rather than trying to analyze what impact he would have on the game of thrones.

Despite the stories, however, there was still a bit of tension in the air between the Lannister supporters and the heir of House Stark. All of the southern knights had heard about the humiliation Ranma had handed out to the Prince, the Hound, a Kingsguard, and even a Lannister knight. None of them were willing to forget it, the Westerlands knights especially, not with Joffrey subtly fanning the flames.

The Prince also warned them not to do anything to redress the issue until they had left the North. No, better to wait until they were in the Riverlands, at the very least, possibly in Frey lands, before starting to make trouble for the boy. After all, no matter how good he was, Ranma wasn't proof against a knife in the back, now was he? Or, perhaps, an attack while he was asleep? Maybe some kind of attack on the boy's pet at some point?

Joffrey had to stretch his mind rather than simply order his hangers-on to attack the other boy. He had to be clever, because for some reason Joffrey didn't understand, his mother had forbidden him to order any direct action against Ranma. It was obvious there was a lot of familial affection between Sansa and Ranma, so any overt attack on him or



his character might offset the work that Cersei had done in gaining the girl's confidence and inflaming her interest in Joffrey.

This was not only because of his impending marriage to Sansa, but because Cersei's determination that day in Castle Cerwyn hadn't wavered. This boy had skills **far** above the norm and, despite the fact that her brother was a little too egotistical to see it, Cersei could see it easily. It was like watching someone out of the Age of Heroes, seeing him race along day after day, not even much sweat on his brow as they covered hundreds of leagues over the past few weeks. Such skill was dangerous, especially allied to an enemy house, and not just as a blade to be used against the enemies of his house, but as a rallying point, a gods-touched champion for the people. Every time they saw anyone on the road or at the very infrequent inns, there were calls of 'Lord Stark and 'Young Wolf', even from the smallfolk they passed or saw in the distance.

Unfortunately for Cersei, she hadn't figured out what levers to use on Ranma. He didn't drink, didn't seem to have any hidden vices in the form of drugs or lust for money she could manipulate. That left only the obvious and, while Ranma was a young boy, the Queen had yet to see any of the sort of glances sent her way that such a young man would normally send a beautiful woman. Either he was much more subtle in that manner than she would've expected given his normal attitude or, perhaps, his interests lay in an entirely different direction. Yet, he didn't give off any of the signs that such a man or boy would give in that case. She had long known about Renly and the Rose Knight for example.

Now, as they passed the halfway point between Cerwyn and the Moat, Cersei had decided that either she just wasn't the boy's type, which was unusual but not entirely unbelievable, or he was one of those **very** few men that didn't feel immediate lust for a woman. Still, she had several months to go before they reached Kings Landing, and Cersei knew she would eventually find some way to control Ranma.

For his part, Ranma enjoyed the trip, a little anyway. It wasn't like it was a big deal for him. Running all day at this speed was easy. Spending time with Tommen was okay, but rather boring. After all, he didn't get much enjoyment out of the stories and, even when he began to let the boy ride on his horse alone while running beside him, it was boring.

Ranma had also not gotten any more of an impression of Joffrey than he had when they set out. The Prince was very careful to not be around him for the majority of the day and, when he was, Joffrey was always with his mother or surrounded by others, along with his father.

Every day the column halted for a few hours at midday to change out the horse teams, have the midday meal, and let the men at arms have some time to exercise. Robert refused to travel as quickly as they could. He wanted to stop and carouse on his way back to Kings Landing as he had on his way up. Eddard nixed most of this, but the King put his foot down on stopping for long lunches, which took chunks out of the day that would've been better spent moving.

The men-at-arms, for the most part, took this time to train amongst themselves, with Ranma joining in exuberantly, training with those from Winterfell, along with Ser Arys Oakheart and Ser Barristan and including his father at times. Jaime had exercised with them a time or two, but his sister demanded he attend her whenever he could, which cut into his training time and had halted any chance of another full match between the Kingslayer and Ranma. Cersei knew deep down who would win such a match and had no wish to see her brother so humbled.

Ser Arys was a brown-haired, brown-eyed man with largish shoulders and an easy going manner which did more than any mask to hide what he was really thinking. He had taken to Ranma due to the way he treated the younger siblings of the royal family, treating them like children rather than pawns, noticing them over their older sibling. It was obvious that the young Princess was quite smitten with Ranma but he had yet to even notice it. It was very clear that Ranma had swiftly put Myrcella into the 'sister zone' as it were (and not her mother's sort of sister).

Today, however, Tommen came to Ranma. The older boy turned from facing three of the Winterfell guards as the youngest Baratheon sibling called his name. "Ranma, do you think you could train me like you did back in Winterfell as we travel?"

Ranma cocked his head, handing the practice sword that he had been using to illustrate a parry back to a smiling Stark man. "I don't think your mother would take kindly to it, Tommy. We didn't bring any of the practice vests, after all. I suppose I could walk you through some exercises to increase your strength and dexterity, if you want?"

Tommen nodded eagerly. "I want to be as good as you are when I'm older."

The Stark heir winced as the men-at-arms around him chuckled. "That would probably take much more time than your family would be willing to let you give to the arts, Tommy, but I'll see what I can do. Did you ask your mother, the Queen, about this?"

Tommen paled a little, causing Ranma to laugh. "Let's go, if she agrees to it, I'll train you, if not then we'll figure something out."

They found Cersei holding court around one of the mealtime campfires. Ranma scowled when he saw that Joffrey had taken the opportunity to sit next to Sansa. He was telling her some story, probably made up, of a hunting expedition he had been on where he had killed a wild boar with a single thrust of his spear. Ranma doubted Joffrey had ever killed a wild boar, leastwise, not one that hadn't been tied down first.

Cersei turned, looking up as her Tommen and Ranma came close. One eyebrow rose interrogatively, wondering what the boy wanted, while inwardly cursing, not having noticed that Tommen had wandered off, concentrating as she was on Joffrey and Sansa.

Ranma bowed from the waist. "Your pardon your grace, but Tommy came to me and asked if I could train him as I did back in Winterfell." He hurried on as the Queen's eyes narrowed angrily. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Joffrey scowling at him as well as Sansa, who probably had heard something of what had happened but almost certainly not the full story. "Er, anyway, I was thinking that I could just give him some exercises to do rather than go straight to training as we don't have the practice pads." He reached out unruffled the younger boy's head affectionately. "It'll probably tire him out for the part of the day spent in the carriage."

Before Cersei could respond the King's voice boomed from behind them. "That's a fine idea lad, and you Joffrey, you join them too." They all turned to look at the King, who had approached them from the edge of the scrub on horseback with Ned and several men-at-arms behind him, the ones who were in charge of hunting for the party, along with his group of Kingsguard. Between two of the hunters they carried a spear below which was tied a boar.

Robert flicked one hand somewhat contemptuously at his older son. "Take this one with you as well, Ranma." he said looking back at Ranma. "See if you can make something of either one of them."

Cersei interjected. "Surely my love, it is more important for Joffrey to get to know his fiancée at times like these. It isn't as if they can have a conversation if you are going to have him ride all day outside the carriage." As the king's face began to redden with anger she went on smoothly. "Perhaps, if Joffrey can exercise with Ranma during our stops like this, he can ride in the coach after the midday break?"

While his younger sister smiled hopefully, Ranma fought back a scowl. He hadn't seen that coming, though Joffrey joining them had been a possibility. He did not like the idea of giving Joffrey more time with Sansa, his sister was besotted with the Prince enough as it was. Ranma still hadn't gotten more than impressions and feelings to back his instant dislike of the older Baratheon child, but neither had his feelings of disquiet eased.

Robert growled a little but decided to go with it. "Fine, your little brat can rest his ass in the afternoon, if that's what he wants." He laughed loudly, as did the men at arms behind him though Ned shook his head, sighing faintly, sending a plume of breath into the cold air.

The rift between Joffrey and Robert was becoming more obvious the more time Ranma and Ned spent with them. Most importantly, it was becoming obvious in comparison to Ranma and Ned. Ned had yet to find out why the King was so contemptible of his firstborn son nor why he was so distant with all of his children. Surely the man had some fatherly feeling in him somewhere, even if his wife wasn't Lyanna?

The Crown Prince scowled for a moment but at a glare from his father subsided. Joffrey wanted the man's attention and affection, but at the same time he feared his father like fire.

Cersei got up as Joffrey did, exchanging seats with him to sit down next to Sansa, but before she did she murmured into Joffrey's ear. "Just wait my son, put up with it for a few days and the King will forget his silly desire to 'make a man out of you' or whatever he calls it. Then you'll have more time in the carriage with me and your bride-to-be, won't that be nice?"

Her son nodded, but still looked irritated.

Ranma led Joffrey and Tommy over to a patch of flat ground nearby, shadowed by the Kingsguard who always followed Joffrey around as well as a few others, including Sandor Clegane. The Hound smirked. "So you'd rather spend your time teaching children than exercising with real soldiers, boy?"

Ranma grinned a little challengingly at him. "Why not? It's not as if the 'real soldiers' on this trip it can really challenge me, after all. Or are you saying you want another go-around?" He held the Hound's gaze for a moment, staring the older man down.

The Hound was not someone who would take such a challenge lying down, normally, but there was just something in Ranma's eyes, a challenge that for some reason Sandor found he was unwilling to take up. He also remembered, just as well as Joffrey did, the manhandling the young man put them through. He was not used to being so handled easily, Sandor wasn't among the top ten blades in Westeros, but he was a damn good fighter despite that, so it had been a sobering experience for him.

About a minute later, Ranma walked Tommen and Joffrey through the exercise he wanted them to do, mainly sit-ups and pushups for now, then running in place and some limbering exercises. While Tommen took to them with a will (yet no skill), Joffrey was not exactly enthused about the exercises, yet did them all the same, scowling all the while. With Cersei and Robert so close by there was no chance of him making any trouble or even complaining verbally, so the rest of the stop passed uneventfully.

About three hours later the group got ready to go. Tommen was once more placed on Ranma's horse near the royal carriage. He looked at Ranma, who was trying to not glare at Joffrey as he got into the carriage after Sansa. "You're so good Ranma, do you think you would ever join the Kingsguard?"

Ser Barristan was standing by Robert's side close-by. Hearing this question he perked up his ears.

The question worked to grab Ranma's attention from his attempt to discreetly burn a hole in the back of Joffrey's head via his stare. He turned, reaching up to ruffle the younger boy's hair with a laugh. "Not a chance!"

Tommen pouted. If Ranma was a King's guard then maybe Ranma would be assigned to him and, maybe, actually being a prince would become fun. Myrcella, getting into the carriage after her mother, also seemed a little sad at that, but it was Tommen who spoke up. "Why don't you want to be a King's guard? It's a great honor!"

"For one thing, I'm the heir of Winterfell and I'd have to leave that behind, something I've been trained to be since I was younger than you. And for another..." Ranma shook his head. "Never mind."

"Is it the abstinence?" Jeyne blurted through the open door of the carriage from her position by Sansa. The girl flushed as the Queen looked over at her from where she was standing by the carriage door, glaring in censure. Mordane, who was getting in the carriage from the other side, also glared at her, smacking Jeyne on the arm.

Ranma however simply laughed. "Not at all, little Miss Gossip, there are other reasons, most of them being bound by the words duty and honor."

The Queen ushered Jeyne in then looked at Ranma quizzically moving to stand closer to him. "Truly, why are you not interested? It is indeed a great honor. You're father is still a fit man, you have younger brothers who could take over as heir while you go on to make a name for yourself, rather than merely wasting your life waiting for your own opportunity." Here she was simply sifting for information, trying to see more of Ranma's character, the better to figure out his handles.

Ranma looked over at the queen. "The responsibly of an heir is not something one should set aside, not if you are actually worthy of it." Ranma paused, then nodded his head slightly towards the head of the column where Robert sat on his horse now, then murmured in a low voice so that Tommen couldn't hear. "And let's just say that if I give my personal allegiance to a King, he'd have to be worthy of it."

That comment brought a small smile to the Queen's face, and she leaned forward just slightly enough to let a bit of her décolletage be seen. "I would agree with that sentiment young man, but perhaps eventually there will be one such."

*My son will be a better king than Robert has ever dreamed of being and with this boy at his side, they could do magnificent things together. I must figure out how to control him or, if not that, marginalize him in some fashion. With that she turned, flipping her hair expertly behind her in such a way that the special soap she used in it wafted under his nose. she ascended into the carriage.*

Ranma turned again to face his horse, Fenris right beside him. The large direwolf looked up at him and Ranma looked down at it, shrugging a little, unable to get the impression the wolf was trying to send him as the smell of the Queen's shampoo hit the direwolf. Smells, especially the memory of smells was one area where their bond was very weak.

Soon enough they were on the move and Ranma put the odd exchange out of his mind, never noticing that Ser Barristan had moved away, sighing sadly. The old man knew for a fact that if Ranma felt like that already, there was no chance of him convincing the boy to take up the White while Robert was on the throne and certainly not Joffrey,

either. Unlike the rest of the Kingsguard, Ser Selmy was not blind to the boy's faults and growing issues.

*No, I will have to set aside the idea of Ranma joining and helping me cleanse the Kingsguard of its current taint. Unless, he thought to himself his eyes moving towards Tommen and then from Tommen to the carriage and back again, something surprising happens. But that isn't likely to happen, is it. NO, I am a Kingsguard, not a king-maker. I must deal with the world as is, not as it should be.*

OOOOOOO

Life in Winterfell had also fallen into a new routine over the past few weeks. Standing in for the wounded lady Catelyn, Jon, with Rickon accompanying him sometimes for the look of it, would meet with farmers, landowners, and merchants, gathering supplies to be sent to the Wall, though he'd yet to receive a reply from Lord Manderly about the way they wished to do this. After all, you could send a lot more supplies by ship in a shorter amount of time than you could by land, and the Manderlys did have a trade fleet, after all, which had grown in size over the past ten years, built from wood coming down from House Cerwyn's land. They could transport goods up to Eastwatch much easier and from there it could be distributed along the wall.

Getting the food and other goods from Winterfell or Cerwyn or Hornwood down to White Harbor would be bothersome, but even there, Jon had plans. After all, House Stark and House Cerwyn had used the White Knife River and its tributaries, why not expand on that? It would take time, and possibly wouldn't be used for the first shipment down to the White Harbor, but eventually he hoped to have a system much like that found in the Riverlands to ship goods down river. Lord Stark, with Ranma and Jon's aid, had been planning to work on that for the past year and the men, mostly pulled from two minor houses along the river, were ready to get to work on it.

While Theon continued to go out with the hunters to bring in more game for the larder, Jon's work cut into his training time, so he wasn't actually able to train with Arya like he had said he would and what little training he did was mostly getting to know how to warg.

Many a night Jon stayed up late, his mind riding along with Ghost as the direwolf went out on its own to hunt. Ghost was larger now than he had been when Ranma and the others left, although he wasn't quite as large as Fenris had been when they left, but he was more than large enough to escape the kennels whenever he wished. His trick of moving unseen had also evolved to the point where he could get out of the keep and out of Winterfell from Jon's room without being seen.

Jon was getting better at directing him, at riding and controlling their connection, analyzing the direwolf's senses and using them almost as well as his own. Arya, too, was getting better and Nymeria often joined her pack-mate to hunt. Though Arya had yet to learn as much as Jon, simply because she couldn't stay awake at night long enough to warg with Nymeria as long as Jon did nightly with Ghost, she was still learning quickly.

Here Jon was lucky. Ranma had yet to figure out a way to bring up their family skill to Sansa in such a way that wouldn't terrify her, but Arya had no such fear. Even with the tales of Old Nan about skin-changers and how evil they were, Arya was confident in herself and her siblings to discount them. But even as fascinated as she was with warging with Nymeria, Arya couldn't concentrate on it, due to how much other stuff she was doing.

Arya exercised for half the day with Dacey in the mornings, then was forced by the Lady Jonelle to take etiquette lessons with her. Unlike the 'old prune' Mordane, however, Jonelle actually made the lessons interesting by putting in anecdotes of history and little humorous moments she had seen in her father's halls, or heard from further south. Rickon also liked Jonelle, who also made his own lessons fun, interspersing them with games for him and for her son, Cley.

Still, Arya made no bones about the fact that she was always eager to get away from the castle and exercise with her new sword, Fang. Dacey obliged easily enough, having been asked, between bouts of lovemaking that last night with Ranma, to take Arya under her wing. When the frost was still covering everything and the mist was still billowing, the two would ride about two hours from Winterfell, deep into the woods to a clearing, where they exercised until midday.

Every day would start off the same, with Arya going through various strength and dexterity exercises, then she would move through some other exercises meant to heighten her mobility that Ranma had trained her in, including, though she didn't know it, several of the first katas he had learned as the basis of the Saotome School of Anything Goes. If Ranma continued to train her, Arya would be able to jump and fight in the air as well as he had when he was younger, though the addition of a sword made her slightly slower. Still, it would certainly take the ground-bound fighters in this world by surprise.

Dacey didn't make use of those, since she was larger and stronger than most men she had no need of them and had

honestly started training with Ranma too late in life to really get the most out of them. Still, even Dacey had gotten some aid from the katas that Ranma had integrated into their training. Indeed, all the wolf-sworn, though only a few people had realized it yet, were deadlier warriors by far than most.

After that, however, came the part that Arya loved best, full on sparring. Arya didn't wear the padded armor like Bran did when he had been training. Dacey forbade it on the grounds that it weighed the girl down and did nothing else. Instead, Dacey had Arya wear personalized leather armor and use a small light buckler, which gave her some defense but didn't weigh her down.

While Arya was built for speed, light on her feet, and always mobile, Dacey was simply a mountain. She would stay still in one place, her sword and large shield flicking out fast as lightning at the younger girl, who could only barely parry a few blows before she was thrown back. In this manner, Arya was learning how to use her speed to the greatest advantage and building up her strength further. She was already surprisingly strong for her size but she couldn't rely on that strength against a grown man or a group of enemies to see her through. Arya would never be a big woman, she took after her mother in height rather than her father, and she would never have the massive muscles or the reach that a woman like Dacey had.

Still, Arya was learning how to fight at a frightening rate. Unlike Bran, Arya had a real talent for the blade and her instincts for fighting were incredibly good. She was also ruthless, taking any advantage she could, using her hands, shield, feet and anything else to gain an advantage, something Dacey praised. She was teaching Arya how to fight, not prance around. Every day Arya improved, never falling for the same trick, always building up her base skills.

Today, however, their first spar was interrupted. Dacey paused for a moment, holding up a hand to warn Arya away. She stared off into the woods, her eyes narrowed as she concentrated.

Arya stopped, looking at her quizzically, as Nymeria, laying on the ground by the edge of the clearing, perked up, her ears upright. Arya frowned trying to get a sense of Nymeria had heard, but not being able to. Instead she turned her attention back to Dacey. "What is it?"

"I thought I heard something over that way." The Mormont warrior pointed away from the direction that would take them back to Winterfell, deeper into the wolfwood. "Sounded almost like jangling of a harness and voices in the distance."

They paused, and in the silence Arya was finally able to get a read on what Nymeria was hearing. ***Voice of two legs, four legged not-for eating things the man things use, those odd things they had on them, moving and stamping.*** Arya came out of her short trance with a grin and raced off, Nymeria nipping at her heels. "Let's go see what it is!"

"Arya, wait!" Dacey shouted then cursed luridly before racing after her.

Arya had gained some of her older brother's endurance, and could run through the woods for hours on end. Dacey had some endurance, but little of Arya's speed so she had fallen well behind the younger girl by the time Arya neared the source of the noise enough to make out what it was with her own ears.

On the other hand, she had also gained some of her half-brothers sneakiness, so she knew how to be quiet in the woods. Sliding into a small area between a snow pile and a tree trunk, she motioned Dacey to move up behind her. Looking around the side of the tree they could look down the side of a very small hill in the forestland looking down at a largish clearing that was full of stamping horses and men.

The men and horses were all ragged, looking as if they had traveled for a long time. The men were caked with mud, their clothing was torn, patched and simply dirty along with their bodies, not a one of them looked as if they had as many meals as they should. They looked like a band of down on their luck mercenaries more than anything else.

Arya wondered what the heck they were doing in the wolfwood at all, let alone so close to Winterfell in such numbers. Dacey was wondering the same thing, and she glared down at the men from their hiding places. "Move back a little," she whispered. "Let's get further back out of sight."

Even Arya knew when to be serious and she moved back with her mentor past several trees, back towards the edge of their hearing range. They hunkered down again, hiding behind a downed tree out of sight. Dacey reached into a pouch, bringing out a small viewing glass, which had been a gift from Jon on her last birthday. He and Ranma had pitched in for it, though Dacey had at the time been a little miffed that her gift from Ranma hadn't been at least a **little** more romantic. Still, it was useful and had been expensive to pay for the glass in it plus have it shipped up to Winterfell.

She looked through it at the men, who were moving around and talking amongst themselves. She was looking for some identifying mark, something she could use to figure out where these people had come from. After a few minutes, Dacey hissed in surprise. Arya looked at her but Dacey merely shook her head, staring at what looked very much like the remnants of a flayed man mark on one battered shield.

The men sworn to House Bolton had been broken up and separated into different houses both major and minor. But Dacey knew that a few of the minor houses that had sworn to Bolton hadn't been happy about their lord's house being erased in such a manner. Greatjon had crushed two such houses when they joined together to try and force the issue, but it looked as if he had missed more than a few of their troops. *How the hell did they get this far south without being seen and what the hell are they planning?*

"Can you hear what they're saying?" Dacey asked her young charge. Part of her wanted to send Arya back to Winterfell, to take word of what they had found and to get the girl away from danger but she knew Arya wouldn't go without a fight. As good as she had been so far about being quiet, Dacey had no illusions that would last if they began to argue. *Best not to have an argument with her this close to men who might have fell intentions.*

She turned back to the man grimacing as she noticed another warrior whose shield bore the image of several frogs on a yellow background. "House Marsh." she muttered. "Evidently some of their men at arms survived when Greatjon crushed them."

Arya looked at her in surprise and Dacey explained. "When your father ordered the dissolution of Bolton you know that some houses took it poorly? Well Marsh was one of them. Greatjon crushed Redflag and Bloodtaker while Lord Hornwood crushed another one when they all tried to take to brigand's ways. Well, Marsh, the family Hornwood put down tried, anyway. The other two tried to band together behind one of their lords and force the issue, wanting to be raised to noble status and given control of the former Bolton lands in their entirety. Lord Umber did not have much truck with that."

"Huh, so, what, they're here to raid something or other? But surely a force this large should have been seen at some point before this." Arya muttered. Once more she tried to connect to Nymeria, to use her partner's senses, but the wolf couldn't relay the words the 'two-legs' were saying, not understanding them.

"I don't know. They could've moved into the mountains and followed that route down through the wolfswood but I would've thought the mountain clans would've stopped them."

Arya shrugged. "Maybe they did, maybe this is just the remnants of a larger force or maybe they broke up into smaller groups and snuck in that way."

In fact, the brigands **had** broken into groups of four or five and made their way south through various means, coming together at an abandoned tower several days travel deeper into the wolfswood before making straight for Winterfell in two groups of sixty.

A sound from behind the two girls made Dacey turn, her sword already flashing out of her scabbard to meet the rush of two men with spears, who had come out of the woods behind them. One of them shouted loudly. "Alarm, alarm! Two Wolf bitches on the southern side of caaa-!" That man died with Dacey's sword in his throat, his words ending with a gurgle of blood.

Arya unwound from the ground like a coiled spring, her small buckler pushing the spear that had been about to take her in the back to one side, competing her turn by slicing her sword into the side of the man who had wielded it.

She gaped for a moment as the blood gushed out from the heavy gut wound but Dacey, knowing they had but moments before the band was roused, smacked her upside the head. "Don't freeze on me! Let's get out of here!"

Arya shakily nodded, but it was too late. The men of the camp reacted with all the speed of the desperate and jumpy. Five more men had rushed toward the sound of the shout, while behind them Dacey could hear the band rousing in its entirety.

"Surrender wolf bitches, you may live!" One man demanded, his eyes staring at both the girl and the woman hungrily. It had been over a year since any of this band had dared to pillage and the sight of two females this close was making them all nearly blind with lust.

Dacey shivered a little but pushed Arya behind her, raising her bastard sword in one hand, her heavy shield in the other. "If you think only five of you are enough to take me, then come ahead and try."

The speaker stared into her eyes and flinched away but his fellows charged forwards. "Guard my back!" Dacey whispered, then moved to meet them. Her shield smashed out, catching one attacker's blow with such force it actually pushed the attacker back, opening him up to be sliced from crotch to chest by her blade before Dacey turned, blocking the next man's strike with her sword as her shield's bottom edge lashed out to the third man's face as he tried to get around her.

"AGH, You gah!" Arya took that man with a deep slash that caught him right below his chest plate, spilling his guts to the forest floor and ending his curse before it could begin. Her buckler whipped out, redirecting the sword of the fourth man before her sword ripped out of her first victim to sink deep into his thigh, causing him to scream and fall to the ground.

The final man tried to thrust his spear into Dacey's chest, as her sword was still blocking his fellow's blow. Nevertheless, she deflected the thrust to the side and into the ground with her shield. The man then screamed and collapsed to the side as he felt the back of his knee be ripped out from behind him. "AGHHH!" Nymeria's jaw then clamped down the back of his neck, ripping and tearing.

With the last man down, the two women raced away through the woods back the way they came. But by this point, the reavers were fully aroused and men were rushing towards them through the woods, many trying to race around the two interlopers to get ahead of them.

The men also had horses and, because Arya refused to leave Dacey behind, they were able to encircle the pair again, though the noise had surprisingly brought aid. Three men, who had somehow maneuvered their horses around the women, fell from their saddles in rapid succession, arrows sticking out of their chests.

Theon burst out of the woods, leading seven men he had been on a hunting expedition with. All eight of them knelt on the ground, firing one arrow after another from their bows. Men fell all around the two racing women, who skidded to a halt in front of the archers as Theon calmly pulled back his own recurve bow, sighting his target for just a second, before letting fly. The one man he had seen with his own bow fell with a gurgle, Theon's arrow having taken him right through one eye.

"Lucky for you, little wolf, that we were in the area!" Theon shouted, a bright, almost hungry smile on his face as he picked out another target, a man coming around a snowbank, another bow raised. Before the man could aim, he too fell, an arrow through the neck, his blood staining the snow around him bright red. "Get going, I have no idea what's going on here, but I think Winterfell should be warned!"

Arya looked at Dacey, who nodded. Arya looked at Nymeria for a moment, a wild idea forming in her mind. Wordlessly the two raced on, but they didn't go back toward Winterfell. Behind her Theon, Dacey, and the hunters broke off, moving away from the direction Arya had just run toward, trying to keep the attention of the brigands on them while keeping their distance from the main band, and picking off the frontrunners.

After running about ten minutes, the noise of combat now muffled by the woods all around them, Arya and Nymeria stopped in a small glade with grass visible in the center, the sun having melted the snow away in this place for now. In the middle of the tiny glade, Arya went to her knees, staring into her Nymeria's eyes. This was something beyond anything she had heretofore tried, using her link to try to command the wolf, not with instincts, but with an actual mental command, even if it was couched in terms that a wolf would understand. ***Pack in danger, pack in danger, call for aid, call now, HOWL!***

The howls of wolves were devices of communication, almost like an army's bugles, and could tell pack members a lot more information than humans could ever truly understand. It took Arya a moment to get her intentions across to Nymeria, to forge the connection to her so that she was controlling the wolf's actions, distilled through the instincts of the wolf, rather than merely riding along her partner's mind. But soon, Nymeria opened her mouth, then threw her head back and howled, the noise echoing all around, heard for leagues in every direction.

OOOOOO

Jon had **finally** been able to get away from the cursed paperwork. He had decided to spend his day out hunting with Ghost, just the two of them, although he had left Winterfell along with a band of ten hunters. He was just aiming his bow at a doe a hundred yards away when the sound of a howling wolf in the distance reached him and Ghost, who was laying belly down in a snowbank downwind from the doe, his white coat letting him blend in with ease.

For the first time, Ghost broke into their connection, pushing thoughts and feelings into Jon. ***Danger, pack mate calls, danger!*** With the thoughts came an image, the image of Arya kneeling by her wolf, her sword by her side, as well as a direction.

Jon bolted upright, instantly turning to race in that direction. As he ran, he raised his hunting horn to his mouth and blew an alarm. This was to summon the band of hunters, which had broken up into teams of two. Not five minutes later, the first of the hunters came into view and he raised a hand, pointing ahead of him.

As fast as Arya could move, Jon could move even faster, though he didn't have the endurance of his brother. In the space of twenty minutes, he covered enough ground to begin hearing the sound of combat in the distance. By this time, four other hunters had heard his horn and moved through the woods to meet up with him. Jon looked at them and the two he had first seen, smiling grimly as the two, visibly winded, came into range of his voice. "Alright, I have no idea what's going on, but it seems we might be running into some trouble ahead, so here is what we're going to do..."

Moment's later the hunters were on their way, and Jon raced through the woods to where he could hear Nymeria sending up her howl. He found her and Arya in the clearing he knew his sister and Dacey used to practice. He raced up to her, catching Arya in a hug before she could turn from staring into her wolf's eyes, evidently warging with Nymeria. "Well done, Arya! Are you hurt?"

Arya came out of her trance when her brother's arms went around her, and was almost surprised that he had come up on her without her feeling it. To one side she noticed Ghost, larger and stronger than Nymeria, standing and staring out into the distance towards the faint clangor of battle through the woods. It was only when those sounds hit her that Arya finally broke out of her momentary stupefaction. "Jon, we need to go, Dacey, she and Theon and few others they..."

"I know, and I will handle it Arya, I've already made some plans, but you need to get back to Winterfell to warn them. I can't take you back into that." So saying, Jon stood up, moving in the direction of the battle. "Go!"

Arya however had other ideas and moved with him, Nymeria moving to Ghost's side, her fangs bared in anticipation. "Oh hell no, Jon! You may be my brother, but that doesn't give you the right to order me out of this. I'm a Stark too, and my Fang will strike against the enemies of our family!"

Jon growled, but after looking into her fierce eyes, so much like their father's, without even a hint of their mother's softer nature in them, he realized the futility of arguing. As they raced on he chuckled, shaking his head. "Well said sister, just make certain you protect yourself well, I don't want to explain to anyone I let you get hurt." Arya laughed aloud, and the quartet of direwolves raced on, both the two legged and four legged now moving as one pack.

OOOOOO

The battle in the trees had become close far too quickly for the hunters' liking. The men they were fighting pressed forward, using their shields to guard themselves from the Stark hunters' arrows, but never falling back. Instead they surged forward desperately, anxious to wipe out this band and move on to Winterfell before the castle of the Starks could be roused against them, knowing that was their only chance to pull through. They had been promised much and they wanted to make the Starks pay for what happened to their Lord four years ago.

Theon was armed with a heavy short sword, sort of like Jon's, only broader, with a jagged cutting edge along one side and a broad, heavy point, good for punching through armor. But the hunters were only armed with their longbows and skinning knives, which was a poor match for armor and melee weapons. They fell back as the men around them rushed to try and close with them.

One hunter died with a gurgle as a man wielding an ax came around a tree, slamming the single blade of the axe into the hunter's stomach, nearly slicing him in two with the force of the blow. The axeman died, however, with Theon's arrow right through his eye.

The Iron Born turned quickly, pulling his sword out of its scabbard to block a blow from a longsword, pushing the man off balance before grabbing his arm and pulling him close. The tip of Theon's blade took the man under his chest plate, then as he ripped it out, pulled the man's intestines out when they caught on the notched side of the blade. As the man screamed, Theon left his sword in the soon-to-be-corpse, calmly picked up his bow, then fitting a shaft to his bow, shot another man down. "Die, you stupid fuckers!"

Dacey was holding off three men at once, her blade flashing out to smash their swords this way and that. Her shield was now dented and buckled but still deadly, both for defense and as a weapon, which the Mormont clanswoman proved by ducking underneath one man's blow and smashing the edge of her shield into the inside of the knee of another man. As the man began to scream and fall to the ground, all the fight gone out of him, her blade came up to cut into the unprotected side of the third man, who had lunged at her former position.



A mace crashed down onto her back and she grunted in agony but her armor held, despite the fact that the impact threw her to the ground. She rolled, bringing up her sword desperately to block a spear thrust from another man, smacking it aside, and kicking out to catch the man right in the crotch. "AGHHHHHhnhhhh...."

Dacey rolled again, as the man went down screaming with his hands clutching his family jewels, which she had ruptured with her kick. She finally got her feet under her and pushed to her feet, blocking two more strikes and pushing both men back with a roar. "Here we stand!"

Theon grunted irritably as he ran out of arrows. His last arrow took a man armored in full plate armor, taking the man in the small opening between his gorget and helmet. He grabbed up his short sword from where it was imbedded in the guts of the corpse he had killed earlier and raced forward to join Dacey. They worked to keep the brigands away from the archers, who were once more pulling back, ducking around trees, and trying to use the trees and snow mounds as cover. There were over thirty of the invaders down already, their bodies scattered through the woods. The wooded terrain didn't allow the attacking force to bunch up and use their numbers to their fullest advantage, allowing the defenders to pick them off as they attacked. Moreover none of them were armed with bow and arrows, and the hunters reaped a deadly toll.

The battle began to go against the Stark loyalists, however, when more enemy arrived from behind the archers having circled through the woods, killing three of them before they could pull back. The remaining trio of hunters moved away from the two sides converging, deeper into the woods. This unfortunately left Dacey and Theon isolated, facing at least forty, possibly more men. "Pull back, move with me." Dacey ordered, making her way in the direction of the glade she and Arya used for their sword-practice.

Then suddenly, Arya, Jon, and their direwolves were there, snarling. "Winter is Coming!"

Ghost went for his usual subtlety, leaping towards a man and ripping out his throat with fangs that approached the size of knives. The force of the blow sent the man's corpse skittering backwards with Ghost still on it, then the large animal leaped off its kill, ripping one man's leg out from under him.

"AHH, getitoff!" The man screamed while he tried to bring up his blade, but Jon slew him almost absentmindedly leaping over Ghost's first victim to engage two men who were trying to circle around Dacey and Theon, his swords flashing.

Of all the wolf-sworn and the Stark siblings, Jon had trained the most with Ranma by a wide margin. His speed and strength were quite frankly inhuman when compared to normal soldiers. There were stronger men out there even so, but there was **no-one**, save Ranma himself who was faster, and his blade smacked the blades of his opponents aside, almost contemptuously, before slicing out their throats so fast the men didn't realize they were dead until their bodies hit the red-tinted snow at their feet. Five men died as Jon moved through the woods, his swords moving in perfect control, smashing blades aside, cutting open weak points, slashing through armor, all with equal ease.

Theon grabbed the haft of a spear thrusting towards him, sidestepping to pull the man close enough for his short sword to ram through his throat, the blow punching out the back of the man's neck while shattering his spine. Then he pulled the spear out of the dying man's hand, wielding it for a moment against another man before Jon was there, cutting the man down and joining Theon. "Took you long enough, Snow!" Theon shouted over the cacophony of battle, stabbing with his short sword at a man who had played possum behind him. The man's blood joined the rest that had been spilled out onto the forest floor and the patches of snow around them.

"Don't complain, I had to set something up!" Jon returned, ducking underneath an axe and slicing open the stomach of its owner, before burying his other sword's tip into the eye of another man.

"Set what up!?" Dacey queried, now wielding her blade in both hands, her shield discarded due to being too smashed and bent out of shape to be anything but a hindrance. She frowned at the sight of Arya, who was now fighting beside her once more. Nymeria was working with Ghost at the outskirts of the battle to rip and tear at men and take attention away from the quartet of hard pressed humans.

Arya, however, ignored her trainer's frown, concentrating on the here and now. She blocked and parried blows from several men who seemed to think her an easy target, falling back toward Dacey for a moment. Suddenly, she jumped to the side, leaping halfway up a tree trunk, kicking off it over a massive two handed swing from a man wielding a greatsword, Fang flashing out to cut the front of his neck open in a welter of blood while her buckler flashed out, smashing into the bridge of another man's nose. She landed on the ground rolling as she hit, kicking out to destroy that man's knee with a satisfying crunching noise before standing tall, her eyes wild and Fang flickering in her hand.

Suddenly, arrows began to fall among the men around them and Jon smiled grimly. "That."

Jon had taken the time to hunt up the men that he had initially left from Winterfell with. Before he met up with Arya, Jon had sent them toward the battle on an angle, intending to have them attack the group making all the noise from the side. Now, their arrows whizzed through the heavily wooded area to take the attackers from the left side of the battle around Jon and the others.

Even so, the invaders were stubborn and there were more of them than Dacey had first thought, a little over a hundred at the beginning of the battle, in fact. She and Arya had only found one of two areas being used as a final gathering point, and the others had all rushed toward the sound of battle rather than trying to go around it to make for Winterfell. The soldiers kept coming forward, pressing the quartet hard. It was touch and go for the next twenty minutes or so, with more men coming out of the woods to try and close with the archers, forcing the hunters to retreat through the woods.

The attention on the archers took more pressure off the quartet of close combatants and they broke away, breaking out into a large clearing next to a path, having forced the attackers off their course toward Winterfell and down toward the road leading eventually to Hornwood and beyond. The hunters joined up with Jon and the others, pulling out their few remaining arrows to aim back at the edge of the woods. Arya wiped her forehead wearily, while her brother, Theon, and Dacey simply stood, waiting for the rush of men to pursue them out of the woods. They didn't have to wait long and, soon enough, their attackers charged out, their faces grimly determined.

Before battle could be rejoined, however, a jangle of harness from around the bend of the road through the trees spelled the end of the battle. "For the Seven and White Harbor!" A familiar voice shouted, accompanied by several others. Around the bend came a force of twenty armored knights, their shields showing the white merman on a blue-green field of House Manderly, their lances lowered.

Before the attackers could pull back into the woods, where horses would lose their mobility, the knights were on them. This was the final straw for the attackers, who finally broke, most of them trying to escape rather than fight now, running in every direction. The knights split off, trampling attackers underneath their hooves, their blades flashing down and out, their lances lost in that initial rush. The heavier two-handed blades they used cut through the infantrymen's sparse armor easily, killing or maiming with every blow.

Arya fell to her knees, gasping in breaths, more exhausted by that short amount of real combat than she ever was after a half day of exercising with Dacey.

Jon reached down and ruffled her hair, leaving his hand on her shoulder as he looked up at one of the knights who was moving towards them. The visor lifted and a familiar face looked out at them all. Hathan smiled grimly. "My Lord Manderly sent myself and Ser Wendel to discuss the plans of using his fleet to transport supplies up to the wall." He waved at a somewhat portly knight who was moving through the woods with more difficulty than the others, but his sword was flashing out with vigor and strength. Wendel was the second son of Lord Manderly, a belted knight and one of his father's better field commanders. "Our timing seems to have been impeccable."

Jon and Theon barked laughter, while Dacey merely nodded, letting her sword drop to the ground as she knelt by Arya, gently bringing the young girl into her arms. She thought that Arya would have to be consoled about having killed men, but she was shocked to realize that there were no tears in Arya's eyes, only the aftershocks of her first battle working their way through her body as the adrenaline left her.

Theon looked down at Arya too and groaned aloud. "By the Drowned God, what are we going to tell Lady Catelyn?"

"Absolutely nothing!" Jon replied firmly. "Arya wasn't here, she was never here. Dacey," he glowered at the woman, "did what she should have done and sent Arya through the woods where she found me, so she stayed far away from the battle." One eyebrow raised, he looked down at Arya, wordlessly asking if the young girl understood that saying anything about this was a bad idea.

But the girl, who was now really feeling all the aches and pains of her first combat and who was trying to figure out what she felt about killing men, simply nodded, with Nymeria's bloody jaw pressing into her side. "We'll have to stop somewhere where I can clean up at least, maybe get a servant to bring me out a new set of clothes, but I **really** don't want to have that conversation either."

Wendel had joined them at this point and began to laugh. "No matter how big a wolf pup gets, I suppose he or she will always be afraid of his mother!"

O O O O O O O

The aftermath of battle was always hard but in this case the Stark forces had gotten off relatively lightly. While Arya

was sore and exhausted, she hadn't actually been hurt. Her small buckler had been ruined, but Fang had come through it without even a nick on the blade. Jon, too, was uninjured, though one of his short swords had been broken by a sword-breaker (a short weapon with two heavy tines, which the user could use to capture and snap the blade of a sword).

Theon, however, had taken several blows, in point of fact his ribs on one side were cracked from a barely redirected blow from a mace, and had taken a cut above one eye, the blood of which had nearly blinded him before they retreated out onto the path, where Hathan and the knights following him had joined them. Dacey was wounded as well. The armor she had been using had been buckled and rent, exposing several wounds to her side and chest. Luckily, none of them were major and the maester was well able to deal with them when they returned to Winterfell.

Of the seventeen hunters that had left the Castle that morning, six returned. They had fallen in the woods to the swords of the attackers before they could retreat, or had been circled and cut down. Hathan had lost one knight, who was pulled from his horse by a desperate band of seven brigands who had banded together deeper in the woods. They had been ridden down by his vengeful fellows.

When they returned to Winterfell, thankfully for Theon, Jon, and Dacey, the ruse about Arya worked. Catelyn was too appalled that the brigands had come so close to her daughter (who she knew spent her mornings out in the woods with Dacey, and was ambivalent about it, not knowing what they were doing) to take much notice of the somewhat faraway look in Arya's eyes or the fact that Nymeria, who routinely did not bathe, was almost fresh smelling. Arya spent the rest of that evening in the infirmary with her mother being fussed over, something she put up with easily enough.

With the aid of Ser Rodrick, Jon and Theon questioned the few survivors closely, and they were all very vocal, trying to save their own skins. It didn't work obviously, but alas, none of them had much information to share. They simply told Jon and Theon they had been a part of House Marsh, before that House had been smashed by Hornwood for taking to brigands ways after the fall of House Bolton, as well as some House Bolton soldiers who were more loyal to their dead liege than most.

They had been led by a man called Gorson, the man who had worn full plate armor that Theon had killed with his last arrow. Gorson had found someone, he refused to tell the others who, that was willing to pay them to assault Winterfell. He had moved the men in small lots south towards their target, mostly through the mountains. Why they hadn't been bothered by the mountain clans, especially the Wull clan, who was the closest and most firmly allied with House Stark, was a mystery. Jon sent a messenger out that day to see if the Wull, the leader of that clan, knew how the men had snuck by him. It would take weeks for that messenger to find the mountain clans, however, and weeks more for him to return.

Later that evening, Jon, Theon, Hathan, Wendel, and Rodrick had dinner together, and the bastard born exchanged news. "It seems as if this was holdovers from the fall of House Bolton, wanting to strike out at us. There might have been someone else behind it, but the only man who knew who it could be, died during the battle." Jon said.

Hathan nodded, but he was frowning contemplatively. "Would a force that size have been able to break through? There were some six score of them all told, going by the number of bodies we found scattered throughout the woods, not enough, I would think, to take Winterfell."

"No," Jon replied, while at the same time Theon said "Yes."

The two looked at one another. Jon waved a hand for Theon to speak. "If they had taken us by surprise they might've won through into the castle itself before an alarm could be raised, surprise is everything in an attack like this. If they could have gotten into the winter town, then they might have been able to do it. The bastards could also have taken Arya hostage, if they had even an idea of who she was."

Jon frowned but eventually nodded his head in agreement. "That is possible. We'll have to heighten the guard's alert levels, though after this they shouldn't have to be told to be more alert, hmm?" Rodrick nodded grimly, having already passed on that order. "And send out patrols to make certain that that was the only group. I've already sent a messenger to the Wull clan, warning them of small parties trying to move through the mountains. I would've thought that no force however small could've moved through their land without the clan's knowledge, but it looks as if that was the case." Jon exchanged a glance with Theon and Hathan, trying to convey the fact that maybe their enemies from the ambush up north had a hand in that.

"Still," Wendel's voice rumbled from deep within his wide chest out from under a walrus mustache. "I believe it is time for us to move past this momentary excitement and to the matter at hand."

After that, the conversation delved into what Wendel was here to actually speak to Jon about, and if he felt any irritation about having to speak to the baseborn Jon about this rather than Lady Catelyn or anyone else from the family, he did not show it. The show that Jon and Arya had put on this afternoon against the raiders had impressed him and the knights with him, even more than the details he had heard of the wolf-sworn from his own baseborn family member.

The plan for the logistics aspect of sending supplies up to the wall was that Houses Stark, Cerwyn, Dustin, and Hornwood, along with the initial shipment by House Umber, would be supplying the majority of the food and other goods for a time. House Mormont would be sending a small troop of three hundred men, via the Bay of Ice, to the Shadow Tower, although that would be all the Mormonts would be sending.

House Flint of Flint's Finger, Glover, Reed, and Tallhart would not be sending any supplies, though they would be sending settlers instead. Indeed, in the case of Glover and Flint's Finger, the settlers would be eager for the chance to move, the lands of those houses being tougher and harder to work than even the rest of the North. House Ryswell, the Lockes, and Flints of Widows Watch would eventually be providing supplies and men as well but their supplies would not travel by road like the first group.

Instead, the majority of those supplies would be sent first up to Winterfell and then to White Harbor via the White Knife, whose tributary was already being used by House Cerwyn to send lumber down to the only true city in the North. The supplies would be taken by ship up to Eastwatch, the easternmost castle of the Wall, which protected a small port. It would be an almost constant stream of supplies rather than just one major drop off, but provisions would be getting up there even faster than the force under Ser Kyle Condon could arrive.

To that end, House Stark, with the aid of its minor Houses Mollen and Poole, would be sending men to clear and control the waterways as much as possible, to ease the trip down. House Poole controlled a holdfast by the river about two days journey from Winterfell and had been working on the project for years, with decent results on their section of the river, including coming up with ideas based off pulleys and elevators to get shipments down several small waterfalls. House Mollen was located near where the White Knife split, with a tributary heading off toward Castle Cerwyn while the main river continued down from Long Lake to the sea. If the river could be controlled enough, the goods would only take a bare week to get down to White Harbor, carried by riverboats with paddlewheels powered by mules. This was far faster than overland, a trip that would take more than a month for a caravan of any size.

House Manderly was willing to go even further, however, by not only sending up the supplies for free, but protecting those ships with their burgeoning navy, a navy that few had a hint that it was growing, just yet. That force had been building for the past several years. It was nowhere near the size that the Stormlands or the Iron Islands boasted, or even the King's Landing, but it was growing, fed by the wood and supplies from House Cerwyn sent down the river, which in turn was fed by Ranma's ideas of the river transportation and water driven saws.

After about an hour, the conversation finished and the two older men retired, leaving only Theon and Jon at the table. The two sat in silence for a time, as Jon simply sat there staring at the far wall and Theon drank a stein of ale. "It's a good plan." Theon muttered, his own eyes rather far away, his mind filled with ideas of the ships that would be sent north. This daydream was interspersed with memories of the crash of waves and the darkness of the depths of the ocean from his earliest years, a memory that had dominated him in many ways for his entire life.

"True." Jon said, now turning back to him and frowning thoughtfully. "The only problem is, that while White Harbor has a navy, it isn't a very good one just yet. Experienced sailors and captains, yes, but not a lot of experienced ship-to-ship fighters and no master-of-ships. Jon cocked his head thoughtfully, staring at Theon. "Would you like a job?"

Theon's eyebrows both shot up as his face, which had been darkly contemplative, now registered shock instead. "What kind of job are you talking about here?"

"I wouldn't be able to make you master-of-ships down there or anything like that, but I could send you down as House Stark's representative. You could give advice and go out on some of the ships as they head up to the Wall."

"You mean I could go up on one ship. It's not like changing horses or something," Theon replied automatically, but his voice lacked the tartness that it normally would when delivering a jibe like that. "What exactly would be my role?"

"Combat specialist." Jon said with a shrug. "You can't say you haven't noticed that you and the other wolf-sworn are simply better trained and better at combat than anyone else."

Theon nodded, he had realized that, both in the fight against the wights and in the fight earlier that day. *Four against how many had attacked us in the woods, we should have fallen quickly, even with the hunter's aid. Even with the*

*woods working in our favor as well as the wolves, we should have all died today. Instead we slaughtered more than half a hundred men! Legends have been made of worse fights than that! Ranma's training has made us all more than normal men. Perhaps there is something to the smallfolk's belief that he has been touched by the old gods.*

Jon went on. "Well, couple that with the lessons you've done with Maester Luwin about naval warfare, your general skills, and what you can remember from your time among the Iron Born and you might know more about ship to ship combat than anyone House Manderly employs. Prove yourself and maybe Lord Manderly and his representatives will trust you with more authority."

Of all the northern houses, the Manderlys had the least amount of antipathy toward the Iron Born. Having their holdings on the other side of the continent from the Iron Born and the rebellion had protected them. Hathan and all the other Manderly men that Theon had met with had treated him appropriate to his station, with no condescension in their manner.

The fact it also got Theon away from Jon before he or Theon attempted to kill one another need not be said. The past few weeks been relatively quiet save at meal times when they were both there at the same time because their duties had kept them away from one another. Yet there was no way that was going to continue.

"So I would be a kind of advisor on naval combat?" Theon asked skeptically. "That's rather vague."

"Which means it will become what you can make of it." Jon replied, nodding. "So, will you do it?"

Theon actually paused for a moment to think about it then nodded firmly. "I'll do it."

OOOOOO

That night, after spending nearly all evening with her mother in the infirmary, Arya snuck out of her room with Nymeria joining her quickly. She made her way unseen out of the keep and over the grounds, entering the small enclosed area containing the godswood. Like a shadow, she moved through it following Nymeria now, heading deeper into the woods to the heart tree.

The duo came out of the woods into the tiny clearing in front of the heart tree, staring as the moonlight gleamed off the deep pool of water by its roots. Arya noticed that with the moonlight overhead, the face of the old man, carved or somehow grown out of the wood, looked somewhat different, yet was still welcoming rather than scary like it should have been.

Arya sat down in the roots, Nymeria crowding into her side as she pulled Fang out of its sheath, laying it on her knees and looking up at the face above her. She wasn't very religious but she had been brought up to believe in the old gods and she hoped that they could help her now. "My Da always comes out here whenever he needs to think or after he, he hands out justice. I never, I never really knew the, the weight, I guess, of that until now. I, I killed today, I don't know how many men. Twelve, more maybe, I don't know."

She paused for a moment then went on. "I, I know Dacey and my brother were worried about my reaction, but I just, it was just a thing you know. I didn't enjoy it, I didn't, after that first one it became easier, but I never really felt sadness about killing them or anything like that. I was angry, really angry during the fight and after, I was just, numb maybe, something like that."

The youngest Stark girl laid her head back against the trunk, the warmth of her brother's cloak wrapped around her and Nymeria pressed into her side keeping the cold of the night at bay for now, though she knew it wouldn't last for long. "I know I'm supposed to feel remorse or something, but I don't, not really. They attacked us, I had to kill them to defend myself and my home, that was it. That, um, I've never been good at, you know, feelings, but that bothers me. Should I be feeling something, or am I still numb, I, I just don't know..."

Arya fell silent, simply leaning against the tree for a moment. Nymeria's head came up, pressing into her own, the female direwolf's eyes locked with her bond mate, as if saying 'this is what you are'. Wolves don't kill unless they have to, but nor did they shirk from it.

Arya's hands rose, rubbing Nymeria's chest, then her neck and ears. A feeling of contentment and belonging filled her, a sense of welcome and approval somehow, coming through to her from the woods all around.

The girl smiled and sat there until her fingers and toes began to feel a little numb from the cold. Arya stood up, then on a whim leaned up on her tip toes to kiss the side of the wooden face coming out of the bark of the tree. "Thank you." With that, Arya raced off through the woods, Nymeria at her heels, all her inner doubts at rest for a moment, not

knowing that this moment solidified all the changes that Ranma had made in her, which would infuriate certain parties once they learned of it.

OOOOOOO

Ranma's decision to train Tommen and Joffrey didn't have an impact on the way the king's party traveled. Just as before the group would get up and head out, covering about 25 leagues or so before stopping for a midday meal, after which they would continue. But now, even Ranma was hard-pressed to come up with new stories to pass the time, forcing him to make up some rather than rely on the memories of his life as Ranma Saotome.

There was still a bit of tension from Lannister supporters towards Ranma, but it had simmered to a low boil, waiting eagerly for the time when they left the North behind to come out.

Joffrey's own hatred of Ranma had solidified into a burning force, though he was careful to keep it under wraps, more because his mother seemed to have her own plans moving forward for the Stark heir. How **dare** Ranma have his father's approval! How **dare** Ranma choose Tommen over Joffrey to befriend! How **dare** Ranma show him up every day with his endurance, good humor and skill! How **dare** he always show him up and force him to do these demeaning exercises! How **dare** this jumped up wild boy from the North act as if he was the prince's equal! In Joffrey's mind, now the idea of marrying Sansa was not just to have a pretty little toy to play with, but so that he could eventually break that pretty toy in front of the young man he had come to hate with every fiber of his being over this trip.

He was able to keep a lid on it while he was out on his horse for the first portion of the day by simply staying away from Ranma or staying near his father. If there was one place Ranma would not be, it was near the drunken carousing that was how Robert began each day. The young Stark heir was quick to leave the King's presence as soon as he could, politely or not.

Inside the carriage was another matter. While on the surface Joffrey kept his cool, he did little things to irritate and hurt both of his younger siblings, things that he could get away with even when sitting right next to his betrothed or across from his mother. Kicking them 'accidentally' while stretching, elbowing Tommen hard in the ribs as he got up out of his seat, or pulling on Myrcella's hair when Sansa and his mother were looking out the window. These very small things, to him, did not truly go far to appease his anger, but it was enough for him to keep control, for now.

Myrcella knew that Joffrey was being his usual horrid self, though he was showing a surprising amount of cunning in hiding it in plain sight from Sansa. Not so much their mother, who never bothered to notice such things. Still, Myrcella put up with it as she always had when she had to, though she was proud of how Tommen put up with it.

Tommen didn't realize what was going on and as days passed he began to ignore these little blows more and more. Thanks to Ranma's training, he was becoming a little tougher every day. Unlike Joffrey, who only did them begrudgingly and stopped the moment Robert, a few days later, stopped watching, Tommen threw himself into the training eagerly. Though he really wasn't very good at it yet, he was enthusiastic at least and soon noticed something that spurred him on even more.

His father was actually showing some interest in Tommen! The dedication and time he was putting into the training exercises of his idol had gone quite a ways to making him seem more like what Robert felt a son of his loins should be like. It wasn't anything big, just a smile here and a nod there, but that was better than the scowls and glares that any of the royal children normally got, if the King noticed them at all.

Thankfully, Joffrey hadn't noticed this yet nor had Cersei. Her normal sharp senses for such things dulled by 'that time of the month' a few days after Ranma began to take Tommen under his wing. This was not a pleasant time for anyone in the coach. Even with the chance to be next to his betrothed plus the chance to needle his younger siblings, Joffrey jumped at the chance to escape the carriage while his mother was in such bad humor. The Queen knew this, so allowed even her daughter out of her sight during this time. The two young children spent five days out on Ranma's horse, with Myrcella holding her brother in front of her, next to Ranma as he ran along with Fenris telling them tales, while Joffrey rode at the front of the column as was his right, with Robert.

During this time, Sansa joined Ned on his horse as she had a time or two on trips to White Harbor, Castle Cerwyn, or even once to Castle Hornwood. The two talked quietly, blocking out the rest of the world as the two of them spoke as a father would with a daughter who he was going to be giving away all too soon.

Once Cersei's time passed, she went back to her project of figuring out how to influence or handle Ranma, with limited success so far. Varys, on the other hand, had given up his interest in the Stark heir for now, instead trying to analyze Ned and the impact the older Stark would have on King's Landing or vice versa. Varys really didn't

understand Ranma or the impact he could have as a symbol or as a warrior. He dealt with shadows, money and politics, not warfare or symbology. Cersei, however, knew that symbols, such as a gods-touched warrior, could be dangerous if not harnessed. She was waiting for them to get down where it was warmer, so she could truly begin her campaign to do just that.

Two more weeks passed thus while they crossed the side of the barrowlands until they were within sight of the Moat. As the massive towers (each of them larger by far than any tower in Winterfell and able to house at least three-hundred people comfortably) came into view, Ranma looked up at his father riding next to Robert at the head of the column. "Do you think Lord Reed will be there?"

"I hope so," Ned responded, a small smile appearing on his granite-like face, "though I am uncertain, the Moat is not House Reed's seat after all."

Robert barked a laugh, as with him as he sipped from his wine. "Hah, maybe the bentback won't have been able to find his own damn castle, Greywater moves, after all! What say you lad, want to run ahead and see if Howland's there?"

"Don't tempt me, my Lord." Ranma replied, shaking his head. "It wouldn't take much, trust me. I'm getting mighty bored with the pace this group sets. Maybe if you quit drinking half the morning away before we set off, we would make better time?" Ned looked at his son sharply, but Ranma merely shrugged back, after all it wasn't like he had really attacked the King, was it? Ranma was just getting tired of the King and of the Queen, in her own way, as well. The King wore his vices on his sleeve. The Queen tried to hide her feelings under a veneer of hauteur but Ranma could tell there was a lot of hate plus a lot ambition underneath. Some of the looks the Queen had sent his way freaked Ranma out.

Robert laughed again, not taking the boy's jape as an attack on him but as a sign of Ranma's boredom. He'd been amused the entire trip with the way that Ranma just kept going day after day, sprinting along with the horses and not even seeming to be very effected by it.

It took them another four hours travel to actually reach Moat Cailin, but they had timed this portion of the journey very well. The Queen, her ladies, Sansa, and the children stopped with twenty guards at an inn within an hour's ride of the Moat. The rest of the party continued on and stayed at the Moat, welcomed by the men of a few of the Neck's minor houses and House Reed.

Lord Reed was indeed waiting there, although neither of his children was with him. After firm, brotherly hugs exchanged with both Ned and Ranma, Lord Reed explained their absence, his voice rasping as it always did, a holdover from a childhood disease many crannogmen suffered from. "Meera was with me here but she's out hunting now, along with several others. There was a report of a lizard lion nearby. A full grown one, not one of the adolescents or young males."

Lizard lions were sort of like crocodiles or alligators back in the world Ranma had come from initially and, yet, in many ways, weren't. For one thing, they were stronger and heavier than crocodiles or alligators normally were and, for another, their skin was even tougher. In fact, many marsh warriors used their skin for armor. It worked almost as well as half-plate without being nearly as heavy. Their arms were also much longer and more flexible and, after reaching their full growth, they developed a poison that they secreted from the spines along their backs. The females were also able to exhale a noxious gas from their mouth, at need. Also, unlike crocodiles or alligators, their jaws were heavily muscled both for opening and closing.

The breeding adults were also somewhat more intelligent, enough to know to stay away from humans for the most part. The adolescents hadn't developed the intelligence to stay away from humans, making the younger lizard lions range from nuisances to real dangers. However, none of the adolescents were ever large examples of their breed. They were a danger certainly, but they hadn't yet developed the poison nor were they so large. They did not have much in the way of animal cunning, which seemed to develop even more slowly for lizard lions than it did for humans. A fully grown lizard lion could weigh, at a minimum, as much as a knight in full armor along with his horse. An adolescent could weigh as much as an unarmored human. It took several years for them to move from their teenage years, as it were, to full adulthood. Keeping their numbers down was a major, long term occupation of the Neck's Noble Houses.

Ranma frowned, looking over the marshlands abutting the eastern side and almost the entire frontage of the Moat, save for the causeway, a road, twenty feet wide at this point, leading on south under the watchful eyes of all three towers. He was worried about Meera, who was a good friend of Arya's, despite being older. He looked up at one of the towers, shuddering as he saw the ballista on the roof. *That thing looks like it would smart like one of Lime's punches.* "What about your son, how is he doing?"

"Jojen is doing well, in the main." Howland answered, frowning faintly. "He collapsed about a month and a half ago, but he seems to be recovering his strength well enough. His mother is keeping him close to home, however, since he has had some fever dreams ever since, muttering about how fate has changed, and other incomprehensible things. 'The eyes have closed' was one, and something about three eyes."

Ranma and Ned both frowned, offering their condolences and well wishes for the boy to get better. Ranma remembered Jojen as a bit of an odd child, with wide staring eyes and an almost musical voice, yet, he was also surly and detached, sometimes giving the impression that he wasn't all there when you were talking to him.

He much preferred Meera, who was an older version of Arya in many ways. The girl was wild and cagey, a very skilled hunter even though she was only fourteen, and somewhat passable (high praise from Ranma) with a spear. She and Arya had met a few times and had got along splendidly, though she and Sansa had not. Sansa was most definitely a girly girl and Meera was the ultimate tomboy.

Howland clasped his old friend's shoulder affectionately. "Come, we've put up a bit of an outdoor meal for you all, not a feast, my lands don't produce enough to fully feast you as you should be, Your Grace." Ned smiled, eager to share news with Howland, whose advice he always respected, wondering if the man would see the same dangers Ned saw ahead of him down south. Robert grunted, but didn't really care one way or another so long as the wine was flowing freely.

Once they started to traverse the Neck, there would be no stopping, no midday meal, and no hunting. The only way through the neck was by the Kingsroad on its causeway. There was nothing in the Neck but marshes as far as the eye could see on either side of the road, so no way to hunt. They would be pushing through as quickly as possible, exchanging horses and mules as they could to push on. The trip through the Neck going up had taken a little longer than three weeks. The trip going down would hopefully take them a shorter amount of time.

Ranma followed after his father, frowning faintly as women he could tell were whores moved to join with the 'camp followers' that were a permanent part of the King's party, moving towards the men-at-arms, two of the better looking ones moving toward the King. He shook his head, suddenly not very interested in partying. Later that evening, Ranma was able to excuse himself, then moved off to talk to a few of the soldiers of House Reed before moving away from the light of the many campfires.

He found Fenris, who was now almost as large as a pony and showed no signs of reaching his full growth, moving toward him almost immediately. The direwolves eyes were gleaming in the faint moonlight, eager to hunt with his bond-mate. Ranma chuckled but shook his head. "Sorry pal, but hunting around here isn't anything you're going to be good for. There's not nearly enough solid ground out here for you, sorry."

Fenris huffed, his breath puffing out in the cold air for a moment, causing Ranma to frown a little, remembering his house's motto, making him wonder if winter was coming soon, and if Jon was handling things back north, preparing the Wall to defend against the White Walkers. At the moment however, there wasn't anything he could do about that.

He came back to the here and now, looking out over the marshlands to the east. "I just gotta get away for a bit. Stay out of the way of the southerners while I'm gone, alright?" Fenris couldn't really understand human speech, but the images Ranma sent along their link got through and the direwolf padded away into the night.

Ranma smiled at that, then moved to the edge of the solid land along the eastern edge of Moat Cailin, marked by a small, chest high wall. It's opposite number along the western edge, facing toward the Fever River, was among the defenses being rebuilt, but this one, facing the marshes, didn't need that. Ranma hopped onto the wall then, without further ado, leapt forward, grabbing the limb of a tree about twelve meters away, flipping himself into the canopy and away, a wide grin on his face as he left the party well behind him.

OOOOOO

While the noise and bustle of the party went on around them, Ned and Howland had retreated to the large, flat-bodied marsh boat that Howland used to traverse the marshes of the Neck. Robert had gone off with three girls at once, mumbling something in his drunken stupor of wanting to break his personal record. Ned had sighed, smiled, and let him go his way, though inside he was beginning to be worried about how much ale his old friend consumed. Then Ned and Howland had made their escape from the carousing, leaving Ser Jory and a few of Howland's men in charge to make certain that nothing violent happened.

Now, alone with a single candle the two exchanged news or, at least, Ned told Howland about the news from Winterfell. He told him everything, the stirring of the White Walkers and their attack on Ranma's party, the attack on Bran, Ned's growing concerns about what might be awaiting him down south, everything.



Howland took it all in, simply sitting there, saying nothing as was his wont. Howland rarely spoke about anything until he had time to work it all out in his mind. Finally he spoke, his voice low and rasping, yet still a welcome sound to Ned's ears. "You are right to be concerned about what might be going on in King's Landing, Ned. Here in the Neck, we hear a little more news than the rest of the North, thanks to our tradesmen selling our medicinal ingredients in the Riverlands. There are rumors of discontent, of the growing reach of House Lannister and the corruption of the court. Robert was an excellent general and a warrior, but he has not been a good king. He has not really tried to rule the kingdom, it is the council that rules in his stead, and there, Lannister gold buys many votes."

He looked at Ned's face and chuckled, the rasp in his voice making the chuckle sound very odd. "You are too much the honest Northerner, my lord. Politics is about power, money, and prestige, as well as appearances. That is where Robert has faltered. Jon Arryn helped him navigate those waters somewhat, but could not control them. The court is a cesspool, where the shit rises to the top."

Ned grimaced, but nodded. "I just wish I had a real idea of what I was going to find when we get there. As the King's Hand it will be my duty to... drain that cesspool, I suppose you could say, but what am I going to find at the very bottom?"

"That I cannot tell you, I can only say that which you should already know. For one, do not assume that the people you deal with will be honorable or even rational. When someone becomes used to wielding power, they will do everything they can to keep it when threatened. Watch your back and keep that lad of yours close, if you can. He tends to react in a very... blunt manner and that might earn you more enemies than it frightens away. On the other hand, if things do become physical, young Ranma can be a force none will be ready to match."

"True enough," Ned nodded, smiling faintly. His son was indeed a force to be reckoned with, though as unsuited as he was when it came to politics and the sort of back alley deals he feared he would all to soon be forced to deal with.

The crannogman paused, one hand moving over his closely shaved scalp for a moment as he thought. "I cannot give you any more precise advice there. You have already been in contact with Lord Tully. He may know more or, at least, send an advisor you can trust with the men you requested. As for your other bits of news, I cannot think what your son saw, but my gut is telling me it was important, more important than simply a illicit meeting between a White Cloak and a married woman. On the other hand, the White Walkers..." He frowned deeply. "That is worrisome, far more worrisome than whatever is going on down south. They haven't been seen in over eight thousand years, far longer than any notes or histories I would trust. I wish I or the houses owing mine fealty could aid you but your idea to send a whelming up to the wall is a good one. Yet, they come with the winter. I trust you have also told the other houses of the North to prepare for that."

After Ned nodded, Howland looked at him sharply. "But the whelming will have brought some attention to the boy. Did you think of that?"

Ned shrugged. "I had to leave him in charge. Ser Rodrick doesn't have the head for numbers to handle the logistics and he isn't well known beyond my family's lands to speak for my house. Jon has the one, and is known well enough for the other. I trust him to handle it and, while this might bring more attention his way, none in the North will look too deeply at things."

Howland hummed noncommittally, staring at one wall as he remembered a day years ago and the toughest fight he had ever been in. He was more than a little concerned about any attention being paid to Jon but his baseborn status defended him from such scrutiny or did, if you didn't really know Eddard Stark and his sense of honor. He shook it off, what's done is done. "I wish I could aid you more my friend, something material, some advice to help you steer this course other than simply telling you to be very careful but it is outside my realm of knowledge. I'm sorry."

"That's alright, old friend. Simply talking about it made me feel better." Ned smiled, and the two moved on to other things.

OOOOOO

Ranma leapt from one tree to another, smiling faintly at the chance to do something more physical than just running along. He zoomed through the night of the marsh, lit by the stars above and the faint gust of luminescent gas rising from the marsh below, which hid the lower areas of the trees he was traversing through, hiding many threats beneath its ever moving surface. He was almost silent for all of his speed, a mere rustle of leaves in the night, not even his sword, strapped to his back, catching on branches or giving any indication of his presence.

Beyond the needed physical exercise, this was also a mental release. Out here there was no hidden agendas swirling around him just outside of his ability to grasp, no drunken king not worth his crown, no queen with her odd glances

and cold ways, no Joffrey, no worries about his family or the coming troubles he could see, both from the White Walkers and whatever the hell was going on down south. Nothing but him, the marsh around him, and the night air whistling around him.

About thirty minutes after he left Moat Cailin, Ranma's enjoyment was shattered by a loud roar, accompanied by the cracking of wood in the distance and someone cussing like a sailor in a voice of mixed anger and fear. It was a female voice, a voice he had heard before. "Huh, sounds like little Meera is in trouble."

Ranma moved rapidly in that direction, passing through the branches of the trees as easily as someone else would over level ground, arriving on the scene swiftly. Below him, a small hunting boat, a coracle about as long as a man was tall, thin, flat-bottomed, yet, made of thick wood to stop hidden branches or, more importantly, the claws and jaws of a lizard lion, had been capsized. A young girl, visible by the moonlight and some marsh lights coming off the waters among the trees, was now balanced precariously on the prow of the boat, both hands holding a short hafted trident, whose tip was pointing down at the reason her boat had capsized.

A **huge** lizard lion had come out of the marsh's water, its fangs gleaming in a mouth opened as wide as Ranma's arms would stretch, its red eyes gleaming with hunger or blood lust. The thing was longer than the height of three men, wider than the coracle it had capsized, and apparently, judging by how Meera's thrusts were skittering along its back, its skin was harder than chainmail. The thing was ignoring the girl's futile attempts to wound it, simply clawing it's way up the coracle's flat bottom to get at her.

"Winter is Coming!" Ranma howled, pulling his sword free from it's scabbard. He leaped down from the tree he had been in to land right on top of the lizard's snout, forcing its jaw closed. One foot raised in an attempt to smack him away but, by this point, Ranma was ready with his sword and the armor of the lizard's arm wasn't as tough as it's body. Ranma's thrust burst through the back of the things foot and the monster lizard retreated, trying to bring its jaws to bear on him.

Ranma turned quickly, grabbed Meera, trident and all, and leapt up into the treetops. "Hey Meera, ran into a bit of trouble, did you?"

"Oh shut up! I was following the thing, it's bleeding from some old wound, making tracking it relatively easy, but I lost it when it hid under some quicksand under the water. How was I supposed to know it had enough strength to overcome the quicksand's pull!?" Meera yelled in his ear, hyperventilating a little at both how close she had come to death and Ranma's sudden arrival.

The girl was tough, though, and got over it quickly, staring down as the injured beast began to slam it's massive tail against the tree trunk that supported them. "The forest folk must have sent you, Ranma Stark, but what do we do now? That thing is going to keep attacking us and it's already killed ten hunters in the past two days, along with three family boats disappearing. It's my duty as a Reed to kill it before it can do more."

"Then we better finish it now. Get your trident ready and make your way down the tree to that low branch down there," Ranma indicated a large branch about three feet above the water's churning surface. "Then wait for your shot but remember to aim for the eyes."

Without further ado, Ranma once again leaped downward, laughing aloud now at the chance to vent some of his frustration about the journey he was currently on. He landed feet first on the things back, slamming his sword down point first. With his strength Ranma was able to plunge his sword's tip through the powerful back armor of the lizard lion, but it didn't penetrate very far before stopping.

This gave the cagey old lizard time to roll in the water, which it did, taking Ranma and his sword with it. Ranma cursed as he slammed into the water, but kicked out, his foot glowing blue for a moment, when the thing turned to try and close its jaws around him.

The blow caught it on its upper teeth, shattering them and actually throwing the thing a little up out of the water. Meera, shaking off her shock at the power of the kick, stabbed quickly, aiming for the giant lizard lion's right eye. Her trident skitter across the armor plate surrounded the thing's eyes and skull, but one of the tines of the trident smashed into the monster's eyeball.

"RAAHH!" the lizard lion roared, turning away to try and bring it's tail to bear on Meera while concentrating on Ranma. Meera dodged as much as she could but she still caught a glancing blow that lifted her off her perch on the low slung branch, throwing her through the air into the water a few yards away. Luckily, like all crannogmen, she could tread water and climb like a monkey, so that was what she did, climbing up the trunk of a nearby tree as quickly as possible.

With Meera dealt with and Ranma now weaponless, and in the water, the lizard lion pressed its advantage. Ranma, however, didn't retreat, simply moving to meet the creature. Its jaws once more tried to catch him, but Ranma, quicker than lightning, grabbed the upper jaw and flipped himself up and out of the water into the air above the beast.

The lizard lion actually shook its head in stupefaction for a moment before pushing out of the water, trying to catch its attacker in midair. Ranma merely changed direction by grabbing a hanging branch, reaching with his other hand to his sword still stuck in the beast's back. He pulled it out, grunting slightly, then, flipped himself over to land in the water right under a tree, standing on the roots hidden in the water.

The beast charged once more, jaws open to bite him but Ranma stood his ground. When the thing came close enough, he stabbed his sword deep into its mouth with as much force as he could, slamming through the lizard lion's upper mouth and deep into its brain, killing it instantly.

Ranma had to let go of his sword and leap into the tree as the thing went into its death throes, watching as the thing thrashed and died. He looked over to where Meera was clinging like a drenched koala (not that anyone else in Westeros would call her that) to another tree and said dryly, "Well, that was exciting, wasn't it?"

Meera gaped at him for a minute, then barked a laugh, before moving up into the branches of the tree. She sat there, staring down at the massive lizard lion, not even looking up as Ranma made his way over to her while, in the distance, lights from other coracles began to appear, the other hunters who had been out searching for this monster making their way toward the sound of the disturbance. Meera had lost her lantern when the boat capsized, but since it had been a choice between her trident or her lamp, she didn't mind. "That lizard lion is a real monster, it must be at least as old as my father. What in the name of the old gods was it doing around here, we never see any lizard lions that old this far from the center of the Neck, nor do ones that old normally bother to come close to humans."

She felt more than saw Ranma shrug ignorance and she looked up at him now, pushing her long brown hair back out of her eyes from where it had matted across her face with swamp water, shivering a little in the cold nighttime air. Ranma looked just as wet and bedraggled as she did but still had a smile on his handsome face and didn't seem to feel the cold. Meera smiled, smacking her shoulder against the boy she knew as a somewhat wild, chaotic cousin more than as heir of the lordship of the North. "So, what brought you to my rescue, Ranma, besides the obvious I mean?"

"Going south with my father, who has agreed to be the King's Hand, though why anyone would want the job is beyond me. Anyway, I'm going south to meet my prospective bride. Someone from House Tyrell down in the Reaches, ugh. Frankly this bit of fun here was probably the last I'll have for a while."

Meera gaped at his morose expression, then, as the lights of her fellow hunters came close enough to see them, began to laugh again. She was still laughing when the other crannogmen arrived.

Ranma left her to it, suddenly noticing that the tree they were on had no moss on it, nor was it rotting. He looked down at the trunk and saw a face jutting out of the trunk. He smiled faintly, leaning back and closing his eyes, allowing a feeling of rightness and wellbeing to wash over him, while below the hunters began to make plans to transport his kill.

Suddenly a small vision came to him, a roar, fire, and the beat of wings. He opened his eyes, wondering what the hell that meant, but shook it off for now, staring down at the giant lizard lion. "I wonder what it would take to make a suit of armor out of that thing?"

End Chapter

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Okay, so first a major rant, then a minor one. Not to speak ill of the dead, but I **loathe** David Eddings' work, not just because they all have all powerful gods (hate that idea) in them leading the people around like obedient dogs on a leash, but because they assume that humans do not progress. 1500 years from one war to another, and nothing has changed but what armor and metals are used in warfare?

Martin is guilty of the same thing, only on a much smaller scale. Technology IS NOT STATIC! Even in the middle ages there was a difference between one century and another. Also, Martin doesn't make enough use of river power. The White Knife should have been mastered and controlled as much as possible, fueling trade and growth between Houses Stark, Cerwyn and Manderly. Jon is going to push that aspect.

I also realized while writing this that Mr. Martin has only a vague idea, or is being deliberately vague, about geography or how land was normally broken up in a feudal system. Having the seats of two prominent houses, and

Cerwyn is one of the most powerful in the North, apparently, so close together is weird as hell. Had to scramble to reason out how that would work, where the borders would be. So consider the two castles sort of being at the points of triangles facing one another but not overlapping. House Cerwyn's triangle is open face moving somewhat down toward the Rills to encompass that town, and a large chunk of the wolfswood below a straightish path to the seat of House Glover. The Stark's widens to include a bit of the wolfswood before reaching the mountains, and down toward the White Harbor including much of the White Knife and some land beyond. I also went back and changed it so that Hathan's new holding is North of Winterfell rather than in what I describe here as Cerwyn territory.

And he also seemed to have forgotten about Flint's Finger for a time or is he saying that their land can't be invaded, then used as a stepping stone, troops being ferried over the Saltspear into the Rills to get around Moat Cailin? Does the Neck really stretch that far west to prevent that? Since it looks as if it becomes forest near the shoreline near the Twins, and while an army has trouble moving through forests, it isn't impossible, for infantry troops in particular. If anyone knows a better map than the ones on: [images/e/e7/Map\\_of\\_](#) and [images/c/cd/The\\_](#), please tell me.

In this chapter, Ranma sort of got bogged down in the blah of the journey, while interesting things happened at home with Jon and Arya getting a chance to shine. Next chapter might have Ranma travel the Riverlands and to Kings Landing or just the Riverlands, we'll see. Unless I decide to concentrate only on Ranma and the King's party for a chapter, Arya too will become more of a central character. Theon and Tyrion will wait a time, to allow them to reach their disparate destinations, (maybe) though I will be honest and say making dialogue for the Imp is a major challenge.

A question I am certain someone will ask, does Arya's blade have the same characteristics of a Valyrian one? No, Valyrian blades were made by magic and with a heat Ranma and company could not reproduce – dragonfire - her sword is simply an exceptionally well-made blade in a new way that sets it above of most others. Why didn't Ranma have one made? He already had a blade, gifted to him by House Glover. Why not Jon? The ore for the blade was too expensive given all the false starts for them to make more than the one for Arya.

I also regret to inform Gendrya fans (is that how you write it) that this particular pairing will probably not happen. Sorry.

I will not be going into the minutiae of the other realms more than I have here unless it directly impacts the story (such as when war breaks out), I wanted to do it for the North here to show what Jon was up to and what the composition of the force sent to the wall was, as well as how Dominic was wheedling his way into the trust of the Targaryen exiles

Oh yeah, how would Theon's family react to him leaving behind the Greyjoy name? – Gaining a new name through a heroic dead and given a lordship? Not saying what I have planned for him, but I am just asking everyone's opinions.

## **\*Chapter 4\*: Chapter 4**

I don't own Ranma or Martin. Mores the pity, since I would have stopped both authors from making the mistakes they did. Ah well.

Minor rant: OH MY FUCKING GOD, I hate it when I look through fanfiction and I see Mpreg and yaoi shit. Mpreg is just fucking wrong, I don't even think it's right if it's a sex-changer. Yaoi is easy to avoid if it is marked correctly, but having Harry/Hermione as characters and then saying Harry/Draco (I just threw up a little in my mouth) without stating Draco as a character in the summary is a fucking trap worthy of an admiral Ackbar impression.

Fem Harry is another pet peeve, but I suppose it is okay so long as she's not paired with... well any male really. Sorry, I just don't get it.

Anyway, I recently got into Transformers fanfiction, and I thought I could do something with that universe – not so much one generation or another, but all of them cobbled together. I really like the Arcee character from Prime, though I am wondering about a woman's perspective on her and on the original Transformers universe, So Janissa, what, if anything, do you think about it?

If anyone is interested, PM me, and I would be very willing to exchange ideas, see what other people think. Frankly lately I've come up with a lot of ideas (Ranma X Sailor Moon, HP X Star Wars, Ranma X Transformers, HP X HOTD, HP X HSDXD, Ranma X X-men, Ranma X Oh My Goddess), and I might, just maybe, be creating a one-shot archive. Not certain though.

I want to thank all of my reviewers, thank you for your continued support. This is, in many ways, the most ambitious project I have taken up, not only in complexity, but in the number of characters, and the type of original tale.

I realized writing this that I made another mistake: I referred to Stannis as Robert's Regent while Robert went north, but it was in fact Renly – for some reason I got their names confused in my mind. I have gone back and corrected this.

I would like to thank Jessolt for his work as a beta, without him this chapter like all my others would be nowhere near the level of writing they are now. I'd also like to thank Wal Otter for a bit of this, he'll know which bit, and special thanks to Trinel for answering some nitpicky questions about ASolaF that I could not get from the wiki or my own memory.

### **Chapter 4 Shadows Hide Many Things**

It took the marsh hunters a while to figure out how to transport the giant lizard lion, since it was actually far bigger than any of the hunting coracles, but no one complained. A prize of this nature came along once a generation. Eventually, Meera, after searching rather forlornly for her pike, ordered several of the crannogmen to tie their boats together, allowing them to then tie the giant beast to them all in turn. During this, Meera also satisfied her curiosity about why this mature lizard lion had been in an area with so many humans around. It turned out that the bull had lost its testicles at some point in the past month or so. Such a thing wasn't really common because their testicles were protected behind an armor plate that only receded when it was time for the actual mating since, like with many animals, mating was more akin to rape than anything else. This time however its chosen female had some more fight in her than this old bull had expected.

It took them an hour to tie the beast's carcass down on the boats, then another hour to get back but word had gone ahead of the party and they were met at the edge of the solid ground around Moat Cailin by two worried parents and a worried direwolf.

Meera jumped straight from the foremost boat up onto the pier and was swiftly engulfed in a hug from her father, her ribs creaking a little for all that she stood a full head higher than him. "If I'd known what a monster was out there lass, I'd never have let you go." His low, rasping voice was even more scratchy than normal with emotion. Lord Reed turned to Ranma. "Thank you for saving my daughter, Ranma Stark."

Ned was never one to show much affection in public but the hard handclasp he gave his son and the pride in his eyes was more than enough to show Ranma what he felt. Ranma, flushed a little at that and the looks of respect in the surrounding soldiers and hunter's eyes, tried to change the subject a little. "I'm sorry father, I lost the blade house Glover sent me for my last nameday."

The sword had snapped in several places after Ranma had rammed it up into the lizard lion's mouth during the

beast's death throes. After it had finished thrashing around, they had only found the tip of the sword still lodged in its mouth, the others having been flung out into the muck and mire, or possibly ingested, Ranma wasn't certain which, nor did he care.

Ned barked a laugh. "Ha, a cheap price to pay for that beast, my son, and for the two of you returning safe and whole."

At that point, Meera began to tell the tale of how she and Ranma had killed the giant beast, a tale that drew several more clumps of feasters to her. Surprisingly, Robert was not among them, having retired early to his tent with a crannog woman. A little while later, Howland asked Ranma what he wanted to do with the carcass. "As it was you who killed it, it's yours Ranma. The armor of this beast would compare well to even full plate and be much more flexible. That is what I'd recommend for you to do with it, though we don't have a blacksmith or leather worker I'd trust to do the job here. Even if we did though, it would take weeks of hard work to create a single suit of lizard armor."

Ranma thought for moment, then smiled faintly. "Could you send the skin to Winterfell? I would trust our blacksmith there to work with your leather workers to make the most of this find. I'd like for it to be made into armor for myself, Jon, Daryn Hornwood, and Ed Karstark. We're all of a size after all, so fitting out Jon would make armor for the rest of us. The bones and everything else, they can be used to make bows and handles for blades, correct?"

"Aye, they ain't as good weapons as dragon bones but they actually make better bows, or so tis said. From such a carcass as this, we could make at least a dozen composite bows." an old hunter, face gaunt and aged with lank white hair answered, tapping a short bow by his side. It was only when he did, that Ranma realized it was white and yellow, the color of bone rather than any wooden color.

"Then let's do that as well, as many as can be made, for my siblings but also for Meera and the other heirs of the noble houses." *We might not have come up with the name ourselves but we are wolf-sworn and, like a pack of wolves, though we are apart, we are together still.* After Howland agreed to do that, smirking slightly at his daughter's gob-smacked expression, the group began to break up, the King's party knowing they would be out on the road early the next morning.

OOOOOO

Used to waking up early after so many days on the road, Myrcella was the first to get up. Even if the party wouldn't set off for a while yet, the children had to be ready to go quickly, along with the Queen. She pouted as she looked around, not seeing Ranma around waiting for them, which had become a fixture on this trip. She knew it was silly of her but that hadn't stopped Myrcella from developing a crush on the oldest Stark sibling. Despite his, at times, stern Stark features, Ranma was warm, kind, outgoing, and **funny** to go with his obvious strength. All the things she would love to see in a betrothed.

*I know it's hopeless, she thought to herself as she entered the inn's bathing area, which the Queen had taken over entirely the evening before for their party. Her body moving on automatic, Myrcella began to undress after testing the water in the tub. The bath was warm, heated by a hearth or something underneath it, she guessed. For one, Sansa and Joffrey are to wed, regardless of my own feelings about that, so there is no need to tie the Stark family to ours with another marriage. For another, Ranma already has a betrothal lined up. And for a third, he treats me more like a sister than my own older brother!*

The young girl pouted as she looked at herself in the large mirror that Cersei had dragged along on this trip. She cupped her barely formed teats for a moment, sighing. *Maybe if I were older or had already started to blossom, then mayhap if Sansa and Joffrey didn't work out, and fat chance of that happening, I could somehow convince my parents of it but no, that's wishful thinking at best.* With a final sigh, Myrcella moved over to the tub, getting in and sighing luxuriantly while waiting for the Queen, Sansa, and the others.

Later, she saw Joffrey, who had elected to stay here in the inn rather than 'rough it' at the Moat with their father, the King. He was once more regaling Sansa with a made up tale of prowess in some form or another. No, Myrcella realized, Joffrey was reciting poetry to the naïve northern girl. *I wonder what Sansa would think if she knew those poems she gushes over weren't originals he made up on the spot for her but ones Joffrey stole from professional poets out of the Reach? He's only changing the name of the woman in them, for the Seven's sake!* While still very young, Myrcella had spent almost her entire life in the court and knew when someone was putting on a false front, especially her own older brother. She had also heard that exact poem before, sung in honor of her mother at one point.

Myrcella frowned, however, when she noticed, as Sansa turned to address Jeyne, the look of vitriol Joffrey sent Tommen's way as her younger sibling raced up to her, smiling. Myrcella, in an act she would never have even

thought of doing before this trip, quickly crossed the distance between them, pulling Tommen around behind her while glaring back at Joffrey.

His eyes widened for a moment, then he glared at her as well before he smoothed his features back to normalcy as their mother came out to usher them all up into the coach. Tommen looked up at her questioningly but Myrcella merely shook her head with a smile, then made certain to sit Tommen as far away from Joffrey as possible in the carriage.

About two hours travel time took their much smaller band to Moat Cailin where the rest of the party was waiting for them. Myrcella gasped in astonishment, a sound that drew the attention of the others in the carriage, causing all of them to look out of the window. By the road leading north was the carcass of a monstrous lizard lion, which was being held up on a huge skinning bed.

The King, Lord Stark, Ranma, and Lord Reed all stood by it along with an older girl she didn't know standing beside the diminutive Lord Reed, with the Kingsguard and the rest of their party already on horses nearby. As the carriage came up level with them, Myrcella could hear her father saying. "By the Seven lad, take me with you the next time you go hunting! You certainly find more interesting game than I have in many a year!"

As the others around the King broke into laughter with their King, Tommen went wide-eyed. As soon as the carriage stopped, he ignored his mother's hissed instructions to stay put and bolted out of the carriage toward his hero.

Joffrey followed, more because he knew that his father would once more insist on his riding rather than remaining in the carriage, than because he was really interested. The oldest Baratheon sibling saw his father nod cordially at Tommen, an acknowledgment that, despite how lukewarm it was, none of the Baratheon children had ever seen from their father before. Hate for his youngest sibling curdled within him and he glared daggers at Tommen's small back. Cersei noticed the nod as well and wondered what it could mean for the future but didn't see, or perhaps willfully ignored like so many other things, the look her oldest son was giving her youngest.

On the other hand, Myrcella noticed it once again. Even as Ranma modestly waved off Tommen's entreaty to tell him the story behind the massive lizard lion, she watched Joffrey through narrowed eyes, wondering what her older brother was going to do. She blushed faintly as Ranma looked toward the carriage, his blue eyes alight with humor. He bowed in their direction, then turned and, after raising the youngster into his saddle, grasped the reins of his horse. He then made his way over to them, already spinning a tale for Tommen. "Ah, I'm bored of telling that tale already, Tommy. Besides, its short and not very funny or interesting. How about this one: There once was a kingdom, whose inhabitants were so strong and powerful they were called demons by their neighbors. Now, to the royal family of this land was born a princess, who longed for adventure. Her chance to get away for a bit was realized when her nation decided to invade a very tiny neighboring nation. Instead of conquering it however, the demon kingdom always gave their opponents a chance, deciding their invasion by contests of all sorts, including simple games. This time they decided to see who would win a game of tag, between the princess or a randomly chosen noble of the country they were invading..."

Sansa blinked then looked at Jeyne, who shook her head. They hadn't heard this story before! Ranma smiled warmly at his sister, before ruffling her hair, affectionately, ignoring her pout with ease while nodding in Myrcella's direction, causing Myrcella to smile at him shyly.

Around them the cavalcade got going. Lord Stark and Lord Reed had put their heads together to think up ways to make this part of the trip move faster resulting in Ned commissioning boats to carry the luggage and many of the servants while the party continued on horseback (and carriage) down the causeway. The boats carrying the food would come out of the secret waterways to abut the causeway every evening. In this manner, they would be able to go faster. This part of the trip was no fun for anyone so even Robert was fine with speeding their way through. The party would eat the midday meal while moving, no afternoon stops, no hunting or carousing, simply because the view in the Neck was not one anyone but a crannogman could love.

As Ranma regaled the children with tales of the Tomobiki district near Nerima, where the insanity was greater even if the amount of combat was much less, the last of the soldiers mounted up and they moved off. Behind them, the smallfolk started to carve up and skin the lizard lion for its trip to Winterfell. Even starting with the softer belly shell it was very tough going, making it obvious that the hide would make extremely good armor, even if the cost of making it would be quite high.

Lord Reed stood and watched the party move down the causeway through the massive gates of the one wall that had still been intact from the old castle, wondering what his friend Ned would face, hoping against hope that he would take his words about not trusting other people's honor to heart. In a pocket of his cloak, he held two letters that would go north with the lizard lion, which he dearly hoped would not be the last such missive sent, even if he would not be

the one delivering the others.

OOOOOO

Greywater Watch was not much of a castle, being more a large wooden palisade around a single two story keep made of stone. Despite this, it was next to impossible to siege because it was impossible to find in the first place. Greywater was built on a crannog, a man-made island that moved randomly over the waters of the Neck, which made it impossible for any invaders to find it. This was the seat of House Reed, Lord of the Neck.

At present, of course, Howland was absent but his wife, Jyana, and his young son, Jojen, were still present along with their servants and a few guards/hunters. Here in the marsh, there were no men-at-arms, although every man knew his way with a pike and most crannogmen were expert archers and hunters.

Jyana spent much of her time these days looking after her youngest child, who had collapsed several weeks ago like a marionette with his strings cut. Since then Jojen hadn't opened his eyes or even stirred at all. So it was with shock that Jyana saw him awake when she came in from grabbing a tray of food for herself. She moved forward quickly, laying a gentle hand on his brow. "Jojen, oh my son, I am so glad you've woken up. You've been in some kind of fever dream for the past few weeks! How are you feeling?"

Jojen did not answer his mother directly, instead staring past her shoulder further north. When he spoke, it was in the riddles of a seer, a talent the Reeds had known he possessed for many years, though Jyana thought it more a curse than a gift. "The eyes that have been closed may yet be opened. The future has changed, yet the green abides. The choice must be made between the green and the builder." It was only after he finished speaking this odd line that the ten year old boy looked at his mother with eyes far older and wiser than his years. "I must go to Winterfell."

OOOOOO

Three weeks after she had taken them, Catelyn's wounds had at last receded, allowing her to talk at a normal level, something all her family and advisors were happy about, save for one. Rickon had at first welcomed his mother back to health but when she ordered him to continue to take lessons with Lady Jonelle, that had faded rapidly. She still refused to leave the healing hall for long but this didn't stop her from becoming more active in the family and the castle. Still the healing area became an impromptu center for the castle business, with Catelyn throwing herself into the work even as she kept one eye on her still comatose son.

A few days after her recovery, Catelyn sent a servant to fetch Arya to her. It was nighttime by this point, and Catelyn stood at the window, staring out into the dark. The window's panes had been repaired, but it was open now, allowing in the night air as well as letting her look out over Winterfell. Snow had fallen since the last time she had taken in the view and Catelyn shivered at the bite of the cold of the North, which seemed sharper somehow today than it had been since she arrived here all those years ago as a new bride.

She looked around at a diffident cough behind her. "You wanted to see me, mother?" Arya was dressed in her regular garb of pants and an overlarge coat. Nothing about it told of her station and it almost erased her gender from view, which made it a sort of example of the problem Catelyn had called her youngest daughter in to talk about.

"Come in Arya, and sit down." Arya did so, looking at her mother warily as Catelyn sat across from her at the small table that had been moved into the healing hall. The mother stared at the daughter for a time, then spoke. "You are my daughter, a highborn woman, yet you dress in rags like that in an attempt to run away from it. I have long allowed you some leeway, allowed you to follow your dreams of wielding a blade because of the agreement I made with Ranma. Yet you and I have never talked about why I felt that such lessons were a waste of time. I have only ever tried to cajole and browbeat you before this. Since it has obviously not worked, I have decided to try a new tact, explaining, in as blunt terms as I can use, why women perform an important job in our society."

Arya stiffened, fighting an urge to run, but stayed put, one hand on Nymeria's head, where the direwolf pup had placed her head in her mistress's lap. While not as large as Ghost, Nymeria was still already the size of a regular wolf, despite only being a bare five months old.

Having noticed her daughter's trepidation, Catelyn smiled faintly but her words were deadly serious as she spoke. "The role of women of stature in our society is to be the bridges that hold that society together by the oldest way imaginable, by that of blood." Arya looked up at her in surprise and Catelyn went on. "A wedding between two Houses can be used to improve the station of one House, to ensure the loyalty of one House to another, to forge alliances between Houses of the same stature. A marriage can win your family power, possibly even broker a peace between warring families or even nations. Eventually, as a Stark of Winterfell, you will be called upon to marry to make the family stronger. As such, you must know the skills all girls of your stature know, the better to bring more



suitors."

At this point, Arya had held her silence as long as she could and now she exploded, years of silently building frustration and anger coming out. "I hate that! I hate it, hate the idea of only being important because of what my, my maidenhead can bring! I want to be my own person, to be important in my own right rather than as simply a, a bridge between our family and another! Why can't I be free to make my own way in the world?!"

"Would you be willing to give up your family to achieve that dream?" Catelyn asked archly. "Would you leave your siblings, me, your father, and Winterfell behind for such an uncertain future?" Arya's silence was her answer and Catelyn smiled faintly. "I know that you hate this but your hate will not change what is. Yet, nor will I continue to try to change you."

Arya looked up in shock at that while Catelyn's smile turned grim. "Times are changing, winter is coming like the family motto says and softness in winter can spell death. If you are to be married, the man you marry will know precisely what he gets, a wolf as well as a lady." Arya smiled at that, but Catelyn's next words brought her down to earth. "Yet, I will have your word as a Stark, here and now, that when the time comes to do your duty, you will enter into it with, if not happiness, then at least understanding because it is your duty to your family. I will try my hardest, and you know your father will as well, to find you a match with a man who will appreciate you for who you are, but your marriage may be too important to put off for reasons such as that. Until then Arya, you are free to continue your lessons with Dacey with my blessing, so long as you also continue your lessons with Jonelle on decorum, the maester with history and with me in land management."

Arya frowned heavily but the allure of getting her mother's blessing for training now won over the far distant unpleasantness of marriage. After all, she had years to go yet before she had to figure out a way out of that. "I swear it mother, so long as the man isn't too old, smelly, or boorish, I won't make trouble when the time comes."

"I suppose that's the best I can get." Catelyn chuckled quietly. "Now, tell me about the battle that occurred a few days back." Arya looked at her quickly to see Catelyn smiling coldly at her. "Did you think I wouldn't see through that flimsy lie you and the others concocted? Please, I'm your mother, I know these things."

The question and answer section when on for a time, then Catelyn told Arya to find Jon, wanting to speak to them both. When Jon entered, Catelyn immediately asked him, "So did you find anything out from the prisoners you took? And why didn't you mention the fact you took prisoners to me after the attack occurred?" She refrained from mentioning his choice to let Arya fight. She had meant to take him to task strongly about that, but Arya had defended him, saying she would have followed anyway. Dacey wasn't off the hook just yet, but that could wait.

"Nothing concrete, ma'am. Just the fact that their leader had found someone who was willing to pay for them to sack Winterfell. I've sent a runner to the Wull to see what he can tell us about this, predominately how such a large band of men moved through his territory unimpeded. The mountain clans should have taken these men to pieces in their mountains. Instead, they came out unscathed and within striking distance of Winterfell without being seen. If I had found anything concrete from the prisoners, I would, of course, have told you."

Catelyn waved that off. "Was there anything to tie the attacker's mysterious benefactor to the Lannisters?"

Jon spoke carefully, not liking the way Catelyn seemed to brush off what he said about none of their prisoners having known anything. "I apologize, Lady, but again, there was no proof of who their backer was. Moreover, this was set in motion long before the King arrived. The travel time through the mountains for a group of any size would be measured in months, not weeks. No ma'am, this has nothing to do with the Lannisters."

It was obvious this did not sit well with the former Tully woman, whose hot-blooded nature sometimes came to the fore. Yet she reined it in for now. "Very well, I'll concede the point. Though I think the Lannisters are somehow behind this, I won't allow myself to concentrate on that to the exclusion of all else. Now, on to more immediate topics: I understand that you, Ser Rodrick, and Maester Luwin have between you been dealing with the running of the land. Arya and I will both now be taking part in those decisions."

Arya looked at her in surprise and some consternation but Catelyn merely smiled grimly. "You want to be the equal of a man then you will have to take on the duties of a man, as well."

That made Arya's back straighten up, and she nodded resolutely. "I am a Stark of Winterfell, mother. I will do my duty."

Life in Winterfell passed relatively quietly for the next few days as the furor over the attackers died down. Dacey (after a **very** uncomfortable talk with the Lady of the House) remained in Winterfell as Arya's mentor/bodyguard/trainer.

Hathan and his new retainers moved on to his new holdfast, taking with them some servants, who were working at jobs below their abilities here in Winterfell.

Theon had left the day after Catelyn's... discussion with Dacey, headed to White Harbor with Ser Wendel and his party, who were returning home with the plans for their part in supplying the whelming. Ser Wendel bore a letter signed by Lady Catelyn and Rickon asking for Theon to be given an advisors role in their supply operations, as well as two sealed envelopes for their Lord. One was from Lord Stark prepared before he left, detailing some plans between the two men, as well as asking Lord Manderly to ask his factors for any news they could get their hands on the man thought needful for Ned to know. Wyman Manderly was among the most intelligent and far thinking lords of the North. Both Catelyn and Ned respected 'the pufferfish's' political acumen. This was why Catelyn had chosen to send her own letter to the man, updating him on recent events as well as giving her own opinion about them and asking for his opinion.

Arya, while not having much to contribute, did indeed join the meetings to discuss readying the White Knife for supplies, making certain all the farms in the area were producing as much as they should, and gathering in supplies. Men also began to ready the winter village (the large village that surrounded Winterfell that was practically empty save for the warehouse and the market) for inhabitants while at the same time preparing Winterfell itself for more people. The crispness of the night air, the heaviness of the clouds in the sky, the random snowfall, all of it pointed to one thing: the coming of winter. Arya only had something to contribute when it came to the construction aspect and, even there, not much but she was at least trying her best. With Catelyn there as well, she didn't allow her irritation at being forced to be part of the meetings to be seen.

This new routine was interrupted several days after Lady Catelyn recovered from her wounds. As had become usual, the extended family of the Starks and her advisers had dinner in the healing area, something that had at first confused and irritated the servants, but they had long since gotten used to it.

Most of the time, the direwolves would be outside playing at this time of day since Lady Catelyn still wasn't over her, rather irrational in her daughter's opinion, fear of the beasts. The only exception was Bran's direwolf, who simply hid under his bed when someone tried to force him out of the room. He never growled, barked, or anything, unlike Shaggydog, who had become quite wild before Lady Jonelle took Rickon in hand. Thankfully, it seemed as if the boy's self-control and education had an effect on the direwolf pup as well. So used to the presence of Bran's direwolf had Catelyn become that she didn't even notice his growling as she, Jonelle, Arya, Dacey, the maester, and Ser Rodrick sat down to dine.

Jon might have but he wasn't here this evening. He and Ghost had gone on an expedition to House Mollen to see how they were coming with their project of taming the White Knife in their territory. He was due back the next day and his report would be very interesting indeed. It turned out that the White Knife could be tamed enough to allow medium-sized barge transports. Lord Dorrel Mollen had found a young man who was a genius at creating pulleys and levers which aided the effort tremendously. They could even be used around the occasional waterfall found along the White Knife.

The meal had been over for a few hours at this point but they all lingered around the table going over business, even Arya, since her mother kept glaring at her every time she looked as if she wanted to run off. Now, however, they were talking about something that interested Arya a lot and her attempts to leave stopped.

"So the next shipment of food and other supplies will be ready before the White Knife has been tamed, unless Jon has something surprising to say about the progress being made on that project. We'll be faced with a choice, either to keep it here, try to send it up to the Wall by land, or over to the White Harbor overland. Your thoughts, Ser Rodrick?" asked Catelyn. Her eyes were shrewd as she looked over at the master of arms, who was Jon's second in command of the whelming.

"It would be faster to send it to White Harbor, milady. A convoy of foodstuffs traveling up to the Wall would take a minimum of six months, maybe longer if the conditions worsen. From here over to White Harbor, two months and then another week and a half, going by Lord Wendell's estimate, to get it up to the wall."

Maester Luwin asked, "So, when our men plus those of Hornwood and Cerwyn arrive, how many men will the Nights Watch have on the Wall?"

Ser Rodrick reached over to a pile of parchment on the table but Arya beat him to it, pulling out a piece of paper that a raven had delivered to them that morning. "It says that House Umber's first group of troops have already arrived and the Karstark men have been sighted and are nearly to the Wall. So plus ours... Lord Hornwood is sending six hundred archers and spearmen... Flint of Flint's finger is sending up five hundred, I think Jon said... I would say that would put their total numbers at around... more than five thousand, with two thousand being our men." That last was

said proudly, Arya being proud of the strength her family could call on.

"A goodly number, for any defensive action." said Luwin, smiling a little at the girl's eagerness for anything involving battle. "Until one thinks of how large the Wall truly is."

Dacey waved that off however. "The Wall is such a strong defensive position that any one man on it is worth a thousand or even two thousand attackers. Yes, you have to spread them out, but," she paused shaking her head a little, one hand going to her stomach as it grumbled at her. "Y, your pardon I seem to be feeling a little ill for some reason. W-where was I?"

Ser Rodrick put his stein of beer down looking at the younger woman quizzically and shook his own head, one hand going to his own stomach. "I'm, my stomach is..."

Arya clutched her stomach for a moment, fighting back a wave of nausea.

Lady Catelyst stood up abruptly. "Excuse me a moment." She ran out the room, heading towards the nearest garderobe. Arya and the others all stood up as one, almost, with Arya rushing over to the single window of the healing hall. The adults rushed out the door, with the men swiftly moving towards the nearest arrowslits, tearing their shutters open and heaving the contents of their stomachs out the narrow windows, while the women made for the nearest garderobe.

Not even two minutes later, the servant who had brought them their food came into the healing hall, smirking villainously. He was not a man known in Winterfell, for he, in fact, was not a normal servant. The excuse he had given for asking for employment was that he needed some money to purchase enough food to get him back to his home in the lands controlled by Flint of Flint Finger's but that was a lie. In fact, he was a cut purse, a murderer for hire, though nothing like the trained assassins of the God of Many Faces. He was simply a low level sort of vermin that could be found practically anywhere, even here in the North.

He had agonized for weeks on how to do this job. He had even thought at one point to simply give it up as a bad job, to take the money he'd already been paid and run with it. But for some reason, he had decided to stay with it, possibly because it had been the Crown Prince who had hired him. Yet, more likely, it was because Joffrey had threatened him with the Hound, who terrified him as any big dangerous predator would a smaller predator. This man well knew he couldn't hide from someone like Sandor Clegane, no matter how long it would take the Hound to find his scent.

Nonetheless, it had taken him weeks to think of a way to get the Lady Catelyst out of the room and for the furor to die down enough so that the guards on the door would no longer be present. A mild dose of food poisoning, mixing in tainted raw meat with the heavy chowder had done for that well enough. It would be several hours before any of the ones who ate it would recover, including the two guards who had eaten prior to the family eating in their room. Of course, it would raise suspicions but by then he would be long gone.

He stopped however when he saw Arya at the open arrowslit, cursing internally. He hadn't realized the window in this room had been repaired, since before this it had been covered by a wooden panel. Before he could think of what to do, Bran's direwolf crawled out from under the bed and stood before him, growling angrily, his teeth bared.

The man froze as Arya turned from the window, her face green and one hand on her stomach, but still in charge of her faculties enough to realize what the man was trying to do. "Wh-what are you doing!" One hand scrambled at her side, but Fang was in her room, Catelyst not wanting her armed at their evening meals.

"What does it look like, you little wild bitch." the man muttered, his eyes locked on the direwolf in front of him. He'd heard what the things could do in defense of their masters. It was well he had, because at that moment the wolf charged him, mouth open.

Arya threw up again but her mind was working despite this. The moment she recovered, she opened the connection she had to Nymeria and sent a desperate thought down it. *Pack mate danger, come to me!*

In front of Arya, the would-be assassin sidestepped left, trying to stab the direwolf with his knife in an overhand blow and catching the animal a glancing blow along the neck. But this was a mere nick to the direwolf, who turned his head and snapped at the murderer's hand in an attempt to mangle it. The man cursed, stepping backwards, his knife once more between him and the wolf. He lunged forward with the weapon in an underhand grip, trying to get the direwolf in the eye.

The direwolf sprang backwards but still was caught by the knife high up in one shoulder, which tore a portion of fur off, adding to the number of scars this direwolf had gained in its fight with the previous assassin. He yipped and

backed away still snarling, while on the floor Arya had thrown up again, cursing how useless she felt right now.

The man grinned and pressed forward, but at that point the door to the healing hall banged open. Suddenly, Shaggydog and Nymeria were there, bounding forward, snarling. Before he could turn to face this new threat, Nymeria had her teeth in one of the man's legs, ripping and tearing at the hamstrings behind his knee.

"AHHHGG!" The man fell to the ground screaming, waving the knife wildly, but Shaggydog dodged in, grabbing his wrist in his mouth. He wasn't big enough to simply bite it off like Ghost or Fenris could, but he could tear a large chunk out of it, rendering that hand useless. "YEEEEEE!" The man screamed again high-pitched, yowling in agony, but that ended abruptly as Nymeria went for the kill, ripping out his throat.

Even as the alarm was raised in the keep, the servants and guards responding to all the screaming, the pack moved together. Shaggydog and Nymeria began to lick at the wounds Bran's direwolf had taken, rubbing their heads against him consolingly. Nymeria turned to her mistress but was waved off, as Arya, leaning back against the wall underneath the window, looked at the bloody corpse, then rubbed her stomach. Strangely enough, the sight of the dead man wasn't making her any sicker.

A sound from the bed drew her attention. She and the wolves turned to gaze happily at the sight of Bran, sitting up and yawning in bed. He looked at the three direwolves and the dead man. But rather than be aghast or scared, Bran merely nodded and reached out to his direwolf with one hand. His bonded partner moved forward hesitantly, at first, then with more enthusiasm licking and snuffling at his master's hand. Then he finally had time to look at his sister. "Hello, sister, you stink."

Arya raised one fist at him mock threateningly but couldn't keep the wide grin off her face. She made to stand up but her stomach gurgled at her and she turned to throw up once again out of the window. Seeing this, her brother shook his head.

Bran felt as if he had come out of a waking dream, although the reality of what lay on the floor made him wonder if the dream was over yet. The sight of his sister being sick was odd but at least he could understand it, unlike his dreams. In them, Bran had been flying, his spirit flying in the air, as he had longed to do for so long, and then he was falling, falling into an abyss constantly, never in control, never able to find his way back home and back to his body. Then the three-eyed crow had appeared, who somehow Bran knew was more than a mere crow, even a three eyed one. It had led Bran home, led him back to his own body.

Now Bran slowly slid out of the bed, testing his legs and finding them a little wobbly because of all the time he had spent lying down. He sat down on the edge of the bed, taking his direwolf's head in his hands and gently stroking his fur.

The moment Lady Jonelle had joined her in the garderobe, Catelyn knew there was something wrong. After a few minutes, she forced herself to her feet, ignoring through sheer willpower the urge to throw up again and rushed back to the healing hall. She looked inside and gasped in horror at the sight of the man on the ground, with the direwolves all sitting around him, looking between her, the bed, and her daughter, who was covered with some of her own sick and leaning against the room's open window. The bed however held a sight that drove her horror of the dead man's corpse out of her head. Bran, her second son, her baby, her darling dreamer, was sitting upright and smiling happily at her.

"His name is Summer," Bran said, patting his newly christened direwolf on the head. "Because though winter is coming, summer is always the hope of man."

OOOOOO

Jon came back the next day, taking a page out of Ranma's book on the last day of the journey to get back that much faster. He ran the entire day, breathing deeply and easily as Ghost bounded alongside him, leaving behind the five men-at arms that he had been traveling with.

He waved at a few guards he saw on the walls of the Keep, stiffening slightly as he noticed their alert, guarded movement along the wall. Suspicion darkening his mind, Jon raced into the keep then up to the still guarded healing hall, where he found Bran and his direwolf sitting in bed together, while the maester once again went over them.

The maester hadn't recovered as quickly as Catelyn or the others had, being an older man and not nearly as hardy. Still, he was on his feet now and going over everyone who had eaten that evening. It hadn't just been the Starks and their advisors; it had also been their guards and several others that had eaten from the same ruined meal. Even so, all of them were on the mend. It was obvious that the murderer had placed the tainted food into the soup to get just

this reaction.

Catelyn, sitting up in another bed nearby and watching her son with joy in her eyes, looked up as Jon entered. "You missed a bit of excitement, Jon." she said dryly.

Jon looked at the dagger on the table as well as the bloody coin pouch, then his now awake brother and asked simply "What did I miss?" Bran and Arya filled him in while Jon picked up the dagger, looking at it carefully. "This is a **Valyrian** dagger, I recognize the characteristics from seeing Ice. Who would give **this** to a common cut purse, whatever their mission?"

"I know precisely who." Catelyn replied coldly. "One of the Lannisters." Jon looked at her skeptically but she nodded her head firmly. "I remember one of them saying that he had won that knife off the King. I can't remember who though. I think it might've been the Imp."

Jon, however, was much more skeptical. "What possible reason could Tyrion have to try to assassinate Bran, especially after all this time and given the fact he was wounded in the first attempt? I will warn you again, milady, don't get so focused on one answer that you neglect to search for others. Who knows, someone else might have won that dagger off Tyrion after that conversation."

He picked up the bloody pouch, opening it, and pouring out the money, whistling a little as the coins poured out. "Gold dragons again, five of them. Someone had money to waste. Which argues against it having been the Imp, he's not so frivolous as all that, and he didn't have much money to call his own."

"Maybe he spent it all on paying the man who tried to kill Bran!" Catelyn exclaimed angrily. "Why can't you see that they are involved in this?!"

"Because there is no **real** proof." Jon answered back calmly, keeping his own temper under control with ease, emphasizing his words with the very calmness he said them with. "There is supposition, there is possibility, but there is no **real** proof to connect any Lannister, let alone Tyrion, to this crime. All we can tell from this is that Bran saw something that **someone** is still terrified of letting anyone know about."

That line of thought derailed Catelyn's growing anger at Jon not seeing the truth as she thought of it. She wanted to blame someone for this assault on her son. She wanted vengeance but Catelyn knew she had to wait and choose her target carefully; she couldn't go haring off in search of vengeance. With Ranma not here and with Bran only just recovered and still so young, she had to stay here to watch over the family.

She trusted Jon, of course. Over the years since Ranma's revelation she had come to see him as a nephew of sorts and did not hold his status as a Snow against him. However, other people would hold that status against the family if it looked like they trusted a bastard born too much, thinking them too trusting and gullible. It would also bring too much attention to him and some might question his origins if that occurred, bringing ruin on the Starks.

She turned to look over at Bran. "Can you remember anything, my son?"

Bran looked up from where he had been staring into Summer's eyes, shaking his head sadly. "I remember waking up that day and thinking I might go kind climbing to find the nests of some birds I noticed by the Old Tower but that's all except, except for golden hair and someone saying 'the things I do for love'. It was a man's voice, but that's all I can remember. I'm sorry." he finished, looking a little morose.

"Don't be, Bran." Jon said moving over and pulling him into a firm hug. "I'm just glad you're alive and well, your memories of what happened are more than a fair exchange for that." Bran snuffled a little, grabbing his older brother in a hug. Jon stood there for a moment ruffling his hair and smiling over at Catelyn who smiled back along with Arya.

Sitting next to Catelyn, Lady Jonelle smiled too. She had been one of those who had thought it odd that Jon was so well loved by the Starks and most particularly Lady Catelyn. But seeing him with Bran like this made it clear that Jon had a good soul to him. Though Jonelle didn't think she would have been strong enough to put up with one of her husband's baseborn children, it was obvious Catelyn had moved past that.

After a moment however, Catelyn brought their attention back to her with a gentle cough. She winced a little, one hand going to her stomach, frowning thoughtfully. "Maester Luwin, will the food poisoning have affected my pregnancy?"

Luwin shook his head. "There are some types of food poisoning that will have such an affect. my lady. However, this one won't have any long term effect on you or the baby." He looked over at Jonelle, who had stiffened with trepidation

at Catelyn's words. "Nor will it have affected yours, Lady Jonelle, despite how far along you are."

The Lady of House Cerwyn breathed a sigh of relief and Catelyn decided to move back to the former topic of conversation. "Despite what Jon said, does anyone here not think that there is something going on down south, that this is not all connected to some larger scheme or plot of the Lannisters? The golden hair, the knife, my sister's message, the knight who hails from the Westerlands trying to kill Bran... the clues are building up. More and more, I am convinced that my husband and my oldest children are walking into a snake spit and I am stuck here, unable to help." Catelyn growled.

That sound actually made all the direwolves look at her in the wolf equivalent of surprise. They then resolved to be very respectful to the angry pupping mother.

None of the people in the room answered her for a moment. Not even Bran spoke up, though he looked a little quizzical, as if he couldn't quite follow the conversation. Jon moved back from his hug, patting Bran on the head. "I'll fill you in later."

He looked over at Lady Catelyn once more and shrugged. "We already called on your father to lend Lord Stark some men in Kings Landing, we could send a message to your sister, ask her for more proof against the Lannisters, or for aid in the form of men for Lord Stark, but that's all I can think of at present."

"We could send messages about this latest occurrence to the Red Keep," the maester thought musingly, "but I would wait until we can be reasonably certain that Lord Stark is there before doing so. Leaving a message like that unattended strikes me as a **very** bad idea. But that would tell Lord Stark that there was more to what Bran saw than we assumed."

"We could send another message to grandfather, mother." suggested Arya. "If I remember my geography lessons right, he could send a rider with a message to intersect the King's journey south."

Catelyn shook her head. "I like the idea of sending my father a message, but Lysa seems too overwrought to be trusted. I already sent two messages to her asking for more proof, one immediately after the initial attack on Bran and one after I recovered from my wounds. The one message I got back held no more proof than the first and was even more hysterical."

Luwin nodded. As master of ravens, he saw most messages as they came in. The Starks were aware of this and trusted him to not read anything he shouldn't. "I have seen that message and I agree that your sister seems too stressed to be trusted. There is more than grief in that, however, there is also fear. And people who are afraid can do odd things at times. I would recommend we give her time to get over the shock of her husband's death and time to let her son grow some more before we trust her state of mind."

Catelyn suddenly smiled, thinking of another family member she could call upon. One who she would swear would not have forgotten their family motto of 'family, duty, honor'. "Actually, don't send a message to my father. With his declining health, I don't want to put anymore strain on him. No, I have another place in mind for it..."

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The trip through the Neck had been easily the most boring part of the trip so far, with the unchanging landscape on either side of the causeway, the lack of hunting for Robert, and the buzzing of bugs and odd noises from the bogs. Thankfully, it was also rather quicker than the trip down from Winterfell to the Moat. With the supplies and the servants who couldn't ride brought along by boat, it had taken two weeks to traverse the length of the neck. Every evening, the boats holding the parties supplies would come up to the causeway through secret waterways known only to the crannogmen, allowing them to set up camp, eat the evening meal, and replenish their daily supplies. This made the trip much faster than if they had to travel at the pace set by the carts. Even the carriage, with two teams of horses instead of one, didn't slow their pace down all that much.

Still, it was a relief for everyone when they began to see regular trees and solid ground ahead of them that was not part of the causeway. Once there, the servants began to reorganize the party's supplies as they came off the crannogmen's boats at a tiny wharf near where the causeway connected into the rest of the Kingsroad.

During this, Ranma shucked off his heavy wool and fur coat, as well as his chain mail for a moment, switching to a short sleeved leather jerkin. It had been getting noticeably warmer with every day they traveled south in the Neck, and it was very noticeable now. It wasn't warm by any means just yet, but it was solid autumn weather. The jerkin, however, was rather tight around his shoulders and Ranma grimaced a little. "I'll have to let this one out around the shoulders, father." he said looking up at Eddard who was leaning against his horse's side beside him.

Ranma ignored the looks he was getting from some of the female servants and, most especially, the look Jeyne was giving him with the ease of long practice. Jeyne had been pining away at him for years but she was not his type with a capital 'Oh Fuck No'. It wasn't even funny how not his type she was.

By his side, Fenris scratched behind one ear with his hind paw. The direwolf was now larger by a head than any dog or regular wolf and, judging by the size of his paws, still had quite a bit of growing to do. Before he finished up, Ranma estimated that Fenris would be as large as a warhorse. That would be interesting, especially if his strength was proportionate to his size...

"That will give you something to do for the evening. We won't be moving out from this place for until tomorrow, I would estimate, before all of this is ready to go again." Ned replied, looking at his son and smiling faintly as he saw the youngest Baratheon standing by his side, scratching at Fenris's neck.

Ranma grunted agreement then looked over at Tommen. "Come on, Tommy. We can get some training in while the servants are doing their work." Robert nodded approvingly at Tommen, causing the young boy to swell up with pride at finally being acknowledged by his father before chasing after his personal hero. They hadn't gotten past muscle exercises yet but Ranma had said he would start teaching him some speed exercises, as well as finger and wrist exercises.

Nearby, Joffrey scowled, staring at Ranma and his younger brother hatefully but quickly wiped it off his face as his mother came out of the carriage. Cersei looked over at Robert and Tommen as well. She had noticed this before; Robert actually acknowledging, for the first time, one of his children in a positive manner. In truth, she was rather torn about it.

She hated the man, no, worse, she loathed him with every fiber of her being, but if he acknowledged one of the children like this, then it might argue against certain...truths if they came to light, which could only help in the long run. Yet she needed to watch out for another reason. *If he chooses to name my babe, my darling baby, as heir over my little lion, the consequences for my plans going forward could well be large indeed.*

Cersei frowned thoughtfully looking at Robert through narrowed eyes, stepping aside to let her daughter, Sansa, and Jeyne out of the carriage. *It might be that I need to move up my plans a bit to combat that...*

Myrcella and Sansa knew nothing of the Queen's inner thoughts. They were best of friends by this point, along with Jeyne to a lesser extent, and the trio of girls stayed together as they watched the work progressing before the septa came out of the carriage, moving a little gingerly. The long trip was not doing her any favors and she had caught something while in the Neck which had sapped her strength further. But she grabbed all three of the girl's attention easily enough, moving them over and beginning to go through some etiquette lessons with the trio.

It was more busy work than anything but she didn't want any of her impressionable young charges to be near the work being done on the wharf, since even from here she could hear the cursing of the crannogmen and the servants as they tried to reorganize the jumble of packages and supplies. This was made more difficult by the fact many of the carts and drovers had turned back to House Cerwyn when they entered the Neck, not having been given leave by their lord to continue. Varys tried to negotiate with them to go on but they were all adamant at turning back, as their lord had commanded. Without Ned's aid, who backed them, Varys made no headway.

Eddard's approximation of the time needed to get the convoy moving again was spot on and the group bedded down by the wharf that evening; many of them in the small huts that the Neck's merchants used and others in tents with the men-at-arms in tents all around the royal family and the Starks. The trio of girls shared one hut with the Queen, her chief handmaiden, and the septa, while Robert and the men shared one, along with, to Ranma's disgust, Varys. He didn't like the eunuch, considering him a greasy little asshole. Having heard from Robert and others of his pederast tendencies, now every time the eunuch was near him, Ranma's fists itched. Alas, as master of whispers, his position was such Ranma couldn't simply kill him and dump his body in the Neck, as much as he wished to.

Around them the work continued through the night, readying the party to depart the next day.

With the warmth of the day, came the willingness of the Queen to actually get up without aid and she did so the next morning, looking around quizzically as she noticed that her daughter and Sansa were not in their cots. She looked over at the entrance to the small hut they had commandeered for the ladies and saw Jeyne leading them out. She sighed angrily. In her mind, Jeyne was a bit of a gossipy troublemaker and Myrcella and Sansa were all too willing to follow her lead at times. This wasn't the first time the trio had gone off during one of the stops, although she wondered what they were up to this time. Surely, there were no rabbits or other wild 'cute' animals around or anything else at this time of day that would interest three young ladies?

Cersei decided to follow them and got out of bed quietly, pulling on a dress, same one she had one last evening. She would normally never wear the same thing twice but it was ready to go and she wasn't about to waste the time to get more prepared for the day. Who knew what mischief the trio of girls would get up to in that time? She followed them swiftly, the ease of long practice allowing her to steal along quietly. Many a time she had met Jaime for one of their trysts in such a manner and she was easily able to move through the slowly waking crowd of servants and men-at-arms.

She was surprised when the girls reached the edge of the camp and kept on going, making her wonder once more where they were off to.

The evening before, Jayne had seen Ranma exercise with Tommen in one of the streams that fed into the neck. She also knew from long experience that Ranma got up in the early mornings to exercise. Watching him exercise was one of her (many) guilty pleasures. So, if he wasn't outside their tent/house waiting for them, it was obvious to her that Ranma would be exercising somewhere.

Ranma was indeed exercising in the middle of the stream, a small fast-moving stream about two yards across and only coming up to his knees but still nice and cool. He was also shirtless, his flat, exceptionally toned stomach and abs on display, the powerful corded muscles shifting visibly under his skin, his tanned skin making the scar along his side and on his shoulder standing out even more. If there was a single ounce of fat anywhere on his body, it wasn't apparent. He was going through some kind of exercise, hands and legs thrusting out quickly, moving in a pattern of some kind like he was dancing in place. None of the watchers knew it, but Ranma was going through one of the advanced katas of the Anything Goes School of martial arts. It was designed to increase your speed, as well as your coordination and agility.

Jayne blushed a little, licking her lips as she stared at Ranma's abs and shoulders. She was far and away the most experienced of the trio, though still technically a virgin, and to her Ranma was just yummy. Sansa simply blushed and looked away, furtively taking glances out of the corner of her eye at her older brother while internally castigating herself for doing so. Myrcella being the youngest and most innocent of the trio, at least in this manner, was blushing so red she looked like a ripe tomato.

Behind them, even Cersei was effected. Despite her love for her brother, she could see that Ranma was a magnificent specimen of man. *Perhaps I should step up my seduction plans even further than I had previously wished to.* she thought to herself, *it might even be amusing if he can actually use that magnificent body for more than combat.*

However, right now, Cersei was more than a little irritated at Jayne dragging her young, impressionable daughter out for this. She reached around them, one hand cupping her daughter's mouth. The other two turned at the sound of Myrcella's muffled squeak. "I think," she said icily, "that you three should head back now, don't you? It is unseemly for young ladies to be spying on a boy like this. I am certain the septa would be more than happy to prepare some sort of punishment for you all."

Thoroughly cowed by her stare, the trio nodded quickly and ran off back to the cabin they had commandeered. The queen took one last glance of Ranma, then shook her head and moved off after them, grateful that the boy had his eyes closed and had not even noticed them, so intent was he on his exercises.

If they had stayed longer, they would have seen Ranma stop his present kata, then jump into the air moving through another one, throwing out kicks and punches faster than most men could even see. Moments later, Fenris appeared out of the woods, attacking his master to signal the beginning of his own training.

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The party got underway a few hours later with nothing else happening, though Tommen wondered why his sister was so red in the face when Ranma picked him up from the carriage. He soon forgot it when Ranma began another tale from Tomobiki.

As the two trotted forward, neither of them saw Joffrey glaring at them, from the back of the column, for once. The Crown Prince turned to the Hound, saying simply. "Tonight. Gather some of the men, I think it's time that the Stark heir be brought down a peg."

Sandor nodded agreement and moved off to do his patrons bidding, inwardly thankful that Joffrey had agreed that he shouldn't participate, the better to not link the attack back to the Prince. Later that evening, Sandor had gathered five Lannister men-at-arms and told them it was time to teach the Stark boy some humility. All of them were in agreement, the Northern boy had to be brought down a peg, though not being fools, they were leery about doing it themselves.



However, when they saw that Ranma had, for once, elected not to sleep outside of the tent containing his sister and the other children, instead sleeping out beyond even the outer edge of the campsite, they agreed more readily.

Joffrey met up with them, giving them some final instructions in a low voice. "I don't want any visible bruises on his face but anything else is fair game. Beat him into within an inch of his life, make him scared of his own shadow."

The men grunted agreement at that, grinning evilly. No matter how much stronger, faster, or more durable Ranma was, he couldn't beat all of them, especially if they got a drop on him while he was sleeping, right?

"Wait!" Joffrey said suddenly thinking of something. "In case you're seen by any of the others, pour some wine and ale over yourselves and drink some ale for your mouth. Make it seem as if you're drunk."

Ranma didn't know why Jeyne, Myrcella, and Sansa were all of a blush whenever they saw him today but had decided to remove himself from their presence a bit until they got it under control, whatever it was. Then too, the forests here were different from the forests at home and Fenris was eager to explore.

Now, his body lay there on his sleeping roll as his mind flew with Fenris, zooming through the trees, all his senses acute, looking for small furry things to hunt or even large furry things to fight. Fenris wasn't picky. It wasn't as if he was hungry, but it never paid to let one's skills flounder.

So deep was Ranma into his wolf trance that he didn't even notice the knights standing around his bedroll. One stood directly over his head, staring down at him evilly, then brought down a wooden staff, trying to smash Ranma in the chest. They were under orders not to kill him, just to beat him up a lot, so he aimed for the ribs rather than the head.

There had been no sign that Ranma was awake or had any knowledge of what was going on around him so it came as rather a surprise to his attackers when Ranma's hand lashed out, caught the end of the staff, then flipped the man over him into the woods.

It was only by chance that the man didn't shout or otherwise make a loud noise at the sudden shock of being thrown through the air, but the 'thunk' as he hit a tree was rather distinctive. To their credit, his fellows responded quickly, moving in, and slamming their own cudgels and staves down towards where Ranma was sleeping.

They found out the same thing that their now unconscious comrade had, as had several people in his old world. Genma had basically attacked Ranma every night while on their training trip and, sometimes, even in Nerima to build up his situational awareness. He had done it so well that Ranma had basically developed sleep-fu. His body responded automatically to any attacks on his person while he was asleep.

So as Ranma was rousing from his trance, his body was still defending him. By the time he was actually aware of what was going on, two attackers had been thrown to slam into a nearby tree and one of his attackers was limping badly from a fractured ankle.

Ranma woke up grunting irritably, even as his body, still on autopilot, grabbed the last person who was about to attack him by his arm, pulling him in before slamming his elbow straight into his temple, knocking the man. Before the unconscious body could fall, Ranma stood up, grabbing it around the middle then tossing it onto the two unconscious men clumped by a nearby tree. The man with the fractured ankle tried to get away but Ranma caught him by the back of the neck and almost gently smashed his head against a nearby tree, knocking him out.

"I wonder what caused this little bit of amusement." Ranma muttered, reaching down to grab two of them up by their scruff of their coats. He jerked backwards however at the smell coming from them. "Drunk, you're all drunk?" he asked incredulously. Fenris, at this point, had come back from where he had been hunting. He sidled up to his master with the first attacker, dragging the man along by his jerkin, though, by his soulful eyes, this was not exactly pleasant for the direwolf. Ranma knelt by the comatose man then shook his head as he smelled the same overpowering smell of spirits from him as he had from the others.

He stood up looking at all five of the men for a moment. "I'm not going to get any answers out of you lot and, by the smell of it, I don't think you'd have good ones to give anyway. Woo, what a pong!" He grinned suddenly, and then ripped off the leggings and arm sleeves from one of the men, before tying his four fellows together, crotch to face. The fifth man, he simply propped on top of the pile. With that he turned away, rolling up his bedroll with a whistle on his lips.

Nearby, well out of sight and well hidden deeper into the campsite, Joffrey growled angrily. Then he turned to Sandor. "After he leaves, cut those fools loose. We'll need to think of something else."

The Hound grunted irritably, yet inside he was very relieved he hadn't been part of the attack. It looked as if the boy had been feigning sleep, just waiting for them to attack, and if so... Sandor shuddered, but after Ranma and Fenris left their former position, moved to do it his master's bidding.

Meanwhile, Joffrey continued to watch Ranma as he walked through the sprawled out campsite, anger and hate churning in him. *So I can't do anything directly to him, little humiliations will have to do, and maybe a change of target as well...*

The next morning as the party was leaving, Ned sidled his horse up to his son, who had just lifted Tommy up onto his. "I notice that you are getting more glares than you were before last night." he said rather obliquely. "Did something happen?"

Ranma chuckled, making certain that the strap around Tommen was tight before turning to his father, a wicked grin on his face. "Nothing of consequence, no. Just some drunks trying to make themselves look tougher than they really were, that's all."

At his father's interrogative eyebrow rising into the air, Ranma elaborated. "Five men at arms wearing the Lannister colors tried to attack me in my sleep. They were all drunk and I think it was probably about that time back in Winterfell where I kind of humiliated the Crown Prince and his 'chosen champions'."

Eddard could almost feel the sarcasm in the air when Ranma use the words 'chosen champion'. "I see, but they were drunk, you say?"

"Yep, their breath smelled of it, their clothing smelt of it, someone had a real party last night and wanted to beat up on me for their after party treat." Ranma laughed while Tommen chuckled. "It didn't go the way they thought it would."

Ned frowned some more, but given his son's nonchalant manner in regards to the attack, he simply nodded. "Very well, but do try to not make any more enemies, please. Humiliating the Lannister men-at-arms is one thing, but if you do it enough you might draw the ire of the Queen and the Crown Prince again. This will be tough enough without you making enemies like that."

Ranma shrugged, moving toward his father and whispering so that Tommy couldn't hear his next words. "I think that I've already made an enemy of the Prince. I've noticed his glares my way a few times, but I'll try."

"That's all I can ask." his father replied in the same manner. "Have you had gotten a chance to find out more of the Prince's character?"

"Other than his being a braggart and a liar, no. Joffrey's always telling tales and using poems as if he'd been the one who invented them for Sansa's benefit, but that's it. You could ask his father, you know? There has to be something behind the Kings contempt for him doesn't there?"

"One would hope, though I'm afraid the King allows his relationship with the Queen to color his actions with his children. There is no love lost there, if you haven't noticed."

"Really, gee, I hadn't noticed father." Ranma said, sarcastically rolling his eyes, causing Ned to chuckle a little.

At that point they were interrupted by Robert bellowing "Ned, we're moving! Get up here!"

Lord Stark nodded again at his son, reaching down to pat him on the shoulder then moved off moving towards the front of the column where Robert waited for him. After his father left, Ranma turned to Tommy and asked "Now, what was the last story I told you?"

As the horse began to move with the rest of them and Ranma began to move along with them, Tommen replied. "The rich lord appeared, and vowed to woo the demon Princess away from the weak knight."

"Okay.... Ahem... Now torn between two men, one chasing her, and the other one being chased by her now, Lum was left in a bit of a conundrum. She actually hadn't been getting anywhere much with the knight who had so surprisingly beaten her in their game of tag. He didn't seem to like her attentions, rather chasing after everyone else in a skirt. So she decided to use a magic game from her country to figure out who she was most compatible with..."

OOOOOOO

Over the weeks since Dominic had opened Daenerys' eyes to what might be happening around them, Daenerys had been teaching herself how to sneak around. She found she was actually good at it. So long as she didn't actually look

like she was trying to sneak around, people in the mansion automatically overlooked her. As such, she had found the magister's treasure room but it was always locked, leaving her no clue as to what they could be using as barter to the Dothraki. She had also followed the two men around the mansion, trying to find out what kind of deal they were trying to make with the horselords. Despite this, she was no closer now to figuring that out than she had been when Dominic discussed it with her.

Finally, she had to concede she was getting nowhere by herself and went to Dominic for more advice. The Northerner had become something of a true friend to her, despite his reservations about sharing information about the North with them. They had actually had a bit of an argument about that because, until she had learned the truth about how the old Lord Stark had died along with his heir, she had never seen a real difference between the Starks or the Lannisters. Both of them, in her opinion, had been dogs of the usurper Baratheon, both equally at fault for what happened to the King, her older brother's wife and his children.

Dominic had described how the two had died in detail, his voice calm from beginning to end, then asked her simply, "What would you have done?" He then went on to tell her about the days after the sacking of Kings Landing, when as a young squire he heard that Ned wanted Tywin and his family punished for their sack of the city. Lord Stark thought the sack went well beyond what should've occurred, as well as what happened to the children, calling for the head of Gregor Clegane at the very least. It was the only time that Lord Stark and Lord Baratheon had argued. It could have led to their friendship being forever derailed if not for their shared grief over Lyanna bringing them back together a few months later.

She found Dominic in the solar, strumming on his balalaika while gazing soulfully at one of the maids of the house, who was gazing back rapturously at him. Daenerys rolled her eyes. Dominic had been cutting quite a swath through the female servant population here, with his 'not from around here looks' and his dashing manner they were easily able to look past his maimed hand. The music apparently helped quite a bit as well.

She coughed to get his attention and Dominic looked up in surprise before rising from his chair. He bowed pleasantly to the maid, gesturing grandly with one hand. "I believe I am needed, we should try this some other time, yes?"

The maid blushed prettily, then moved towards the doorway, bowing to Daenerys before exiting. She nodded at the servant before turning back to Dominic, shaking her head. "I do hope you're being careful. I don't think magister Illyrio would take it kindly if you put half of his staff in the family way."

"Oh, I'm quite careful and there are certain concoctions that can help prevent such which I make certain that all of my dalliances take the next morning." As Daenerys laughed and moved towards the now vacant seat across from him, Dominic took a moment to look at her. Despite her womanhood coming rather later to her than was sometimes the case, she was definitely showing signs now of growing into a radiant beauty. Sixteen now, she was slowly losing that rangy, gangly look that girls of that age sometimes went through and was putting on pounds, gaining curves in all the right places. Even from when he first saw her until now, which was only a bare six months, the difference was apparent.

What wasn't apparent at first glance, was the inner strength of the girl coming to the fore. Now safe and with the ability to learn from the magister's library, Daenerys' intelligence and knowledge was growing daily. Helped, Dominic was certain, by the fact that Viserys was only rarely around to breathe down her neck, out and about as he was with Illyrio. She was also quietly charismatic. There was just something about the Targaryen girl that drew people to her, seen in the servants that had at first been supposed to watch her now looking to her as their mistress. Moreover, she seemed to be able to stare straight through you. Those eyes, those violet eyes of the Targaryen line, seemed to gaze into your soul.

"Now, what can I do for you, princess?" He asked, bringing his mind back to the present as she sat across from him.

She sighed. "I've tried following my brother around. I've tried following the magister around. I have tried asking the servants. I've tried getting into his vault to see if he's got some sort of relic or **something** that he's going to trade to the Dothraki for their aid. I have found nothing. I can't get into his treasure room. It's always locked and I think the magister keeps the key on him at all times. I don't know what else to do. Have **you** found out how they are trying to get the Dothraki to aid us and, more importantly, how they intend to get them across to Westeros?"

Dominic frowned now, wondering how to break the news to her. After a moment, he decided for the truth, the girl would make her own decision after that. "I can actually help you there. You see, I wandered about the town as a bard today, just to keep my hand in, you understand?" He waggled the fingers of his non-mangled hand at her. Daenerys rolled her eyes, making a 'get on with it' gesture with her own hand. "Anyway, I asked a lot of questions about the Dothraki and about their leaders. I found no way anyone could convince the Dothraki to go on the ocean and there have been no hints of grand alliances or treasure being handed over to them, beyond the normal tribute the city gives

them to stop them from sacking it, of course. One the other hand, apparently one Khal, that is what they call a leader, is in the city. His name is Khal Drogo. There is some kind of prophecy detailing the coming of a figure out of Dothraki legend, 'he who mounts the world'. They say it may be Drogo's son, born of a union between himself and a woman from another land. What is known as fact, however, is that Khal Drogo is the most powerful Dothraki warlord around. He leads an army of forty thousand horse, an impressive horde to be sure."

He watched as it sank into his listeners mind. Nothing happened for a moment, then Daenerys' violet eyes widened in shock and horror. "You mean me! They, they mean to, to sell me off to some, some horse riding barbarian! **That** is the totality of their scheme? To simply **sell** me off to this Khal and he'll **give** us his troops! That's beyond ridiculous!"

"I thought as much," Dominic said mildly, waving one hand in the air as if to calm her down, but this didn't work.

Daenerys stood up in a fury, for the first time feeling that boiling, all-encompassing rage that Viserys thought came from their Targaryen blood. She stood up abruptly and stalked around the room, waving her hands in the air. "Even if I become this Drogo's wife, it's not like I'll be his equal or anything. I know enough about the Dothraki to know that their womenfolk do have rights of a sort but they can't lead a horde! That doesn't even consider how the **hell** we're going to convince them to cross the sea, which you said they're scared of!"

"I never said it was a smart plan." the bard protested. "I only mentioned that it was a possibility. Possibly, there could be more to it that hasn't reached the rumor mill. For anything else, you'll have to go to your brother or the magister."

"I will." Daenerys said firmly. "I'll go to Viserys this very night!" That line froze Dominic's blood, but before he could say anything Daenerys stormed out heading back towards her rooms.

That very evening, as she said she would, Daenerys confronted her brother. For the first time in their lives she stood up to him, angrily, "So, I have heard some rumors about how you are planning to get the Dothraki to agree to back us. Selling me off to one of their Khals? Is it true?"

Viserys calmly sipped at his wine smirking at her, somewhat drunk and therefore a little more coarse than he would have been otherwise. "Yes, that's the general plan, we have to use what we can, after all, and you," he said leering at her looking at her from head to toe, "are a very valuable commodity. Why do you think I never married you, myself? Your brides-head is worth far more than anything else about you, that's for certain."

This calm response did nothing to quiet Daenerys' rage and she replied scathingly. "And you think we can just march in with an army of forty thousand barbarians, barbarians who have no ability at siege warfare, against Westeros, a land that has dozens of castles that we would have to take by storm and with terrain far more varied and mountainous than that of most here in Essos? What about the barbarian's fear of the sea? How are you going to get them to go with you at all?"

"That's just a silly myth." Viserys said with an airy wave of his hand. "The promise of loot, pillage, and a return to the old ways of sacking cities rather than being paid tribute by them will garner enough interest from the Dothraki to offset their fears. All the cities are willingly paying them tribute rather than fighting them. That removes most of the worthy enemies, save for one another."

"As for aid in sieges, I have a certain alliance in hand already and with Illyrio's help we have allies elsewhere in Westeros. Trust your brother." he said, smirking and patting her cheek like a little girl. "With the barbarians as our manifold fist and our agents aid elsewhere, we will regain the Iron Throne." His eyes burned with a fervent light.

Yet, Daenerys did not share his optimism. "I think you're underestimating the fear of the ocean that the Dothraki feel and, unless this alliance you speak of is with a strong enough nation, we don't have enough people! What about a fleet? We would need to protect the ships the Dothraki are on until we land, and Dominic said that Stannis Baratheon is very dangerous at sea."

Now, Viserys was becoming angry at her questioning him. "If you must know, it is with Dorne that I have an agreement." he snapped, ignoring her rather pertinent point about needing a fleet. "I am to wed Prince Doran Martell's daughter thus once more binding the House of Martell and the House of the Dragon together once more!"

"That's all well and good in the south," Daenerys said, "but the rest of the nations won't just fall in line, we'll have to conquer them. We won't be seen as their rightful rulers returned, we will be seen as conquerors and we **can't** do that! Have our readings and Dominic's retelling of Robert's Rebellion taught you nothing?!"

Her brother snarled in anger at the mention of the rebellion but Daenerys forged on. "A King cannot simply run rampant over the land, wielding the sword to keep himself on his throne, because the moment the sword fails, he

dies! We need to subvert them from within, garner public support, not barge in like, like a rampaging dragon! We don't have to just take back the throne, we have to **rule** from it!"

She was interrupted as Viserys slapped her across the face. Her head jerked back with the power of the slap. She could feel blood running down her from her lips for a moment but she glared back defiantly. That deep well of anger Daenerys had felt since realizing what Viserys and Illyrio intended sustained her where before she would have meekly given in at the first hint of her brother's rage.

"You will do as you are ordered." Viserys growled at her, grasping her around the throat with one hand. "I will reclaim our throne, whatever I must do, whatever price we must pay, however we can do it! If I have to wade through an ocean of blood to the Iron Throne, then I will do it. Remember your place, you are my younger sister, I am the head of the family, you **will** do what you are told!"

"Never!" she gasped. "We can't rule like that. We can't just rely on the Dothraki and Dornish swords. We need..." she was interrupted again by a slap, but she still glared back defiantly.

That look seemed to goad her brother and when next Viserys hit her, it was with his fist, not within open palm. Daenerys reeled, but she still stared defiantly at him "You can't silence me by..."

That was as far as she got before he again had her by the throat and his fist smashed into her stomach. Again and again, Viserys hit her, now in full 'Targaryen rage' as he called it, not even noticing when Daenerys' eyes lids shut and she slumped into unconsciousness. He hit her again and again in the face, on the chest, on the arms, and the stomach.

Viserys only stopped her when Dominic raced in along with Illyrio, wanting to see what all the noise was about and the bard pulled Viserys off his bloody, beaten, sister.

OOOOOO

Ranma and the King's party had been traveling for about a month after they left the wharf at the end of the Neck and they were now near enough to a river to hear it from the road, if faintly, due to the noise of their passage. The Green Fork it was called, one of the three major rivers that gave the Riverlands its name. It flowed out of the Neck elsewhere on the Neck's length and, up ahead, merged with the Blue Fork and the Red Fork before traveling out to sea.

The King had called a halt early today for this reason, since the stream would allow the servants to wash the dirty clothing that had accumulated and this area was a good hunting ground, as well. "You want to come with us, lad?" he asked gaily, looking down at Ranma where he was helping Tommen down from his horse. *That horse*, Robert reflected with amusement, *is probably the envy of the rest of the four legged bastards in the party, only having Tommen to carry day after day*. He had invited Ranma along ever since they had left the Neck behind, hoping always in a rather loud voice that the boy's luck would rub off on them and they'd find some good sport for a change.

Ranma shook his head. He had come to somewhat like the King. He did have a sort of rough and ready humor and magnetism to him but he wasn't Ranma's favorite person in the world. Plus, hunting when he wasn't warging with Fenris didn't really interest him. "Not this time, your majesty, I think I'm going to swim for a bit. Do you have any idea how rare it is to be able to swim in the North without danger of frostbite?"

He looked over at his little sister, who had just exited the carriage. "I think you should come swimming, too, dear sister. You haven't had any proper exercise since this trip began." The girl raised her nose up haughtily but Ranma continued his needling of her before she could reply. "I don't think the Prince would like you so much if you became overweight, do you? And that's what you're going to do if you don't exercise after all that eating and sitting in one place for so long."

That seemed to settle the matter for Sansa, who nodded in agreement. Robert rode off with a booming laugh as Ned simply shook his head and chuckled, reaching down to ruffle Sansa's hair before he rode off after the King.

The trio of young girls, along with Cersei surprisingly, went off to change, coming back in the short pantaloons and loose shirts that passed for swimming clothing for women here.

Looking at the Queen, Ranma groaned a little internally, turning away quickly. Cersei had been acting strangely since they had left the Neck behind. She was almost always semi-friendly to him now, which made him even more suspicious of her. She was also always finding some reason to bend over or flip her hair back in such a way that the scent of her perfume hit him, always touching his hand after he brought Tommen back after exercising at their stops.

There was no denying the woman was gorgeous: blonde hair, green eyes, fair skin, and a figure that was one of the best Ranma had ever seen. However, her attentions toward him were freaking Ranma out! It was like she was flirting with him, but that couldn't be right, could it? Why him, especially considering, you know, the whole **married to the King thing!**?

While Cersei had gone into this little bit of seduction with the hope that she could eventually wear Ranma down and begin to control him using the oldest way imaginable, after a few days she had actually begun to enjoy it, and not just because her evil little brother Tyrion wasn't around. Despite the fact that, according to Jeyne, at least, Ranma was no virgin and, in fact, had been in a long-standing relationship with Dacey Mormont, the warrior woman Cersei had noticed a time or two at Winterfell, he tended to flush and look away, blushing like a little boy at the merest hint of flirtation from her. It fed her ego a little but it also was just so intensely amusing to her.

Beyond that, she had realized that Ranma was more dangerous as a rallying point than she had thought. He had an easy going charisma, an energy, a power to him, which seemed to ensnare anyone nearby, even some of the southern men-at-arms. When he spoke, people listened, even those nominally his superior, and when he was around he grabbed people's attention. He was at times stern like his father, such as when he was training Tommen, but the warmth underneath was visible in those deep blue eyes for any to see, unlike with Eddard, who only let his warmth show with family and friends.

Luckily for Cersei, her twin had been too busy 'guarding' the King to notice her interest in Ranma. Two of the Kingsguard had come down with the flu a little while after they left the Neck and were unable to do their duties. Jaime had been forced to follow the King around in their stead and the King **always** went hunting the moment they stopped for the midday or evening meal. Even once the King returned, Jaime had to stay with him. Jaime had become a little irritated by it but Cersei was rather thankful for it, since her twin would never have understood what she was up to with her mild flirtations, if he saw it. Oh, Cersei was subtle, but Jaime would have noticed something.

As would Tyrion of course, though what he would have done about it, that she didn't know. She hated the little dwarf, had hated him since she had heard a prophecy from a wise woman in Lanisport that both she would outlive her children would be slain and that her life would be ended by the 'valonqar', which was Valyrian for 'little brother'. She had feared Tyrion for years as being the object of that prophecy, especially since everything else the woman had told her had come true.

That was unimportant right now however. Now, they were coming to the halfway point of the trip and there hadn't truly been a lot of progress with her little project. Ranma still didn't seem to look at her as a woman when she wasn't outright flirting with him and it didn't seem as if she was getting through to him. Today's venture into flirtation also failed, because Ranma took one look at her and the girls, flushed, and moved off down the Green Fork, swimming away with the ease of an athlete through the water. When Tommen made to follow, the Queen brought him up sharply, ordering him to stay in the shallows with the rest of them, though her eyes tracked Ranma as he moved off.

At this point, Joffrey joined them, more to show off his physique to Sansa than anything else. To his dismay, however, Sansa merely glanced at him then away with a faint blush on her face while her friend Jeyne stared with a rather critical expression on her face. She turned away to whisper something into Sansa's ear, which caused Sansa to blush brightly and push her friend into the water with a giggle. Myrcella laughed and jumped in too, splashing them both. The young girl had been having a lot of fun on this trip, able to get away from the court and all its rules. Even her mother had allowed her to have some fun, though only under supervision of course.

The Queen allowed her legs to soak in the cold water of the river for a few moments, then, as Ranma showed no sign of coming back while she was here, sighed and stood up. She left septa Mordane in charge of the girls, knowing that nothing would happen under her watch. Instead, Cersei went back to change and talk to a few of the Knights who were loyal to her family, to see who had been behind the rather stupid attack on Ranma the night after they left the Neck, which was still being talked about in amused tones by many.

Cersei felt such assaults were premature, at best. She needed some way to figure out how Ranma was going to react to the cesspool that was politics in Kings Landing. If he was unable to navigate it without making enemies, that too would be information she could use and could give her pawns to use against him in the future, if need be. She also needed to learn his father's intentions when they arrived, which could be a much more immediate problem.

Back at the stream, Joffrey had begun to practice his swordplay, flicking his sword here, there, and everywhere, showing off in front of Sansa. This effort however, failed. Sansa had seen her father, both of her older brothers, as well as a few of the wolf-sworn at work, and knew true prowess with the blade when she saw it. So she merely smiled rather wanly. "You, um, you look magnificent, my Prince. Surely your prowess in battle matches that of your prowess on the hunt." Her face and tone however gave her away.

Joffrey scowled at her before stalking off angrily. Soon his angry walk brought him near Tommen, who was playing with Lady and Fenris further down the riverbank, splashing them and being splashed in turn. The sight of his younger brother brought an all-too-familiar rage surging through Joffrey's mind.

He hated the fact that Tommen had been getting so much attention lately, not just from Ranma, who he could care less about, but from the King, their father! While fearing Robert, the one thing Joffrey wanted above even the crown was his father acknowledging him, seeing him as his true heir! The fact that Tommen seemed to gain their father's approval after a few weeks of working with Ranma, made Joffrey's anger boil over. He conveniently neglected to think that he had had the chance early on to learn from Ranma, and possibly gain Robert's regard in turn, but such people never realize that they are their own worst enemies.

He charged his younger brother, his sword raised. He had just enough presence of mind to try and cover his act by saying, "Let's play brother, sneak attack!" He brought his sword down and Tommen, thanks only to his training with Ranma, was fast enough to dive out of the way, just in time.

Joffrey's sword wasn't a practice sword, it was a real one, which he had convinced his mother to let him carry a few days ago. If that blow had connected Tommen might've been maimed for life, at best. Tommy ducked back again, moving deeper into the water, his eyes wide and afraid at this sudden assault.

The 'civilized' Lady simply sat there in the shallows, looking on in confusion, but Fenris came to his rescue, bounding out of the deeper water. Joffrey tried to protect himself, slashing at the wolf, but Fenris was too fast and he slammed into Joffrey bodily with a shoulder, smashing back-first into the shallows. He leaned down, growling low in the prince's ear, and Joffrey stilled, something in his monkey brain telling him that death was very near indeed.

Ranma, warned by his bonded wolf's anger came swimming back up river in time to catch a bit of the action. Once there, he came forward motioning Fenris off. "What the **hells** were you playing at?" His voice was coldly angry as he knelt beside the prince, picking up his sword, which had fallen into the water when Fenris hit him. This isn't a toy, your highness." and instead of saying the words with any sense of respect, there was only derision and contempt in his voice. "You could have killed Tommen with that stunt. If you want to spar with someone, you ask, you don't just charge at your **younger brother** with a real weapon like that!"

His sister came running up at that point, pulling Ranma away, while behind her Myrcella went to Tommen, cursing herself for not having anticipated this kind of thing. *Joffrey can't really hurt Tommen 'by accident' while in the carriage thanks to Tommen traveling on horseback most of the time, now. I should've thought he would look for some other way to hurt Tommy, but attacking him like this?*

Sansa, however, knew nothing about Myrcella's thoughts or Joffrey's growing darker desires. "R-Ranma! He was only playing, your wolf overreacted. Are you all right, my prince?"

Joffrey scowled but allowed the girl to help him up, staring hard at Ranma. "Your wolf hurt me, if you can't control it, I'll have it put down!"

Fenris growled at him, but Ranma laid a gentle hand on his head and he calmed down quickly. "I have Fenris in complete control, my prince, which is something I can't say about you or whatever the hell drove you to try and attack your younger brother like this. I'll say again, if you want to spar, go to one of the men-at-arms, don't attack someone out of the blue like this."

Joffrey glared at him and stalked away, exaggerating his wounds where Fenris's claws had nicked him on the shoulder and chest, wincing occasionally for the look of the thing. "I'll have that beast put down for this, you'll see!"

After that, Joffrey ran to his mother, who overreacted, and when Robert and Ned came back from hunting, she accosted them with Joffrey at her side. After Joffrey told his version of the tale, he demanded that Fenris be put down.

However Ranma quickly countered that, informing them of what had really happened, with Tommen and Myrcella backing him up. When they were asked their opinions Jeyne simply said she hadn't seen anything and Sansa, much to the ire of both her father and Ranma, took the prince's side.

Robert looked disgusted. "So someone here is lying and I think I've got a good idea who," he said glaring at his oldest son. The useless waste of cum had never amounted to anything, yet, and this was just one more in a long line of disappointments that began with that damn pregnant cat he had butchered. *Then the boy had the nerve to come and show me the babies, expecting me to be **proud** of him!*

That thought never failed to infuriate Robert, but even so, he turned back to Ranma. "Still, we can't have an animal

attacking the Crown Prince like that, even if it was warranted. It's almost as if it had attacked the King. Besides which, look at the size of Fenris, he's what, a tail longer and a head taller at least than the other one. The bigger that wolf grows the more dangerous he's going to be and the less you'll be able to control him. Best to put him down now."

Ned frowned and looked at his son, who he could tell from the tense way he stood, was about an inch away from committing violence. This was proven when he said grimly, "Your majesty, Fenris is only as dangerous as I am myself, something I will prove if anyone tries to 'put him down'."

Robert's eyes drew together angrily, unused to being talked to like that, but the Queen surprisingly came down on Ranma side. The last thing Cersei wanted to do was to drive a further wedge between him and her family. It looked as if Joffrey was doing all he could to widen that rift and she determined to take him strongly to task for that. For now, however, Cersei spoke calmly. "I think this has been blown out of all proportion. It's true that my son was only playing but he should have remembered that his sword wasn't a practice sword, while, at the same time, Fenris should've been gentler about taking him down. There is wrong enough to go around and Fenris has never acted violent before this. He interacts well with Tommen and with Myrcella and hasn't attacked anyone else, either. I will admit its size is off-putting and can make it dangerous but it seems well-controlled."

For some reason that made Robert bark out a laugh, although Ranma couldn't say he got the joke. Yet even his father's lips twitched in amusement, at the way that line could've been taken. The Queen went on, ignoring them with ease. "When we get to King's Landing, we might need to think of how to corral both wolves, simply for the safety of others. Right now, have Fenris and Lady steer clear of Joffrey, who it seems Fenris, at least, doesn't like, and we will speak no more about this incident."

She ignored the look of surprised betrayal on her oldest son's face. They would be having **words** later. This would put Ranma somewhat in her debt, as it was well within the King's power to order Fenris be put down and his own father would've had to obey.

The King laughed again, good humor restored by his bitch of a wife saying a double entendre like that without even realizing it. "Fine, but if it happens again lad, your wolf will be put down."

Ranma's glared at the King but didn't say anything, merely stalking away. That almost brought the King's bad mood back but he only had to look at the constipated expression on his eldest brat's face to get it back. Ranma also glared at his own sister and then shook his head, as if gravely disappointed in her, which he was. He then walked away without a word, followed by Ned, who didn't even look at her.

That made Sansa feel about 4 inches tall for a moment, but what was she supposed to do? She was to wed Joffrey. She couldn't go against his word, certainly not for a mere pet.

That evening, Ranma cornered Sansa after dinner before she could retreat into the children's tent and laid into her in no uncertain fashion. His voice lacked the usual warmth it held when he talked to family and his face was set in the 'Stark mask', as his friends often called it. "You took the Prince's side over that of your own brother and what you knew was right? What possible reason could you have for lying like that, Sansa?"

"Ranma," Sansa whispered urgently, "he's my fiancée! This is what I've been dreaming about for years! To wed the Prince!"

"So that is more important than the truth? What if it had been Lady who had jumped on top of Joffrey, would you have stood up for your own wolf if he and the Queen called for her to be put down, or stood by and watched Lady get her head chopped off?"

"No! But it's not that simple!"

Ranma held up a hand, far too angry right now to continue this. "I think you need to rethink about your priorities, Sansa, or you might lose something important while chasing after something that might not even exist." With that he walked off.

Sansa stared after him for several moments before ducking inside the tent, wondering why Ranma couldn't see, couldn't see that she loved Joffrey, that they belonged together! Sure, Joffrey had an anger issue but so did his father! Sure, he wasn't the warrior that Ranma was but he was also untried and a man didn't have to be a warrior to be a good king or husband. Marrying Joffrey was her dream and she would do **anything** to see it come about.

While Jeyne commiserated with her friend, Myrcella looked at her sadly, wondering if it was too late to open Sansa's eyes to the truth about her brother. *If something like today couldn't do it, I'm almost afraid of what could...* Instead of



saying anything she turned away on her cot as if already falling asleep, vowing internally once more to protect Tommen from Joffrey as much as she could.

As he stalked away, Ranma paused looking at the Queen who was about to enter her own tent. Ranma nodded his head at her and the Queen responded with her own nod of the head before moving inside, where she let a small smirk of triumph appear on her face. *A crack has appeared, now all I need is to find some way to capitalize on it.*

Ranma groaned, running one hand through his hair as he moved off to where he would sleep up in one of the trees near the camp, with Fenris on the ground below them. He didn't want a repeat of what had happened after they left the Neck and with Joffrey on a tear that was more likely than anything else. *This isn't my kind of fight.* he thought to himself *There isn't anything I can grab here, anything I can see to turn my skills on. It's all just words, trickery, backstabbing, and hidden agendas. Damn it, I need to be on guard all the time. It's like being back in Nerima only instead of physical attacks I need to be ready for political ones.*

In the tent he shared with his uncle Joffrey was trembling with rage, while Jaime simply lay there, lost in his own thoughts as to what his sister was playing at. For the first time, Joffrey had felt the barbed edge of his mother's tongue and it had been unpleasant to say the least. She had taken him to task for endangering his sibling, for then lying to her, and, worst of all, for making her have to make peace with the King. She ordered him, **ordered! Him!** To stop looking for ways to attack Ranma, that the Stark boy's physical skills made him a weapon she wanted to turn to their use but that she couldn't do that when he was making every effort to alienate Ranma.

All this made Joffrey's hate for Ranma even stronger and for Tommen as well. He couldn't understand what was so special about the Stark boy. Oh, he was quick and had endurance but who cared about that in relation to Joffrey being the Crown Prince! That meant he was much more important than some wild boy from the North, so why was everyone acting as if the Stark freak was special? And as for Tommen, he was now getting even more of their mother's attention as well as their father's, something Joffrey could not abide. Yet, that was Ranma's fault more than anything. *There must be something I can do to him, something he won't see coming.* He thought for a long time then smiled. *I can stomach this a while longer but the moment we get back to King's Landing, I must seek out the alchemists' hall...*

O O O O O O O

She dreamed of the fire of dragons, raining down from the sky. Only their targets weren't normal, they didn't seem to move as humans should, nor did they seem to feel pain they only died silently under the breath of the dragons. She dreamed of a man made of blue-gold fire leading a charge but against whom she couldn't make out. She dreamed again of blue eyes, warm and expressive, a face that somehow was kind yet stern. She dreamed of cold, cold creeping across the ground like fingers of death, coming closer and closer only to be halted by the fire of dragons and the feel of a wolf pelt draped across her body.

Daenerys woke up but found she couldn't gather enough energy to move or even open her eyes. What had awoken her was an argument going on nearby, the noise of which drove what little memory she had of her dreams out of Daenerys' mind. "What! You said it yourself, we need their troops! Why the delay?"

"Not even a Dothraki barbarian would agree to marry a woman who has been beaten bloody, my prince! What on earth were you thinking?" There was something to the magister's tone that had never been there before when he addressed either of the Targaryen siblings, cold harshness and condemnation rather than obsequiousness.

That, possibly more than the words themselves, brought Viserys up short. He glared at the magister then asked abruptly, "Are the barbarians really afraid of the ocean? If we can't use them in Westeros then what is the point of this arrangement at all!"

The magister waved one hand dismissively. "That fear can be overcome with enough treasure promised to them, if..."

"You sound remarkably blasé about it, but this is putting all our eggs into one basket. What if we can't? What if this marriage doesn't do anything for our cause? We will have gambled away one of our most important pieces for nothing!"

"Do not concern yourself about that, the barbarians will play their part. You will have your army eventually. If not from the Dothraki, the threat of them might force a few of the free cities to pony up enough money for us to raise a mercenary army."

"And thus he would be seen as just an invader, just another claimant to the throne with no more right to it than any other. Worse, you would be seen as a foreigner and that would rally the people against you like nothing else." That

was Dominic's voice, calm and almost analytical.

Viserys turned on him. "I heard that same argument from Daenerys. What have you been telling her?! She should know not to question me or my decisions! I should have your head for your part in this!" Viserys, of course, didn't think he was in the wrong at all, it was merely his sister questioning him that was wrong.

"I merely answered her questions, your grace, that's all. She was the one who asked them in the first place. Yet, that does not mean that her questions are invalid, does it? If you get them across the ocean, over their fears and Stannis and his fleet, the Dothraki might be able to win you the throne, but your own actions before, after, and especially during that invasion will make it so you keep it. If you simply threaten anyone who's wants to stand against you or questions you with your horde of foreign troops, you will never be able to live without them. You, your children, your line will always be forced to rely on the sword to keep your throne."

"If that is the way I must take back my crown from the usurper then so be it!" Viserys said coldly. "Those people should all have been loyal to my family in the first place, now they have made their beds and I will happily kill them all in them."

"This is all of no consequence, really." the magister said waving one hand airily, unseen by Daenerys. "My healers say that Daenerys will be able to move in a few days but it will be months before her bruises and cuts heal enough for her to be seen in public, let alone be married off to Khal Drogo. I can postpone the wedding for that long. Postpone, not get out of. The barbarians are death on pact breakers and the city itself could be made to pay for the price of any such broken deal."

In actuality, the Dothraki were really not a threat to the main free cities themselves these days. Their defense was too strong for the Dothraki, who had no siege knowledge, to break through. But the Dothraki could put the lands all around the main city to the torch. Of course, none of the other cities would come to one another's aid, which, even with the sea trade untouched, would allow the Dothraki to slowly but surely choke the life out of any one of them.

Viserys nodded grimly. "Daenerys will do her duty and we will have their blades."

The two of them left, leaving only Dominic and the healer, an elderly woman who puttered around the room making certain that the two of them were not left alone, acting more as chaperone at the moment than a healer.

Dominic took no notice of that, simply sitting in the chair next to Daenerys and shaking his head. "You silly girl, what in the world possessed you to actually confront your brother in such a manner? You should've gone to the magister rather than your brother, at least the magister wouldn't have assaulted you like this."

"Had to." Daenerys whispered, her voice coming out hoarse thanks to the damage to her throat and mouth area as well as disuse. "How long?"

"You've been out of it for four days now. And what exactly did you mean, you had to?" Dominic asked, not showing any surprise at her answering him.

"Had to confront him, had to show, not a little girl anymore."

"He seems to already think you aren't a little girl, that is in fact the problem at present. So what will you do now that you have confirmed their rather simpleminded plan?"

"Don't know, rest, heal first. You, you look around? Search. Illyrio hiding something, the treasure room."

"Simplicity, the hallmark of any good plan, and yes, I'll hunt around see what I can find."

Daenerys tried to nod her head but couldn't move her neck. She simply blinked at him with her one open eye. "Thank you."

Dominic shook his head, moving away from the bed as the healer moved in to give the girl some medicine that would knock her out, letting her body heal. He chuckled quietly, looking down at his un-maimed hand, wiggling his fingers. "Well, I suppose I can see if these old fingers still remember how to pickpocket."

OOOOOO

The King's party continued down the Kingsroad, which in turn followed the Blue Fork. At this point, they were in the Riverlands proper, the more settled region of this kingdom rather than the less populated border region between the Kingsroad entering the Neck and entering the Riverlands. As such, there were more people and many more dwellings

along the road. Farmsteads now appeared practically every two or three leagues, but they looked rather strange to Sansa and Ranma. The Northerners had gotten used to farmsteads in the North, which were always heavy stone buildings, designed to hold a large extended family and to serve as a defense stronghold as well, in a pinch. But the houses were also built heavy to keep in the warmth and keep out the cold. Here, buildings had many more windows with much more glass. Most of the structures were made from wood rather than stone and mortar with thatched roofs rather than the heavy wooden roofs found in the North.

The two siblings were now talking again, though only haphazardly. Sansa had not yet apologized for taking the Prince's side in the argument about Fenris nor had she really thought about what she might be giving up in chasing her dream that Joffrey had come to represent, that of marrying a prince and living in the center of things, in King's Landing. However, Ranma had cooled down a little from his anger at that but was even more determined than ever to find real proof to show Joffrey wasn't what Sansa thought he was. Unfortunately for him, Joffrey had made himself scarce since that incident, sticking to his mother's side at stops, and staying in the carriage when he could, from wherever Ranma and Tommen went.

Two things had changed though. The first was that Robert occasionally forced Ranma and Tommen to ride up front with him, where he regaled them with his own stories. He seemed to be, in his own rather ham-handed way, to be showing approval for Tommen, whose lessons Ranma had stepped up. Along with the ones made to build up strength and speed, Ranma had begun to give him lessons on self-defense, unarmed for now. Robert had seen them at it, and his approval for his youngest child had risen a bit more.

Now, while Ranma enjoyed the stories that Robert could tell from his youth, at least the ones that were about battles and fights rather than wenching, he preferred to spend time with the youngsters at the back or talking to the men-at-arms from Winterfell. By this point he had exercised with all of them, even the ones he haven't exercised with before this journey began and all of them had gained a bit more skill because of it. Nothing like Ser Jory or the others he had trained with back in Winterfell but enough to make them a little more dangerous than your run of the mill swordsman. At every stop, he could be found giving pointers of stance and style even as he kept training Tommen, though his own sword had not been replaced.

The other change was that the leader of the White Cloaks, Ser Barristan, had taken to spending more time by the carriage and talking quietly to Ranma and Tommen when Ranma wasn't regaling the younger boy with stories. He did this randomly and never seemed to spend much time with them but he plied Tommen with questions about leadership and what he would do in any given situation, like the sort of question Ned plied his son with at times, but Ranma was left to wonder what the older man was thinking. Nor was he alone in this, Cersei too noticed, both this and Robert's attempt at reaching out to Tommen. She noticed, wondered, and worried.

Despite this minor mystery, nothing else occurred for the next week or so until they came upon a large inn set on the side of the road that was large enough for the Baratheon and Stark households, although not their troops. Most of the men-at-arms kept going and would make camp in a large clearing at the other side of this tiny village, though the Kingsguard stayed with the two families.

The inn's second floor was organized around a small central seating area, with six rooms of varying size down two hallways on either side. Two large rooms were first, with several beds apiece, for normal guests. Then there were two more rooms, each of better quality than the last.

After a very decent meal, dominated by Robert talking excitedly about what kind of hunting they could do on the next day of the trip, as well as Ned quizzing Ranma on his knowledge of the Riverlands geography, the group retired. Ranma first went outside to check on Fenris, who had been put in the inn's kennel for the night. His wild looks and size frightened the innkeeper so much that he was shaking like a leaf despite the amount of money that the eunuch handed over for their night's stay.

Still, Fenris seemed happy enough and the other dogs in the kennel certainly weren't going to bother him. They were all away well from him except for two. One was a large hunting dog that Ranma thought looked sort of like a Rottweiler but with a basset hound's ears. He had seen both often enough in his travels to make that comparison, though the combination was new. It was lying down near Fenris, its eyes on the direwolf, although it didn't seem to Ranma that it was thinking of attacking him. The second dog that didn't seem wary of Fenris was a tiny toy dog that was yapping at the large direwolf pup. The direwolf, however, was ignoring it with ease. Ranma chuckled reaching through the bars to rub Fenris's ears, causing the large pup to rumble deep in his throat and wag his tail. "Try not to eat that one, okay? I don't know whose it is but that can only cause trouble and, more importantly, it might upset your stomach. Then where would ya be."

Fenris chuffed, amused at his masters words, then looked over at the yappy dog with one eye. The tiny dog whimpered a little and backed away, its tail between its legs, but the moment Fenris looked away shook itself and

came back yapping even louder. The other dogs however continued to stay silent and as far away from Fenris as possible. Even though he was only barely seven months old, Fenris was larger and more powerful than any of them. Unlike the yappy dog, all of the others knew this. Ranma chuckled again and headed back into the inn.

When he got up to the second story, he noticed Ned waving to him from one doorway, near the far end of the leftmost hall. On the other side of Ned, Robert could be seen entering the last room on that side of the inn. Giggling laughter of some woman or other reached Ranma's ear as he walked toward his father causing Ranma to sigh, shaking his head, noticing the Queen entering the second room on the other side with her handmaiden, while the girls entered the one beyond that.

He had a tremendous amount of respect for Robert the fighting man, Robert the general, but he was quickly losing all his respect for Robert the man. It wasn't so much that he particularly liked the Queen. Even if Cersei had come over to his side on the issue of Fenris, she was too vain, too aloof, and too unthinkingly arrogant (above and beyond the whole flirting thing) but he still didn't like the way the King flaunted his infidelity front of her.

That was added to the fact of his drinking, something that reminded Ranma all too much of Genma, plus the fact that he didn't really seem to want to do anything but hunt and rut all day. Not once had he discussed anything about actually being king, taxes, laws, problems facing the realm, whatever. None of it seemed to matter to Robert, which bothered Ranma a lot, given the training Ranma had under his father and maester Luwin.

Ned and Ranma talked for a while that evening in their room, something they hadn't been able to do during the day for a while since Robert took all of Ned's attention and Ranma was perfectly happy to train with the troops or spend time with Tommy and the other kids.

Though honestly calling Sansa a child wasn't really accurate any longer. Ranma hadn't really noticed it back in Winterfell, in the familiar environs of home, but here on the road, especially since it had gotten so warm out after they had left the Neck behind, he could see Sansa was now a rather attractive young woman. Sansa had their mothers auburn hair and heart-like face, a thin waist, long legs, and had developed breasts at some point when Ranma wasn't looking, all of which her dresses were made to accent without putting her body on display. All in all, she was easily one of the prettiest girls/women in the party.

Her brother wasn't the only one who had noticed Sansa. The men-at-arms and Joffrey all had noticed. Of course, the troopers stopped after they noticed Ranma looking at them, his blue eyes dark with the promise of violence. Joffrey, however, Ranma couldn't stop from looking.

They stayed up late that night, talking about their impressions of the royal family, what they expected to be happening back home, and what they would find in King's Landing. Ned informed his son that he was going to try and find out what Jon was doing before his death. He was beginning to believe more and more strongly that, in at least one area, Lady Lysa was correct: Jon had been poisoned. "From what I have gathered from Robert, there was no lead up, no warning of an oncoming illness. One day Jon was hale and hearty, in command of all his faculties, performing his duty as Hand of the King, and not even two days later, he was dead. That speaks of someone having a hand in it, some poison or other. And if Jon was murdered, there must have been a reason. He had many enemies but I fear it was in aid of something more than a personal vendetta. If so, it is my duty, not only as Hand, but as a friend to the king to figure out what it could be."

Ranma shook his head. "We're going to be in a very tenuous position, father." he said critically then smirked a little. "I'm good, but this isn't my type of fight."

"Nor mine." Ned murmured, leaning back on the bed and smiling faintly. "Still, honor demands that I look into it."

Ranma nodded. "Of course it does, but I don't think you should look into it without guarding your own back. We need to think of a way of doing that. And I don't think we should trust anyone in King's Landing."

"Roberts all right," Ned replied mildly, though his face had closed down a little, knowing his son really didn't have the best opinion of his friend. "And I think your lady mother has a friend in King's Landing, a man Jon Arryn trusted as well. Hopefully... the master of purse, Petyr Baelish, is a childhood friend of hers, and I can hope for some aid from him." *So long as he doesn't hold my brother Brandon's beating him in a duel for Catelyn's hand against me and my family...*

Ranma waved one hand in a so-so gesture, unknowingly echoing his father's thoughts. "That's nice and all, but that was a long time ago. People change, and like I said, from what I've seen just from Varys, the King, and the Queen, this is a cesspit we're running into."

That remark brought to him Ned's mind what Howland Reed has said that evening at the moat, and he nodded slowly. "I will trust only what I see and hear, and I won't go anywhere without a guard. Will that do?" he asked rather jokingly, looking at his son. "Or will you be dogging my steps as well? You realize you're going to have to get to know your possible spouse after she shows up? Who knows, she might already be there."

"Oh, thank you so much." Ranma growled, "I was trying to forget that part."

Ned laughed quietly but warmly as was his nature in private like this. He reached over and grabbed his son's shoulder shaking him gently. "Give the girl a chance, you might be surprised."

Ranma chuckled, reaching up with one hand to grasp his father's where it rested on his shoulder. "So long as that surprise is a pleasant one, that's fine." With that the conversation turned to less serious matters such as what might be going on at home and whether or not Catelyn's latest child would be a boy or a girl. Still, both of them were worried about what they were heading into in King's Landing but were equally determined to do whatever their honor demanded when they got there.

OOOOOOO

That evening, Fenris lifted his head up from where it had been lying as the tiny made creature, the dog that was not natural, began its little yapping sound. No wolf would ever call that thing a dog really, it was simply too small, too tiny, not natural.

This time, the creature wasn't yapping at Fenris but three men dressed all in black who had stolen into the inn's yard. Rather than make for the doorway of the inn, which was closed for the night, they went straight towards the kennel. Something in their manner made Fenris stand up from where he had been laying, dislodging the female that had sidled up to him during the night. She smelled quite **interesting**, as if she was going into heat soon but wasn't quite there yet.

That was a pity, but for now Fenris shook off such thoughts, which he wouldn't have even been able to do if he was a regular dire Wolf and not a bonded one. His sense of self was odd, far more human than would otherwise be the case, even more so thanks to the odd energy that their connection carried to him from Ranma.

That was unimportant at the moment. Here and now, Fenris began to growl low in his throat, a growl with strange harmonics to it that should've sent anything evolved from monkeys up into their trees for protection.

The three men paused, showing they had some sense, then came on, showing that they didn't have enough. Two of them carried those long fangs of the men they called spears, while the third carried a shorter steel claw, a sword. Fenris's nose wrinkled, smelling the men from here, the same scent that had been on the men who had attacked his bonded master. Fenris backed away, growling somewhat louder as they advanced on the kennel.

Once they were close enough, the two men with spears thrust them through the kennel's fence, trying to stick Fenris. But Fenris dodged to one side, then with a lightning twist of his head grabbing the spear of one man, pulling him forward with a muffled whoop to crash into the fence. It rattled a little, and the other man barked out a whispered order in the man thing's tongue. Without Ranma warging with him, Fenris couldn't understand it but he could read their tone easily enough.

The other man with a spear tried to get Fenris in the side. He dodged away again, this time smashing out with a forepaw with surprising strength, breaking the spear halfway up its shaft. He swiftly grabbed up the pointed end with his mouth and threw it at the man who held a sword with a sharp twist of his neck.

Though he missed, that seemed to startle the man things, and they all backed away quickly. To heighten the effect, Fenris growled at them, his fangs bared, the noise getting louder and louder.

The three attackers seemed to think better of it at that point, and raced away out of the inn's yard as quickly as they had come. Fenris stood staring after them, growling still, as the rest of the dogs, who had been woken by the disturbance, looked around and made their yips or barks in turn for a time before Fenris turned and glared at them.

That silenced all of them, save for the small irritating creature. Fenris glared it into submission easily, however. He looked at the other dogs who all looked back at him backing away slightly as was proper in front of an alpha. With a huff of amusement Fenris laid down again, and almost immediately the female with the **interesting** smell nestled against his side.

He was unsurprised to feel his master moving toward him and the very brief sound of a door opening and closing

heralded his arrival.

Ranma had felt his bonded direwolf's anger and irritation from where he had been falling asleep. He had woken up and snuck out, but by the time he had reached the front door of the inn, the excitement had been over. Now he looked down at Fenris, smirking. "Did you have fun?" Fenris huffed again, his tongue lolling out as smiled. "Ah, good, did you notice if they were wearing red?"

The direwolf looked at him askance and Ranma groaned. "Right, can't see colors, never mind." He reached down to rub Fenris' head once more, then turned and walked back into the inn.

Fenris snorted, then laid back down, allowing the female to rub her body against his. Yes, she did smell **interesting**...

OOOOOOO

Ranma froze halfway up the stairs to the second floor for two reasons. One, there was a candle casting a very low light from the central sitting area. And two, he had just gotten a surge of, of lust or something down his link from Fenris. *Fucking hell! Okay, none of the texts that talked about warging ever mentioned feeling that kind of thing from your animal!*

After a moment he continued on, wondering who was awake. He was surprised to see the Queen sitting there with a small slim novel in one hand and a glass of wine. Her hair was rather frazzled and she grimaced occasionally, as if she was suffering from a headache. She looked up as Ranma came up the steps. Ranma bowed slightly to her. "Your grace, are you feeling well?"

"A minor headache, young Stark, nothing more." In point of fact Cersei did suffer from headaches occasionally but she also was using this to see if she could overcome Ranma's self-control with one final push. "Was there something wrong with the dogs? Your Fenris acting up?" Cersei leaned back slightly, bringing attention to her chest, barely held within her silk chemise. "Come sit with me, I have been meaning to ask you some questions about my Tommen's training."

Ranma gulped, feeling a little more effected by Cersei's minor flirtations than he would otherwise have been because of whatever the hell Fenris was up to. *Damn it, where's a fucking snow drift when I need one.* Even so, he knew better than to bring up the little bit of excitement Fenris ran into. He also noticed, not for the first time, how possessively the Queen talked about all her children. "C-certainly your grace. And no, no problems, a small toy dog was causing trouble, which got the others all irritated, but I was able to calm them down. Now, maybe I'll be able to get some sleep."

He sat down across from the Queen, looking at her quizzically. "What did you wish to ask? I think Tommy's training is going well. He's slimming down nicely and putting on some muscles."

"That is precisely what I want to talk to you about." Cersei grimaced a little. At first, Ranma's informal manner had been amusing, but after so long it had begun to be irritating, yet she was more concerned her little lion. "You have him doing all these exercises at such a young age. I am worried it will stunt his growth in the future. I have often heard the maesters speak of too much exercise not being good for children, hence why sword training does not begin until ten."

"That is true, your grace. Some exercises, if taken to extremes, can harm you long term. But I am varying the exercises Tommy is doing so his body can adjust."

"Hmm... Well, that brings me to my other question. I realize that my Joffrey and you have... not been able to get along, but I was wondering if, if he comes to you, would you agree to train him again?" Cersei leaned forward, which allowed her décolletage to flop open.

In his present frame of mind, Ranma couldn't stop himself from looking. He saw the Queen's breasts, somewhat larger than they looked when she was dressed, full and ripe, capped with pretty dark red nipples the size of a silver stag. He groaned, a low, primal, sort of rumbling sound that caused a smirk of triumph to appear on Cersei's face for the briefest of moments.

Ranma very visibly got control of himself. *Why the hell is she doing this? What does she have to gain?* He suddenly snorted mentally, *Fuck it, I was never one ta beat around the bush.* He reared back, closing his eyes for a moment then opened them to glare at Cersei, ignoring her body for now. "Why? Why this..." Ranma gestured with one hand at Cersei. "Why are you trying to, to get a reaction out of me? What do you have to gain from it? I refuse to believe you're doing it just for fun."

Cersei actually blinked in shock at this direct question, then surprised herself with a very dry chuckle. "You are direct, young Stark." She paused for a moment, knowing now that she would never be able to control Ranma through his hormones like she had hoped to, which, surprisingly, saddened her, just a little. The boy had an iron self-control which was astonishing in one so young. "Such a question, and what it implies, could get you in a lot of trouble."

"You more than I, I think." Ranma riposted. "And speaking of which, wouldn't our current circumstances be damning enough, the Queen alone with a young man? Even if the King flaunts his indiscretions, it would be damning for you to do the same. Not exactly fair, but there you are."

"Too true." Cersei replied dryly, though that line of defense struck far too close to home. Robert was so egotistical he would dismiss any suggestion she might be unfaithful to him despite his own treatment of their so-called wedding vows, but Eddard and others would take it much more seriously.

She thought for a moment, then decided Ranma required some answer or he would become more suspicious of her, which she didn't want, most particularly in this direction. A bit of the truth would do. "Have you ever heard politics described as the game of thrones?"

Ranma shook his head, watching her closely, not even a hint that he thought of her as a woman.

After a moment Cersei went on. "It is called a game, but it is a most serious one, where families vie for power and the ultimate goal, the throne. I have been a pawn in that game my entire life." She paused, wondering why she had said that, not having meant to but she couldn't pull the words back now. For some reason, even she was effected by Ranma's nature, becoming a little more open around him than she should be. "Now I am a player and I am willing to do anything to see that my side wins. Robert Baratheon is an inept king but my son will sit on that throne in time. You are an enigma, a force to be reckoned with physically, like my brother only even more so. Your skills, they come straight out of the Age of Heroes, making you very dangerous, not only as an individual but as a symbol."

"You are allied with a house that might someday move against mine. The Starks and Lannisters have never been friends. It has been obvious from the beginning that you do not partake of your father's loyalty to my husband and, through him, the Baratheons. Is it any wonder I want to try to control you?"

She didn't mention the fact she hated his house thanks to Lyanna's memory laying over her marriage like a stifling blanket, her fear of Ned and his ability to whisper into Roberts ear, or how willing she was to resort to any means to get what she wanted. Honesty was just another weapon, after all.

Ranma sat silently, looking at her for a moment then nodded. "You have been honest with me, your grace, so I will be honest with you. I will not be controlled in such a manner, nor any other. My loyalty is to my family and to the North. Maybe, eventually, if I get along with this Margaery girl..." He twitched a little at the memory of his upcoming marriage, as if he had swallowed something bitter, which, given his previous experience with fiancées was understandable, even if no one else knew about it.

Cersei actually smiled slightly, noticing how ambivalent the young man was about marrying the Tyrell girl, who was, even she had to admit, a very comely lass, regardless of what else the marriage brought to both families. Yet, the idea of marriage seemed to hold no attraction for Ranma.

"My loyalties may expand to include her family. I like Tommen, I like Myrcella, and I wouldn't ever do anything to harm either one of them, though I think Joffrey needs to grow up a bit and stop being such a brat." That caused Cersei to stiffen angrily, but Ranma went on undaunted. "So long as you and your son, once he ascends to the throne, do nothing to threaten those parties, we will have no problems."

With that Ranma got up from where he was sitting, bowed from the waist to Cersei, then walked away. Cersei's voice stopped him however. "Young Stark, the moment your father officially becomes Hand of the King, both of you will be forced to play the game, whether you want to or not. And in the game of thrones, you win or you die. Remember that."

Ranma stood there for a moment at the edge of the candle light, then continued on his way silently, making no noise as he reentered the room he shared with his father. Cersei remained there, slowly drinking her glass of wine for a time as she thought about the young man that had just left, trying to factor him into her plans, trying to stop the thought that he would have been a good husband for her if only she were younger or him older.

She never noticed that Varys the eunuch had been listening from the foot of the stairs. He had been given a room downstairs, which, while not as nice as the ones upstairs, was adequate for his needs and which kept him close to the royal family and the Starks.

*Well, wasn't that interesting. It appears my plan to make myself invisible to the Starks and the Baratheons on this leg of the journey has borne some unexpected fruit. So the boy is nothing more than a blunt object after all, despite his undeniable charisma and possible leadership ability, though that last one is up in the air, I must have it tested somehow. Yet still, a blunt object, with a tremendous amount of skill and self-control but no real threat to those of us who are used to moving in the halls of power. And Cersei seems to think of her children as Lannisters first and Baratheon a distant second. How... interesting. Though she was surprisingly open there, that too was surprising.* With that thought, he turned and went back into his room, wondering what would happen when they reached King's Landing.

OOOOOO

Smalljon, grunted irritably, sawing at the reins of his horse for a moment to bring it up sharply, ignoring the horse's irritated whinny as he glared down at the cart whose wheel had come off, necessitating this stop. *I never knew what moving with large groups of people was really like before this. By the old gods, this is so irritating!* "How long will this be-damned wheel take to fix?"

One of the smallfolk, from among the several young married couples that were part of the first group heading into the Gift to repopulate it, looked up at him. He was a large man, as most men from Umber lands were, though not as large as Smalljon, with a massive beard that covered most of his face. "At least an hour ,lord. Thankfully this wagon isn't full, it was one of the ones our provender fer the trip we're on."

The heir of House Umber grunted. "Well, get to it then but make it quick. I want us at least three leagues further on before we stop for the night." The man nodded, then bent to his work as Smalljon turned away, looking from side to side at the procession heading ever deeper into the Gift and, at this point, it was the Gift, had been for a few days. A little over a dozen family groups, all young and hungry for their own land rather than working their family's land, two blacksmiths who wanted to open up their own smithies, and several others. It was an oddity of geography, but the Gift had decent, arable land without the need to clear the forests like elsewhere in the North. Certainly more than House Umber's lands, which was just too damn rocky for many farms. What farms there were, were massive farmsteads, each of them little forts, almost holdfasts, able to house the extended family as well as any farmhands they had. Despite the security and family ties, sometimes a newly married couple wanted to get out and away from their family to make their own way.

Smalljon turned his body further in the saddle, looking around at the group of forty mounted troopers ranging around the column. None of them were actually trained horsemen but the horses allowed them to cover the entirety of the column, which was a rather toothsome target for any wildling raider, or any other sort really, though Smalljon hadn't raised any... odd ideas about that. He knew there was more out there than just wildlings but he had agreed then and still agreed now with Commander Mormont and Ranma about keeping that a secret for now. It wouldn't do to have people questioning them about the nature of the threat until they were positioned to defend against whatever was out there.

He noticed, almost absentmindedly, that it was somewhat colder than it had been when he came this way with the other wolf-sworn. *Not a good sign...* Smalljon was pulled from his thoughts by one of the Norrey scouts coming out of the forest, obviously wondering why the column had stopped, then laughing loudly at the idiot lowlanders with their troublesome carts. Smalljon laughed and waved at the man, thinking that the scouts had earned the right to laugh.

None of the Norrey warriors traveling with them, a full hundred from the northernmost mountain clan, had horses and they had kept up easily with the carts. All of them would be going on to the Wall to add their skills to the rangers and were eager to get it stuck in with the wildlings. The forty men-at-arms with Smalljon would be building a small holdfast around which the settlers would build their community, the first of several on the Kingsroad. That way they could send guards up to the Wall with any supplies they sent up. That was well into the future, of course, when they had their first harvest in but the system was a good one to put in place, especially given what had happened to the Gift's previous occupants.

The column soon moved on and they were able to cover the three leagues Smalljon wanted before needing to stop. The place they stopped at was a rocky clearing with several large boulders and rocky outcroppings everywhere. It was a decent defensive position, one the wolf-sworn had used as a resting point on their way up, well before they spotted the wildling raiders.

As the sun was setting however, one of the Norrey scouts (they didn't seem to have any kind of organization so one was as good as another) came out of the dusk near where Smalljon was tying his horse down for the night. "Umber, we've spotted a large group of wildling raiders, at least twenty hands strong. They're at least two hours away but their own scouts have probably spotted yar and yer slow ass carts." The man spat to the side in disgust. "What'ja want ta do?"



None of the Norrey scouts could really count but hands and twenty was easy enough to understand. Smalljon grinned evilly, waving one hand in the air to signal his men over. He'd taken lessons from Ranma, Jon, and Lord Stark himself several times, and knew that there was nothing more dangerous than having an ambush turned against you. "Do? We're going to slaughter them, mountain man, we're going to slaughter them."

As the Norrey scout gave him and his two officers more information, Smalljon could see the belief of the new threat going through his troops. Many of them had been rather skeptical of the idea of a King Beyond the Wall but the size of this raiding force definitely argued for it. Not only was it large for any wildling force on this side of the Wall, it was also a single group. The wildlings rarely raided in larger than groups of ten without someone around to instill some organization to them.

Along with the acceptance of the threat there was also a sense of grim anticipation. House Umber had felt the stings of wildling raids many times over the millennia and every man here had fought them before. Smalljon nodded at them all. "Alright, here's what we're going to do..."

Two hours later, it was full night and the temperature of the air, which had already been extremely cold, plummeted further. The fires the smallfolk set up were large, to give off heat as much as light. Large, head sized stones, were set into the fires, then placed under and around the horses. A few families had gifted their youngsters with portable braziers, which they set up under large canvas tents containing their carts and their horses, warming both the beasts and themselves for the night.

Nothing about the campsite, at least at first glance, said that the Umber men were ready for trouble but they were. The majority of the smallfolk, though many of the men had taken up arms to join the battle, had been moved into the center of the clearing around the rocky outcropping. Two large makeshift tents had been commandeered for use by Smalljon and his men. A few of those men were out there on guard, although they would be transferred in every hour in an attempt to keep frostbite to a minimum. The Norrey scouts were nowhere to be seen, of course They were waiting to close the jaws of the trap.

Smalljon waited anxiously, waiting for the signal from a few of his guards, who were positioned up trees several yards out from the edge of the camp, watching until they saw the wildlings advancing through the forest toward them. The wildlings were experts at night actions but they would have to charge out of the forest for that final push into the rocky area around the camp.

Finally he heard it, the call of a crow on the wind. "CAW-CAW!"

Smalljon bellowed, charging out of the tent. "Up lads, and at them!" Almost immediately, he saw the forms of the wildlings lit by the fires of the camp behind him. They had charged forward and now reacted like the time with the wolf-sworn, once again, not like a trained force would have by freezing and backing away. The wildlings had no such response. Instead, they surged forward as a mob, their iron, copper, and a rare steel weapons raised and howls on their lips.

Which suited the men of House Umber all too well. They charged with roars on their own lips. "RAGHHHH!" Smalljon led the way, his massive claymore slicing one rather thin wildling in twain before he brought it back around to smash into the wicker shield of another. All around him, his men hammered into the wildlings, who attempted to go around the sides of their defensive push only to be taken in the back by the Norrey clansmen.

Smalljon had split the scouts into twenty-five men groups and spread them out away from the straight line of the wildlings advance. Now those groups smashed into the flanks of the attack, grinding it under. Where before, it appeared the attackers had an advantage in numbers, now they were on their heels against a numerically superior force.

Smalljon laughed aloud, bringing up his sword to block a blow from a copper sword, almost negligently smashing his free fist into the sword wielders' face, throwing him to the ground. "One!" The flat of his blade smacked into another wildling's head, sending him comatose to the ground. "Two!"

An older soldier, wielding a wicked looking saw-toothed axe, laughed. "Keeping score lad, I thought yer father'd beaten that out of you years ago!"

"Ha, he did indeed! Many a lesson I've learned over my Father's knee, but no, I want at least..." Smalljon paused, parrying the blow of one wildling that was wielding his sword somewhat better than the normal hack and pray method. His sword smashed the other man's sword to the side, opening up his body for a punch to the sternum. The wildling doubled over with an explosive whoosh, then fell senseless to the ground when Smalljon brought his sword back,

smartly rapping the man on the back of the head with his pommel. "Three prisoners! I want to know how these bastards are getting around the Wall!"

"Hoho, someone's learned to look beyond the edge of his blade." The man said, grunting as he twisted a little, freeing his axe from a corpse to block a blow from another wildling just in time.

Smalljon grunted again and pushed forward into the woods, where the main battle was taking place in the dark of the nighttime woods, lit only by the lights of the fires behind him, and the half-moon above them. He was immediately surrounded by four wildlings but he hacked one down before the other three could close.

The heir of House Umber put his back to a tree for a moment, blocking the blows of all three, moving his claymore as if the massive sword weighed nothing, then kicked out, shattering the femur of one of the attackers. That man fell and Smalljon's knee took him in the face, throwing him backward. Another Umber man came in behind his attackers, his sword ending that man's life then threatening the side of one of Smalljon's other attackers.

The last man found himself alone for a split second and was backing away when Smalljon charged forward, bulling into him and throwing him backward. Before the man could regain his footing, Smalljon's claymore cut off his head in a welter of blood.

He grinned over at the other soldier, who had dispatched his own opponent with less panache but with just as much certainty, who grinned back at him. The battle wasn't over and wouldn't be for a while yet, given the nature of the terrain and the poor visibility, but it was no longer in doubt.

Two hours later, the battle was over, the remaining wildlings breaking off and disappearing into the dark of the forest. Because it was so dark out, Smalljon forbade his men from following them, knowing the wildlings could still be dangerous. The Norrey men ignored his edict, for the most part, and lost over a dozen more men after Smalljon ordered his men back, making their total losses twenty six dead and fifteen injured, four severely. The men of Umber had lost nine dead and ten wounded, two seriously. No one knew the total wildling corpses but they were scattered everywhere, so much so that Smalljon had to have his men gather the nearest ones and take them away from the camp. His order to burn them surprised many of his men but no one argued about it.

The next day, Smalljon and the two most experienced men of his command questioned the three prisoners he had taken. Not one more wildling had been taken alive, which was normal for fighting the wild men from the far north. They didn't believe in giving up, and they certainly never took prisoners themselves. Not male ones, at least. Women were fair game and many families, even House Umber, had lost daughters to wildling raids. Mors Crowfoot, the man who had lead the Umber contingent up to the wall, had lost his daughter to such a raid, which was why Greatjon had chosen him for the command.

Eventually, Smalljon was able to wring the information he wanted out of their prisoners. It turned out that the wildlings had begun to use large boats, built with mostly green wood, then set forth through the Skirling Pass out onto the Frozen Shore and, from there, took to the sea to get around the Wall. It had been one of the first things that had changed under the new King Beyond the Wall, who Smalljon now had a name for: Mance Ryder. It was still treacherous work and many men had died from the cold of the Frozen Shore but it had allowed larger groups of wildlings to move around the Wall and into the Gift or even beyond. Yet, the wildlings were all adamant that the Gift had been emptier and emptier with every raid and it wasn't just them. That raised some questions among Smalljon's men and he did nothing to quiet them.

Eventually, the column got moving again. Smalljon, with his advisors suggestions, had split off twenty of the Norrey scouts, sending them back to carry the words to the mountain clans. The Norreys and the First Flints especially needed to know about this, since they could possibly intercept the wildlings in the mountains before they could enter the Gift proper.

Those men would also spread the word to the other groups coming up to reinforce the wall. The threat had a name and was very real now. Everyone needed to know that the wolf-sworn had been on the money, something that would steel their resolve. Once that was done, Smalljon and the rest of the column continued their journey deeper into the Gift.

OOOOOO

The next two weeks passed uneventfully, with the King's party continuing on their way in as lackadaisical a fashion as the King could contrive. The breaks for lunch and dinner became much longer and the time spent hunting during those breaks was longer as well. That was fine by Ranma, who had been expecting another attack on himself or Fenris ever since his little meeting with the Queen, though he supposed she was probably still continuing her wait and

see approach.

Ranma somehow knew Cersei was also unconnected to the attacks had seen before this, they weren't her style. He wasn't certain why he thought that, but they weren't. Cersei would wait until she knew he was a real threat rather than a possible one but when she struck, it would not be some toughs smelling of drink that came for him. Ranma wasn't certain what it would be, but he was certain it would be much more dangerous than that.

He was almost positive now that Joffrey was behind those attacks, although he didn't have any proof to back that thought up, other than the men who attacked him being men-at-arms in the Lannister colors. That wasn't enough given the 'provocation' Ranma had given them back in Winterfell. It was just a feeling, that and the fact that whenever he was around, Joffrey tried to glare a hole through his back.

Of course, the princeling had enough sense to stop doing that if Ranma was looking his way or if Sansa was around. That bothered him, both the fact that Joffrey was showing such subterfuge or, at least, an ability in said skill, and that Sansa was still besotted with him.

Lady seemed to have gotten the hint that not all was as it should be with Joffrey and she tended to be tense and ready to spring whenever Sansa and Joffrey were together, according to the pack sense Ranma got from his link through Fenris. Unfortunately, Sansa seemed determined to not take her direwolf's advice, treating Lady as a simple pet rather than a partner.

*Mind you*, Ranma thought to himself now as he once more lifted Tommen off his horse to set the young boy on the ground next to him at one of their interminable stops, *the fact that she's tried to dress Lady up like a doll a time or two on this trip with Myrcella was hilarious*. The image of the ladylike direwolf, bedecked with ribbons and bows, had brought the entire party to a laughing stand still for a moment as she ran away whining into the woods. Even the Queen had cracked a small smile at that.

Ranma frowned suddenly as he felt the Queen's presence behind him, moving to one side, that perfume of hers wafting towards him. She had still been slightly strange lately and Ranma wasn't really certain of what to make of that. Or of the 'discussion' (and he used the word very loosely) that they had back at the inn. It left him still uncertain what game the Queen was playing. It was obviously to promote her darling Joffrey but did that also mean that she would move against anyone she thought might be a threat to him and, if so, how? Was she personally dangerous? Ranma didn't think so, but wasn't about to place any wagers on it. Or was she only dangerous because she was Tywin Lannister's daughter? All he knew of **that** man certainly made him one Ranma would be wary of,. Gold could buy many things, after all, though Ranma was still getting used to the idea of someone being more dangerous through his influence than in person.

He pushed those thoughts to the side for now, reaching down to rub Fenris' head for a moment, nodding pleasantly at Myrcella who blushed brightly and moved away. She had been doing that ever since that night at the bottom of the Neck and Ranma was still bemused as to the cause of it.

Still, he ignored it once more, moving off with Tommen following him eagerly, ready to get to work on today's exercises. They had finally gotten to the point where Ranma was having him practice swinging a specially weighted blade, and Tommen was eager to get to actual sword exercises.

Myrcella hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should follow them but then she saw Joffrey approaching and saw, out of the corner of her eye, Sansa smile. She groaned before moving to join the girl she was rapidly coming to realize would become her sister. *Not in the way I could wish*, Myrcella thought rather tartly, *and whether or not she'll be happy when she achieves her dream is up in the air, but I can't in good conscience leave her alone with him*.

She discounted the chaperone presence of the septa with ease, that old woman had not taken to travel on the road very well at all and was moving as stiffly as an old crone these days, especially after she had been taken ill from something a few weeks back. The Queen had already moved to talk to her brother about something by one of the fires, getting in a word with him before he had to leave with the King on one of his numerous hunting expeditions. The rotation had not been changed since the two ill Kingsguard had recovered, something Cersei was rather irritated about.

Myrcella sighed again, but pasted a smile on her face and moved with Sansa toward Joffrey. She shivered for a moment, seeing the Hound at Joffrey's back as always as well as Ser Meryn Trant, a man whose smile scared her, made worse by the looks he sometimes sent her way when no one was looking. But then, Myrcella felt the reassuring presence behind her of Ser Oakheart, heartening her, and she went forward resolutely.

OOOOOO

Later that day Ranma looked around suddenly, hearing raised voices from the little area by the cooking fire he and Tommen had taken over for their training. He could hear one of the voices, raised as only a voice trained to bellow over a battle field could be. "He's my boy too, damn you! If I want to send him to foster somewhere, I'll damn well do it!"

Ranma stood up, tapping Tommen gently on the head. "Hold off for now, Tommen, let's go see what your parents are yelling about."

Tommen flushed a little, embarrassed but nodded and moved with him. Before he had met Ranma, Tommen would've made himself scarce quickly if his parents were arguing, fearing the man who was his father almost as much as he wanted the man's acknowledgment; fearing his mother too, not physically but for her words, which could hurt worse than anything else. He had seen her flay men with her tongue alone and had felt it himself a time or two before this.

These days, however, Robert was acknowledging him, smiling at Tommen since he began to learn how to fight and be fit from Ranma plus, in the past two weeks, he had also begun to truly spend time with the man during their rides. Tommen wasn't really close to his father, not yet anyway, but the chance of becoming closer was there.

The two soon found the Cersei and Robert arguing with Ned standing between them trying to mediate things while everyone else had quickly gotten out of the way, though Varys and everyone else stood close enough to listen to the argument. Ranma sidled up to Ser Jory, nodding at the two arguing royals. "What sparked this?"

Jory shook his head, looking a little bemused. None of the Winterfell men had really gotten used to the fact that the King and Queen were so at odds with one another, certainly not in such an open fashion, and it took them all aback that the two royals were airing their rift in public. "The King mentioned the idea of sending Prince Tommen off to ward with some lord, his brother Lord Renly, or even up in Winterfell. The Queen exploded on him, saying Tommen was far too young for that kind of thing and she would never agree to sending him so far away. The King responded angrily, and it, well it, escalated from there."

The young prince smiled, then scowled in turn. It was nice to know that his mother cared for him, she was sort of standoffish with him and Myrcella, devoting most of her attention to his older brother, which was right and proper given that he was the Crown Prince. Yet, at the same time it made sense that he, as a younger brother, would be sent off to ward while Joffrey would not. Sending the Crown Prince off anywhere like that would imply favoritism and that just wouldn't do. The younger prince, however, could be sent and thereby tie another family closer to the crown.

Tommen looked up suddenly at the thought. *If I could possibly ward with Ranma wherever he is...* He looked up at Ranma, who was staring at the two arguing royals, his eyes narrowed, focusing on their body language. This wasn't the first time the two of them had argued like this, that was certain, and he could tell these arguments only ended one way. Thus, he did not see Tommen looking up at him, sudden hope in his eyes.

As the argument reached a crescendo, Ranma stepped smartly between the King and Queen, one hand grasping the King's hand right before he could raise it in a blow across the Queen's face. "Is this something you both should really be arguing about in public like this?"

That caused both Robert and Cersei to frown at him but it also knocked both of them out of the tunnel vision that had come upon them as they once again argued with one another. Robert frowned, feeling his arm gripped in Ranma's vice-like grip. He was about to bellow at the boy to let him go when he looked around, finally realizing he was about to strike his Queen in public. He really didn't care about most people's opinions but Ned was staring at him with hard, judgmental eyes, that was enough for him to pause.

"Personally," Ranma went on, "I would ask my Lord Father what he thinks of the idea that sparked this argument."

Ned smiled faintly at his sons attempt at diplomacy. It reminded Ned all too well of the times that Theon and Jon had fought, only to have their heads banged together by Ranma until they stopped. He also vowed to watch Robert more closely from now on. He knew the man hated Cersei but that was not enough reason for a man to strike his wife, as Robert had seemed about to do.

However, he concentrated on the present. "The Queen raises a good argument that Tommen is too young at the moment to be sent to ward, the usual age for such things is ten or eleven. Her point about favoritism is well taken, as well. With the impending marriage between our houses, Robert, you need to be careful not to show too much favoritism towards my house. Being a King is all about being a balancing act after all. This means of course that sending him to Renly or Stannis is out of the question, as well. The point of warding is to build relations between families and they are your brothers. Yet, at the same time," Ned now turned towards the Queen, who was wearing a

triumphant expression, "Tommen should not be sent to ward in Casterly Rock because of the connection there with your father, Lord Tywin." That wiped off her smile quickly. "The best idea would be to send him to the Reach, the Vale, or to Dorne. That way you avoid any hint of favoritism and Tommen gets to see a portion of Westeros that he has previously not seen."

That perked the boy up a little from his previous disconsolate expression at not warding with Ranma and the Starks. He enjoyed learning and seeing new places would be fun, though it appeared as if it would happen in the distant future. *Three whole years!*

Ned went on, speaking about things he felt both should have already known. "Ser Renly's friendship with the Tyrells is well known, so perhaps House Hightower in the Reach? That would put Tommen in Old Town and the Citadel. The Vale is without true leadership at present and Dorne is such a land apart. Plus it has real cause for grudges against you that any thoughts in that direction would need to be considered seriously."

The master of whisperers, who had been listening silently, smiled at this, shaking his head. *Lord Stark would have made a fantastic king, if he puts such thought into something so distant. Pity.*

Robert frowned then that frowned turned upwards into a smile and he guffawed loudly slapping Ned on the shoulder. "You see, this is why I want you as my Hand! I can't get my mind around all that 'balancing act' shit! We'll think about it some other time but I'll take your words to heart." He scowled at his Queen for a moment then turned away, not apologizing to her for the argument or the fact that he had been about to raise his hand to strike at her. It wouldn't have been the first time after all.

Cersei stood there for a moment glaring after him, then nodded quite abruptly to Ranma and said sharply to him, "Remember what I said a week ago, young Stark." With that she turned away as well, heading back towards the carriage.

Everyone else moved away, going back to preparing the camp for their departure. Ned looked at his son with his head cocked to one side and Ranma shrugged. "She said 'in the game of thrones you either win or die', couldn't really tell you anything else." *Not without making everything much worse and embarrassing the hell out of me, anyway.*

Ned nodded, sighing faintly and showing a bit more emotion than he normally would. "This is getting more and more complicated!" Ranma nodded, then turned and moved off with Tommen once more.

OOOOOOO

The southernmost land of Westeros, Dorne was truly a kingdom set apart. Partly, it was geography. Separated by the Red mountains, Dorne was hotter and rockier than any other region in Westeros and even had the continent's only real desert. The people here also followed more Rhyonish traditions, giving their women more leeway in their choices of profession than other lands, as well as practicing a... more open and more physical sort of courting.

This land was ruled by the cagey and cunning Prince Doran Martell. He was an old man, who battled with a bad case of gout which made walking painful. Yet, there was nothing wrong with his mind and his experience made him a very dangerous political opponent. Now, he sat, staring at a message from the far North, which he had been doing off and on since it had arrived several weeks ago.

"Still staring at the missive from the northern dogs, brother?" Oberynt Martell was Doran's younger brother and, outside of their narrow, tanned faces, there was nothing in them to show that relationship. Oberynt was a middle aged man, hale and hearty, trained as a warrior, called the Sand Viper for his skill with a spear. Where his hair was still black, Doran's had been white for years and he was much older than his brother, a happenstance caused by their mother having several miscarriages and two other siblings between them, now dead. Moreover, Oberynt was known for his many dalliances with the ladies and, if you asked around, men as well, while Doren had only had one wife, who had given him three children, yet, had never really become used to Dorne and had left when the youngest had been sent away to ward with House Yronwood.

But what really set them apart wasn't their looks, but their temperament. Oberynt was wild, as hot blooded as most of his countrymen, quick to hate and quicker to act, with a bottomless rage deep inside him for what had happened to his sister, Elia Martell, during Robert's Rebellion. Doran was pensive, calm, cool, and collected, never acting unless he knew he would succeed in his endeavor and never gambling on anything. Yet, he too harbored a deep rage for what had happened to their sister.

"I am wondering what it signifies, if anything." Doran murmured, leaning back in his wheelchair and looking around the Water Gardens, gardens that were entirely fed by water funneled by a series of aqueducts. "It could just be a

woman trying to make the best match for her son and house or it could be a sign of the Starks rise to ascendency. One would be amusing, the other, dangerous for us and the interests of Dorne."

"Bah!" Oberyn spat to one side. "The wolves might not have been the ones who sacked King's Landing and I'll give you that Eddard Stark would not have allowed the slaughter of Elia and her children but they still support the Usurper. I doubt that any close relation between the two of us would be a good idea, or even very profitable."

"True enough. Lord Stark should know that just as well as us, yet, he allowed his wife to sound us out about this. And my spies have reported that the Queen of Thorns has asked for a meeting between Margaery Tyrell and this Ranma Stark in King's Landing, to see if they are compatible. Of course, with that woman, nothing is as it seems but I have to wonder what game she is currently playing."

The two brothers turned as a feminine chuckle resounded around. Arianne, Doran's oldest daughter, was a petite thing at five feet two inches, yet that did not in any way take away from her beauty. She had long, thick black hair that fell in curls down her back, perfect olive colored skin with large, full breasts barely covered by the silks she adorned herself with, as befit her station. Her eyes, which could smolder with lust and desire on a whim, were now sharp and cunning. "At least the Tyrells are acting one way or another, father. Whereas we seem to be content to sit here and wait, secure, yet out of touch."

Arianne went down to one knee in front of her father. "Let me go to King's Landing as well. This Stark boy could be interesting and, even if not, it hardly matters. I will be there to look for advantages for our family. We've had reports of Robert's drinking himself into an early grave and the rise of the Lannisters before this. Surely we should act to nip that in the bud." No one in this family ever called Robert, King. Oberyn, in fact, had never done so even in Robert's presence.

"If I could trust you to keep your cool and your mind on the job, I might well have thought to send you." Doran replied calmly, raising one hand to touch Arianne's hair. "Yet, you have too much of my brother in you, child. Besides, you would hate the North, the cold would kill you in short order and, if Olenna has already opened up talks for Margaery's hand, then we would be coming in too late to get enough out of the talks to interest me."

"I am getting tired of waiting here!" Arianne cried, shooting to her feet and stamping her foot angrily. "You have been saying we will avenge Aunt Elia's death for years, yet you haven't taken a single act in that direction. Is your grand plan to avenge her to simply outlive her killers?"

Doran lost his temper for a moment. "Enough! There are plans in the works, plans I am not at liberty to tell you but in which you will play a major part. To that end, you must simply wait for the opportune time." The Prince of Dorne leaned back, calming himself. "A scorpion is patient, my dear, and thus only needs to strike once to allow its poison to work. A scorpion can kill anything with a single strike, whereas even the mighty cobra might need more than one. Yet, you are correct, we need to have an eye in King's Landing."

"Oberyn, **you** may go. Keep your eyes open and sound out the Starks in particular about what they will do when Robert dies, especially if their hatred for the Lannisters has cooled. Also, find out if there is any truth to the rumors that Jon Arryn might have been poisoned. You may take your squire and two of your daughters, as well. We need information and if there is any chance to weaken the Lannisters, I want to know about it.

"You are not to act on your own though." he hastened to add, seeing his far younger brother's eyes light up with eagerness. "Merely report back to me on anything that happens."

"Of course, brother. I would never dream of acting without your approval." His pious tone fooled none of them. To one side, forgotten for the moment, Arianne's eyes narrowed as she began to make plans of her own.

O O O O O O O

The trip passed uneventfully for the next two days and they began to see actual signs along the road, giving them directions towards King's Landing as well as signs for the rather famous Crossroads Inn. Robert saw this and sighed. "That means were nearly home, damn it! Oh well, it was fun while it lasted."

He looked down at Ranma. "What do you say, lad, could you race ahead and tell the inn we're on our way?" He pulled out a small ring from a pouch, tossing it carelessly to Ranma. "Show them that if they don't believe you when you tell them you're from the King."

Ranma grinned and sped off without another word, instead of jogging, moving into an easy, ground devouring lope with Fenris at his heels letting out a loud, happy bark. Robert looked in shock at the speed of the lad then laughed

aloud. "Young Wolf, indeed!"

Ranma raced ahead, glad to get away from the party once more. About an hour's travel, which would be practically an entire day's ride for the rest of the party, brought Ranma within sight of the huge Crossroads Inn. It consisted of several buildings around one main one, four stories tall, with wide walls around a central area. It could easily hold the Baratheons and Starks, plus their servants and the Kingsguard, though not the rest of their party.

Ranma turned his attention away from the inn when he saw a man sitting on a horse by the side of the road that he felt probably lead toward the Vale lands. The man was tall and lean, his features, from what Ranma could see as he ran closer, were lined and weathered with gray hair visible even from here. Though, as Ranma trotted closer, he could also see a hint or two of auburn.

As Ranma got even closer he could see the man had bushy eyebrows. As Ranma slowed down he could tell the man also wore excellent chain mail and had a cloak fastened by clasp in the form of a black painted trout. That gave Ranma the last hint he needed at the man's identity and he began to laugh.

The noise caught the man's attention and he turned from looking down the road toward the Vale to the young man who had been jogging easily along the road from further North. As the young man stopped, the man took in his weathered features speaking of the North, his dark hair tied into a ponytail, blue eyes much like his own, only deeper. The young man, with that hard gaze, the muscles visible under his clothing, and the confident expression, he was a man there could be no doubt, also wore a good leather jerkin under good chain mail. And, as if he needed it with the large wolf at his side, his belt buckle was shaped into a wolf's head.

Ranma looked up at the man smiling widely. "If my lady mother described you accurately, you would be my great uncle, Brynden Tully?"

The man smirked down at him and when he spoke, it was with a hoarse, almost smoky voice. He slipped out of the saddle easily, before grasping Ranma's arm warmly. "Aye lad, I am that. Catelyn described you to a T, as well. Good to finally meet you, kinsman."

Ranma grinned, pulling the man into a hug, which Brynden returned. The Tullys were never one to stand on ceremony with family members and Brynden was even less inclined in that direction than his other kin. When he pulled back, he held Ranma at arm's length, looking at Ranma, analyzing him. He was not known as one of the most intelligent knights in Westeros for nothing and he quickly realized that this young man was something special. He had a strength in his form that was astonishing and a barely concealed energy. Whether that was all, he could not say, yet, but Brynden would watch for more. The warhammer on his back made Brendan almost compare Ranma to Robert in his youth; A Robert that had never taken to wenching, drink, or carousing of any kind.

He finally let go, smiling faintly, though there was some worry in his eye. "Come, Ranma, let's go inside and sit down. I have things to tell you. Your lady mother did not convince me to leave my post as Knight of the Gate just on the chance to meet you, her message has... things we must talk about. Where is the rest of the King's party? Surely, you didn't run off and leave them behind. I wouldn't blame you but..."

Ranma laughed a little. "No, they'll be along eventually. The King sent me ahead to ready rooms for them here."

Brynden looked at him sharply at the rather sour way Ranma had said 'the King'. "I see we must talk." he said reflectively. As Knight of the Gate, Brynden was able to hear a lot of news from anyone using the main, in fact, only real, road into the Vale and it was that information which Catelyn hoped would he would use to aid her husband and son. Brynden led the way inside in and sat at a table waiting while Ranma talked with the innkeeper. Soon, Ranma was back and Brendan looked at him with calculating eyes. "So, before we get to what my lady niece has to say, tell me what's been going on? From your perspective, I mean."

That made Ranma's eyebrow rise in surprise but at the older man's cool, contemplative look, he nodded and began to relate everything that had happened from the moment the King arrived in Winterfell. He also informed Brynden of what might be happening up north, though didn't tell him about anything mystical. He could tell that his uncle could see there was more than what he was saying and smiled faintly.

His mother had often said that on top of being the one all the youngsters went to when they had problems, Brynden seemed to see things that others missed and had the ability to pull information out of anyone. This was proven as Brynden led him on with small leading questions, pulling information from Ranma that he would probably not have shared otherwise, even information that Ranma didn't realize he possessed, like discerning the real thrust of Varys' interest in him or that the eunuch had been making an effort since leaving the Neck to fade into the background. Ranma hadn't actually noticed at all.

"You see, the master of whisperers is a consummate politician, not just a spy leader but, at times, a spy himself. He can learn more by being silent than you could tell him in your answers. He was trying to figure you out. Lord Stark, your father, he knows from years ago. The Ironborn Rebellion and even THE rebellion with its aftermath brought them into contact. But you, he did not know and the unknown can scare someone whose business it is to know everything. I daresay by this point he has a much better read on you, possibly a better one than you could want."

Ranma nodded and went on with his story. At last his tale ended. Brynden sat thoughtfully silent for a few moments before speaking again, staring at his niece's son with one hand cupped under his chin. "There is more that you have not yet told me about this threat rising beyond the Wall," he said bluntly, "but keep it secret for now, lad. I am a proven skeptic, after all, and things of that nature don't sit well with me."

Even so, that very sentence told Ranma that he had guessed what might be lying out there, though it gave no hint of whether or not he believed it. "Still and all," The older man went on, "it's also obvious to me why my dear niece wanted me to come and meet you."

"Will there be any trouble from this? I mean, you were Knight of the Gate weren't you? Surely, Aunt Lysa would be irritated by it?"

Brynden waved one hand airily, though there was nothing airy about his eyes. "Lysa sees shadows where there are none and enemies where there are friends. She seems to have gone almost entirely around the bend since her husband's death, though I would have been shocked if you would've told me she cared so much for him even a week before his death. They were not a loving couple, indeed, I would've said she hated him."

"What about my mother's message for me?" Ranma asked, eager to hear from home.

Brynden smiled and pulled out a small leather satchel. He reached inside, taking out a piece of parchment, folded many times over to be small enough to slip into a raven's carrying case. There was another one beside this, which Ranma supposed was for his father. Ranma eagerly took the note from his great uncle, reading it quickly while Brynden sat quietly. In it, Catelyn described what had been going on since he and Ned had left Winterfell. The attack from the former Bolton men, who had somehow gotten down to Winterfell, the assassination attempt on Bran's life, both of these drew frowns from Ranma, though the rest of the note, which said the logistics aspect of the whelming was going well and the notes about her continuing pregnancy. Arya's continued training under Dacey and the notes about Bran waking up, made Ranma smile.

"So, some good news and some bad, Ranma?" Brynden quipped. "You'll need to work on not showing your emotions so clearly."

"Oh, I can do that already, if I think about it." Ranma replied, then tapped the table thoughtfully. "I suppose you know much of what my mother mentions to me?" Brynden nodded grimly. "It is all still guesswork but it isn't painting a pretty picture."

That drew a bark of laughter from the Blackfish. "Hah, that would just be business as usual in politics." He went on more grimly. "Before your father gets here, let me tell you what I know of the conditions at court. Mind you, since Lord Renly was the regent during this little jaunt of his highness, some of this might have changed."

"Shouldn't we wait for my father or is this so interesting that you want to do it twice?" Ranma asked, smiling faintly.

Brynden paused then nodded. "Good point, lad." He raised a hand to grab the attention of the barmaid, asking her wordlessly to bring over some ale for the two of them. He watched, rather amused, as Ranma pushed his mug to one side, not touching it and looking across at him. "So, tell me about any adventures you've had before all this began."

The two of them talked for hours exchanging tales, waiting for the King and his party to show up, while at Ranma's feet Fenris sat, his eyes closed. Until that is, a bard in the far corner began a song called the wolves of Winterfell. After a few lines, Brynden watched amused as his kinsman's face paled, then reddened with irritation. "By the old gods, he promised me, no damn flowing locks!" Ranma paused, while the two listened to the song, then Ranma shuddered visibly. "Ugh, why the hell did he change his own gender in the tale? That's just..."

Brynden was indeed very intelligent. Thus he was easily able to put what he was hearing from the bard together with what he knew about Ranma's history. So when he heard that part he began to laugh, loud and long.

About an hour later, the King's party finally arrived. Reactions to Brynden's being there were mixed in the company. Jaime and Ser Barristan regarded him as a fellow warrior, as did most of the knights, not caring about why he was there. He was a well-known and well-respected knight for his part in the Ninepenny Kings War and had fought in



Robert's Rebellion as well. Robert greeted him warmly and took it as truth that he was merely here to be with his kinsmen.

The Queen, on the other hand, did not welcome his presence. Brynden was far too bright and watchful for her tastes with none of the naïveté that plagued Ranma and his father. Moreover, he had more knowledge of the way the world really worked here in past the Neck, which wasn't good for her ambitions. She still hoped to, at the very least, not make enemies of the Starks, but knew that Ned would do the 'honorable thing', which would almost certainly put them at opposing sides in the near future.

Sansa was ecstatic on meeting a new family member, having heard tales of Brynden Tully from her mother. He also figured prominently in several bards tales for his role in the war that had won him his knighthood.

Brynden was gentle as he gathered her into a hug, ignoring her formal curtsy. "By the Seven, lass!" he exclaimed quietly. "Look at you! Your mother sent me a small sketch of you when you were six but, by the seven, look at you now! You look just like your mother did when she was your age." Sansa blushed rosily at both the hug and the comparison, since in her youth Catelyn Tully was known as one of the most beautiful women in the Riverlands.

That night the majority of the King's party stayed up late, carousing in the inn's main room along with Brynden, Ned and, for the first time, Ranma. They stayed up well into the night, but unlike the rest, Brynden and the two Stark men did not get drunk. They were still sober when they met that evening in the room the trio was going to share, along with Ser Jory, who was 'stepping out' at that moment with one of the barmaids.

Brynden immediately handed the note from Lady Catelyn to Ned, who devoured it with hungry eyes. Unlike Ranma, who had shown his emotions on his face when reading his note, which he had burned following Brynden's advice, Eddard showed no emotion other than the skin tightening around his eyes.

When he was done, Eddard looked up at Brynden. "I see. So, everything is pointing at the Lannisters being up to something."

"And what Bran saw was not a Kingsguard rutting with someone he shouldn't but something much worse." Ranma muttered, then frowned. "But the knife could have been a plant, right, to make us look even closer at the Lannisters. By the old gods, this is damn confusing."

"True." Eddard chuckled, though there was no humor in the sound. "I am afraid however we still need more to go on. As you say, the knife could have been a plant, nothing you or I have seen is conclusive of anything but bad blood between the King and Queen and their children, which, thanks to your efforts, seems to be fading in at least one case. Without Bran's memory, we have nothing solid against the Lannisters."

"Solid or not, you should realize they are a threat." Brynden cautioned.

"True. Now, Brynden, my wife trusts you to aid us and I know you and trust your judgment. So tell us, what are we heading into in King's Landing? Do you have any idea why the Lannisters are stretching their muscles?"

"It isn't so much stretching their muscles as acting with muscles they already have. Robert is a fantastic general and was an excellent warrior," Brendan said calmly, "but as a king he is a figurehead, at best. I wouldn't say he's a horrible king. We've had worse, obviously, but he doesn't really rule."

Ned frowned sadly, while Ranma merely grunted, making a get on with it gesture. Brynden went on. "The real power is the Council. The King's Hand wields quite a bit of power but even he must answer to the Council. It will be imperative for us to discover where they all stand. Ser Barristan is on the council, but rarely speaks up, Renly is master of law, but spends as much time as he can get away with in the Reach. It is rumored he has a lover there but no one knows for certain. He can be counted on to promote the King's interest, but he isn't actually very learned in law. 'Tis rumored he is more a moderating influence than anything else but he also looks out for his own interests."

"And he's the one the King left as regent?" Ranma asked, addressing both the older men. "Is that why?"

Eddard frowned. "Renly was left as regent because Robert favors him over Stannis and trusts him. As regent, his power would be limited but I wonder what if anything he has made of Jon Arryn's death."

"I have no idea but there has been no news of any other upheaval since Lord Arryn's death." Brynden replied. "Stannis is master of Ships but his duties often have him away from the council, as well. With Stannis, it really is his duty. That man takes all his duties seriously and can be found in Dragonstone ruling there or with the fleet. A decent power base but not a political or monetary one, made worse by the fact that all know of the bad blood between

Stannis and Robert. That bad blood was made worse, at least, according to rumor, by your opponent over him as Hand, Ned."

"I've heard from Maester Luwin in our studies that Renly was given Storm's End over the older brother but never what caused the bad blood between Stannis and Robert in the first place."

Eddard winced, knowing this wouldn't go over well. "For one, they are just simply too different in personality to get along. For another, Stannis led the assault that took Dragonstone from the Targaryen holdouts but failed to capture and kill the last two children of the Mad King, Viserys and Daenerys. Daenerys was born on the island."

"So he hates his brother for not killing two children of the family that wronged him. Lovely." Ranma growled.

"His hatred for all things Targaryen is indeed all consuming." Brynden quipped, trying to lighten the mood before going on. "Grand Maester Pycelle is the spokesman of the Citadel but is known to be a political animal, almost as corrupt as the High Septon, which might mean he has been bought by Lannister gold."

"Okay, the High Septon is corrupt too? Oh, septa Mordane is **not** going to be pleased." Ranma didn't really like the septa much but he respected her power of faith and the fact she was devoted to her charges and said faith.

"I can't say I know the lady. Next is Petyr Baelish, Lord Arryn's appointment to master of coins. I... I have no idea about him, his loyalties these days, or how good he is at his job. It was a surprise appointment, though I believe Petyr is intelligent enough to do a good job. He... he will be on the watch for anything that can be used to his own advantage but I just can't say with any truth where that will take him or if he will aid us for loyalties sake. Oh, the Queen is known to take part of the council sessions, if informally. "

"So let me get this straight, the council is the power behind the throne. On said council, we've got two who are sometimes absent and possibly not on our side, one who is, at best, playing his own game, a Queen who has possibly bought another councilor who, again, is playing her own game, and a eunuch with pedophile tendencies who, a third time, is playing his own game. Needless to say, these games are for their own good, rather than the good of Westeros as a whole or us in particular. Ouch!" Ranma winced, remembering all too clearly Cersei's warning about the game of thrones.

He kept worrying at that problem and the growing suspicion that the Queen was in fact the most dangerous of their opponents, at least in the short term. On the outside, Ranma continued to listen intently as Brynden discussed what else he knew, which, alas, read more as a series of rumors than anything else. Why the Lannisters were stretching their muscles, he did not really know, though he had heard that Jon Arryn was looking into the King's bastards. That made Ned frown but that gave him a starting point. Brynden finished up with, "I have some contacts in King's Landing in the poor sections and the harbor, so I will be able to find out more when we get there."

Ranma groaned again, causing the two older men to chuckle darkly. None of them were looking forward to the end of their journey now but were willing to go on. The next day, Brynden joined the party.

From then on the journey became much more fun interesting for Ranma, with Brynden and Ranma getting to know one another. The old knight and Ned also took turns to begin testing Ranma's geographic knowledge at random. They made up military scenarios for him and Joffrey to solve. Robert too wanted to see his eldest son's military ability.

Robert soon let off on it, realizing that his son didn't show the aptitude for anything martial Ranma did. His beliefs were too unrealistic and too vainglorious. Joffrey fully believed that as crown prince he was unbeatable, and that conviction bled out into his view on strategy and anything else.

Ranma on the other hand was quick, always on the lookout for tricks to use to minimize his own casualties while smashing his enemies.

At Robert's behest Tommen joined these little lessons but didn't seem to take them as seriously as he should, which Robert put down to his age. Still and all, he was well pleased with how his youngest was turning out on this trip, glad to see at last one of his legitimate sons was acting almost like a son of his should, even if he still didn't look like him.

OOOOOO

"He killed what!?" Lady Catelyn asked, her eyebrows rising in astonishment as she looked at young Meera Reed, who, along with her brother, had arrived with several carts, apparently carrying the skin and bones of a single lizard lion. "What in the world was he doing?"

"I know not why or even how he appeared, milady, but Ranma saved my life. That monster was close to finishing me

off and it had killed several dozen hunters before me." Meera said, still kneeling in front of where Catelyn sat next to Bran in the main hall of Winterfell. Now that Bran was awake, there was no reason to continue to use the healing hall as the center of the keep's business so life had returned to more normal lines. The only real difference was that it was Bran sitting in the Lord's seat, rather than his father or older brother.

Jon looked up from reading the note from his brother, smiling faintly. "I hope that you are up to the challenge, Mikken? From what I hear lizard lion skin grows tougher as they age, something like this, it would be as good as plate mail."

"Aye, Jon, t'would, and would be as flexible as leather. Perfect for your style or that of the lass and the rest of you wolf-sworn." Mikken was an older man, with a balding head and short cropped white beard. Still, his shoulders were broad and he was skilled in his craft, acting as both blacksmith and armorer. He was skilled enough to make Fang for Arya, Theon's ugly short sword, and Jon's short swords. None but Fang were true challenges but he was eager for the chance to work with such an exotic material as the lizard lion skin. He had been called into the hall when Meera arrived.

"In that case, when you have a good idea of what you want to do, tell me when you want me and I'll make time for fittings." Jon responded. Arya pulled on his sleeve from where she was leaning against the wall next to him behind the Lord's seat. He shook his head, motioning that she was still growing a point that caused her to nod agreement yet pout at the same time.

Sitting next to his mother, Bran ignored all this, trying hard not to look at Jojen, who was staring at him with wide eyes. Something in them worried Bran, as if Jojen represented something but he couldn't tell what. All he knew was that it had something to do with the odd dreams he had been having off and on. They were so confusing he didn't really like thinking about them but Jojen's stare was telling him that he might have to face them, and what they meant, in the near future.

"Arya, show Jojen and Meera to their rooms, they'll be staying with us for a time." Catelyn said, bringing Bran back to the here and now. Jojen looked as if he wanted to speak, but his sister hurried him out of the hall, seeing the Winterfell maester waiting along one wall with a raven message in hand. He kept looking at Bran as the two followed Arya out, trailed by Mikken, rubbing his hands excitedly.

Bran looked to his mother to see if he could be excused but she shook her head. "I realize you don't have much to contribute Bran but as the Stark of Winterfell, you must take part in these discussions." The young boy nodded glumly, reaching down to pat Summer's head where it lay in his lap.

Now that the Reeds and the blacksmith were gone, the group became much less formal, with Jon pulling chairs around to form a loose circle around the Lord's seat. In fact, they wouldn't have been formal in the first place if not for Meera being here to speak for her family. For that there were certain formalities that had to be addressed. Catelyn still was in charge, of course, and she proved this by speaking first, though the topic wasn't as serious as normal. "What does Ranma have to say, Jon?" Needless to say she had already read the message from her husband, which was more of a love letter than anything serious, mentioning offhand the fact that nothing untoward had occurred and that her children were getting on with the Baratheon children.

"Beyond giving us all our love and hoping that Bran has recovered by this point it says, and I quote, 'Traveling is slow. The King is a drunk, his eldest a stuck up ass, but the two youngsters are nice enough. Sansa is still acting lovestruck. I miss Winterfell already, oh, and I killed a lizard lion.'" Jon replied drolly, causing the people around him to laugh. "My brother has never been good at communicating via the written word but it does get the gist across. Unfortunately, I bet that any trouble will have happened after they left the Neck, so this note really doesn't tell us anything."

After that moment however the meeting turned to other things, with Maester Luwin relaying the messages that had arrived by raven. "Lord Mormont has sent word. Smalljon came ahead to the Wall after setting up the first group of smallfolk in the Gift. They have been set up in a single area and are building a holdfast, around which their community is going to be kept small, so that they can pull back into it at need. The farmers report that they can begin to plant right away but, of course, it will take time before they can harvest anything."

Luwin sighed, shaking his head. "Given the weather being colder here, I fear we may soon see a real winter, unless it is a false winter like years past of course. Even so, they might be able to get in a single harvest before autumn is declared. I would caution everyone to begin hoarding now."

"It will be a real winter." Bran and Jon said together. They looked at one another while around them their family and advisors all wondered about why the brothers both sounded so certain. Jon shook himself and smiled at the old

maester. "Your advice is good and we have already informed the farmers of Stark lands to begin doing so."

Luwin nodded and went on. "Smalljon also said his party was attacked in the Gift by a large band of wildling raiders, a hundred strong. He sustained losses, as did the Norrey scouts, but they were able to get some information about the King Beyond the Wall from them. His name is Mance Ryder and Commander Mormont says he is a former Night's Watchman."

Jon and Ser Rodrick both winced. At the younger man's nod Rodrick elaborated, his voice gruff. "That will mean the wildlings will be better organized and led than they have been under other Kings. He may also know where the Wall's defenses are weakest and concentrate his assault. It may prove to be a very good thing that Lord Tyrion went with our forces, his knowledge of siege craft might be the decisive factor."

Catelyn scowled at the mention of the Lannister Imp, but Jon moved the discussion on quickly, seeing that Luwin was done. "The messenger I sent to the Wull clan came back. He reports that the Wull has no idea how the men got through their lands, and are willing to 'give us geld' to repay their dishonor. To that end he has promised 'full dross', a full whelming, of his men if we call on them." Jon still thought something or someone else had aided the ex-Bolton men, but wasn't willing to say it out loud nor could he prove it in this instance.

His report brought Catelyn out of her thoughts about the Lannisters and their plots. "That would be what, five hundred men?" Rodrick and Jon both nodded, that was about what they would estimate the Wulls or the Flints, the two most powerful clans, could put out. "I don't think we should call on them for the Wall, the mountain clans can't mobilize as fast as we can and they would be a burden on our foodstuffs the entire way North."

"I would recommend we send another messenger and ask the Wull, the clan chief, to come down and speak to us in person here, to tell him of the news further south, like we have the other Lords only a bit more. That way we can show we still have confidence in him and his clan, which may make them react even faster to our summons, if we do need them." Jon interjected.

That made sense and the conversation continued. Bran took part in the next topic, his eyes alight with eagerness. Since he had recovered, Bran had decided to mold his thoughts around a conversation he had with Ranma, about not needing to be a warrior, instead he would be a builder. He had taken over designing the necessary pulley systems to get barges down the waterfalls that broke up the White Knife, corresponding with one of Lord Manderly's surveyors to do the same thing in Manderly territory. He also was planning ahead for the days when the river would freeze and had devised ways to still use the waterway even so, with the barges fitted with huge runners.

Catelyn and Jon both smiled at the young boy's eagerness, hoping his plans worked half as well as he thought they would. Catelyn took over then, telling how the Glass Garden, a glass enclosed garden heated by the hot springs underneath Winterfell, was going to be expanded and turned over entirely to the growth of foodstuffs. With that, hunting, and careful rationing, Winterfell could feed itself and the small town around it even in the depths of winter. The plan had come from her and maester Luwin, as well as designs found in the library from days long past.

As the talk continued, Jon leaned back, letting the others dominate the discussion as he thought about other things. He thought about the White Walkers, those inhuman foes beyond the Wall. He thought of the wildlings and what it would take to make peace with them, if it was possible at all, because he knew that they and the White Walkers were going to be only two of many enemies that reared their heads soon. On the heels of that thought, Jon wondered what was really going on down South. He wondered about Sansa, his father, and brother and what they might be facing, what the future had in store for them all. Then he vowed once more to himself, that come what may, when they returned, and he was certain they would return, Ranma would see to that, that the North would still be here. Winterfell would still be here, their family would still be here to welcome them home, strong as ever. *For though we are far apart, like a pack of wolves, we are together still...*

OOOOOO

The rest of the journey to King's Landing passed swiftly without any more additions to the party or changes to the daily routine. Robert now insisted that Ranma and Tommen travel with him at the front of the cavalcade, which angered the Queen, who didn't like her baby boy being out of sight like that but Robert put his foot down sharply. He continued to try in his ham-handed way to reach out to the boy, not really doing anything with him but regaling him with tales of his own early life and including him in the 'discussions' that Eddard and Brynden tossed Ranma's way about geography and warfare.

Ranma enjoyed himself during what amounted to tactics and strategy classes given by three of the best. Say what you would about his personality, Robert was a very good general and his problems, despite not being as varied as Ned's or Brynden's, were built around real life questions. He always wanted Ranma and Tommen to do better than

the reality had been in those battles of his youth or ancient history, even with him or the others in their party, including Jaime at times, taking over the opposing side. He treated it like a game, but his eyes were shrewd as he watched Ranma and his youngest son, most particularly Joffrey on those few occasions the boy would make an appearance. Of course, Ranma took to this like any other kind of combat and he learned just as much about the King and Jaime as they learned about the way he **said** he would do things.

The questions that Brynden asked the 'kids' were in particular very tough, with most of them covering small unit tactics. Small unit tactics, along with skirmish actions of all sorts and battles in hard terrain, were the Blackfish's specialty. After the first such question, Brynden always made a point of saying that Ranma couldn't just power his way through them by himself, which had been Ranma's answer. When he tried to bring the boy to task he was surprised that Ned backed his son up, stating quietly that he could do that.

That night, the two Stark men filled their kinsmen in on some of Ranma's abilities, though not all of them, since Ranma had gone to some lengths to hide many of them from everyone, even Jon and his father. For example, his new ki armor technique would come as a severe shock to anyone as would the ability to project his ki as various weapons and into his own weapons to make them deadlier.

They didn't give Brynden any kind of explanation for where he got his abilities but the Tully knight seemed to take that in stride. His loyalty was to his family and to his personal honor. So long as Ranma was both family and did nothing to dishonor the family then Brynden would have no problem with them.

While Ranma and his father took these conversations seriously, regardless of how it was treated by everyone else, Tommen simply thought it was a fun kind of game and, while he learned, he in no way took it seriously. Still, it was telling that his strategies were never as... removed from reality as Joffrey's answers remained. Tommen cared for his troops and smallfolk and all his answers tried to protect those two groups. He rarely won because of this but at least his questions didn't drive Robert to yell at him as he often yelled at Joffrey for his irrational belief in his own infallibility.

Speaking of Joffrey he had, thankfully in Ranma's opinion, backed off from his enmity for Ranma. He was actually acting quite nicely these days to everyone, not just around his parents or those of equal stature, unfortunately solidifying Sansa's 'love' for him. Ranma still didn't trust him. His eyes never matched his new attitude and Ranma caught him sometimes, when Joffrey thought he was unobserved, glaring at Ranma as well as Fenris. Still, he didn't seem prepared to push things any longer.

In reality, Joffrey was playing the waiting game and was willing to spend most of his time in the carriage, where he could feel Myrcella watching his every move, something he despised but could do nothing about. Myrcella ignored his attempts to hurt her under the guise of 'stretching' and kicking her, or punching her when Sansa and the other's were not watching. The one time he had tried to do the same to Tommen when he joined them at Cersei's demand, she pushed him, spoiling his aim. The girl had gained courage somehow, though Joffrey had no idea where it came from.

Still, they were nearing King's Landing, near **the** place of power for him and the other Lannisters, a battleground where he had all the advantages, as well as the backing of several powerful figures. Once there, he could find ways of causing trouble for the young Stark, without it being traced back to him. He, Myrcella, Tommen, and several others were still Joffrey's targets, but he could wait. If there was one thing this trip had taught him, it was to hide his true feelings. He owed that's to his mother turning on him so suddenly about the direwolf issue so many weeks back, though she was still his staunchest supporter, thankfully.

He even understood what she was saying about wanting to wait but felt his mother was wrong. Cersei didn't want to make Ranma an enemy of her family unless she absolutely had to. She hoped to hide certain truths from the Starks and thus keep from open conflict, where Ranma's abilities, those she could see, scared her. She was astonished they didn't scare Jaime or any of the others but still believed that the boy was a threat they should do their best not to face openly.

Joffrey knew that they were already enemies. He did not know the terrible truth that Cersei was hiding, that neither he nor his siblings were in fact the King's children. He was simply looking out for himself. A king could not survive, in his opinion, if there was someone nearby who burned brighter than him, who was more important, more powerful, than the king. Ranma, by his very nature, gathered to him the attention that should've been Joffrey's, something he could not allow.

While the Queen knew Eddard and Brynden were the true threats to her plans (and her life, future, and everything else), Joffrey was single-mindedly focused on Ranma and the effect he was having on those around him, particularly his siblings. The elder Stark, Joffrey could care less about, feeling the adults would handle the adults.

Ranma knew nothing about his enemy's thoughts or that he had gained an enemy for life rather than an egotistical

boy's ire. As they started on the last day of their journey, Ranma exited the tent he shared with his great uncle and father to see King's Landing, visible in the distance. It sat in the land like a squat, spiked hill with three tops.

About an hour after the party set off, Ranma and the others could see a band of mounted men coming down the road toward them. They had seen traffic for much of their journey going in both directions but normally the scouts were easily up to 'convincing' the rest of the traffic to make way. This time, Ranma could see that they allowed this group through.

About twenty minutes later, the group had come within hailing distance. The man in the lead, who wore a suit of enameled green armor and a helmet with a pair of golden antlers, raised a hand in greeting, shouting aloud. "Hail, brother. I see you have escaped the cold of the North without any trouble and brought back your prize is well! Hello Ned, how are you?" The man speaking was Renly Baratheon, Robert's youngest brother.

Ned shook his head, bemused as usual by the way Renly tried to be so friendly to everyone around him. The two of them had met many times, but Ned had never been friends with the younger Baratheon. Eddard was closer in temperament to Stannis than Renly, but at least he felt that Renly was loyal to Robert, which was enough.

As they got closer, Ranma could make out more of his features. Renly was a handsome man with neatly combed black hair falling to his shoulders and light blue eyes. His body was trim, yet not muscular, and his face clean shaven, much like Ranma's own.

When they were within touching distance, the two brothers leaned over their mounts to clasp arms. Renly looked down at where Ranma was standing between the King and the horse carrying the littlest prince. He wondered why it was Tommen up here rather than Joffrey, though any of the three being near Robert was a surprise. "And who is the boy? Surely, you don't need help to get off of your horse, Robert..." he paused, as Fenris loped up from the rest of the party, coming to a stop beside Ranma with his tongue lolling out a little. Now nearly the size of a small pony, the direwolf looked simply monstrous in comparison to most wolves or dogs, a fact that caused many of the knights behind Renly to grab their swords in shock.

At his brother's gob-smacked expression, Robert laughed, waving one hand expansively at the wolf and Ranma. "This is Ranma Stark, Ned's oldest boy, and that is his pet, Fenris. Large, isn't it? Still the boy's got it well-trained, never saw the like."

One of the knights laughed quietly. He was an exceptionally handsome young man with long, flowing brown hair framing a face without blemish or mark, dominated by golden eyes. His armor had what looked like jeweled flowers on it at points.

The carriage had come up as the party stopped and spread out. Within, Sansa and Jeyne began to talk excitedly to one another as they stared with blushing faces at Ser Loras Tyrell, the Knight of Flowers, a living legend thanks to his beauty and gallantry.

Loras flashed the carriage a bright smile and a bow, causing the girls inside to nearly swoon, but he had already turned back to Ranma. "So you're the one who might be marrying my sweet sister? I don't know whether to congratulate you, warn you if you hurt her I'll kill you, or commiserate with you. Do not get me wrong. Margaery is a great beauty and very intelligent but she abhors the very idea of cold, having never actually felt it in her life. She was not well pleased to hear that she might be marrying you and thus be forced to move to Winterfell."

Ranma turned to him from looking up at Renly with one eyebrow raised but his glance sharpened on the other young man. "You must be the Rose Knight I've heard so many songs and stories about, most of them from the two blushing maidens in the carriage, admittedly." Ranma bowed slightly but didn't remove his eyes from the man. The stories were equally split in talking about the Tyrell knight's handsomeness and his deadliness with the blade or lance. Despite how he looked, this man held himself like a knight, and was much more dangerous than he appeared.

Loras, too, looked down at Ranma, his gaze changing from humorous to searching. The two of them began to talk, mostly commiserating about sisters much to Sansa's chagrin. This was a cover for analyzing each other as young men who were certain in their strength often did with one another.

After only about ten minutes' observation, Ranma formed a positive opinion of Loras. Underneath his handsome good looks there was a blade, waiting and ready. He was almost like Jaime in terms of skill but nowhere near as cocksure or blind as the older man.

On the other hand, in Ranma's opinion Renly was simply a good-looking man who was well spoken, but Ranma felt he cared a bit too much about appearances and seeming. Charismatic certainly, but soft. He had dismissed Ranma

after that first gaping glance at Fenris, which was rather stupid. He seemed much more interested in the fact that Tommen was up here and that Robert seemed to be almost friendly to the boy.

Loras was different from Jaime however in one, much bigger factor. He hadn't crossed blades with Ranma, yet, and so was forming of his opinion of him through his words and his manner. No tales except for one bard song had reached this far south of the Young Wolf but even observing Ranma for a few moments, Loras could tell that he was something special. Every movement seemed controlled, every racing step certain and sure as he jogged along with the horses when the party began to move on with the knights of Reach accompanying Renly added to the cavalcade.

"Tell me," he said casually, looking at the boy as he raced along with his warhammer on his back (due to an incident with Tommen trying to lift the thing and hurting himself, which nearly gave the queen ammunition to cancel his lessons), "are you planning to enter the tournament?"

"What tournament?"

"Robert loves tourneys as much as he loves hunting and other things." Loras replied smiling faintly. "He is bound to want to hold a tourney to celebrate your father's appointment as his Hand."

Ranma looked up at him on his horse and the two men shared calculating glances. "And are you entering this tournament?"

"I would be proud to enter and win glory for my family." The handsome Tyrell knight said smiling faintly. "And the women do love it so when I win and share my roses with the crowd."

The younger man nodded his head with a smile. "In that case, I will make certain to enter. It will be **fascinating** to cross swords with you."

"The words you spoke are mine as well." Loras responded with his own smile. The conversation turned once again to other things, the differences between the Reach and the Riverlands, the number of tourneys that Loras had entered before. In turn, Ranma mentioned what had been happening in his life, giving a little more detail about the Bolton incident than he normally would, as well as the run in the wolf-sworn had with Wildlings.

While this conversation was going on, a much more guarded conversation was going on nearby between Ned, Renly, and Robert. "So, has anything happened while you were acting as regent for the King?" Ned was trolling for information here, trying to see if anyone had taken advantage of the King's absence to push their own agendas. He still hadn't really come to grips with how hands-off Robert was as King. Anyone could push their own agendas while he was there, save for the most... obvious machinations.

"Nothing much." Renly replied, smiling faintly, his face and voice giving nothing away. "My brother, Stannis, once more retreated to Dragonstone a few days gone, much like he had when you 'slighted' him by not choosing him as your Hand. Robert grunted irritably at the memory of their brother's anger at this supposed slight, though his lips twitched at the droll emphasis Renly put on the word. "Although he had returned to the city a few weeks after you left, Robert. Some kind of business he was conducting here, I know not what. Just that he spent a lot of time down by the docks, so I assume it had to do with the fleet in some manner."

That news interested Ned somewhat, as he wondered what Stannis was up to but didn't help him much. "Anything else happen?"

"No nothing else, save the normal humdrum business of the kingdom running itself. Though I am afraid you will have little time to get used to the workload when we formally install you as Hand, Ned. I imagine you will, alas, find a lot of paperwork left over from Jon's sudden demise."

Though Renly said it in a flippant manner, this line brought attention to Jon Arryn's death, which was what Ned had been angling the conversation towards. With that line of thought, Ned responded quickly, yet casually, remembering Brynden's warnings to keep his thoughts close. "I am afraid you are right about that. Paperwork is one of the world's uncomfortable certainties. Just so I am prepared as I can be, do you have any idea what he was working on before he died? Any new taxes or anything like that?"

"Not at all." Renly replied, chuckling. "I was not in the city at the time. I was in the Reach conducting business there."

"Business between the sheets!" Robert guffawed. "You may be subtle about it, brother, but everyone knows you have a lover somewhere in Highgarden! We all thought it was Margaery Tyrell, but since Cat was able to convince that old ass Mace to see about a marriage between her and Ranma, I've been wondering who it is that's caught your eye

enough to keep you traipsing back to Highgarden every chance you get!"

Renly chuckled and waved the question off, his entire body giving the impression he couldn't be bothered to answer the question. Ned sensed this was a new twist on an old topic of conversation for the two. Renly turned back to Ned and said formally. "I have no idea what Jon was working on. His sudden demise was unexpected and quick but he was an old man after all."

This gave Eddard no clue whatsoever about what Renly was thinking, though his apparent friendship with Robert was a mark in his favor. Ned really had no belief that the man was plotting against his brother. But, whether or not Renly was not sharing information about Jon's death because he didn't have any or because he was afraid to share it, was more than Eddard could say.

Ned wondered how to once more bring the conversation around to this topic but Robert quickly grabbed the reigns of the conversation. "Never mind that, we must have a tournament! I want to start to plan for it the moment we can, to celebrate Ned becoming my Hand! I bet that son of yours is going to join up the moment he can. He's been chomping at the bit for something physical to do this entire journey!"

"Though I will say," Robert laughed, looking over at Tommen, "he's had a good effect on the kids or, at least, two of the three." He guffawed again, but this time the sound was sharper, less humorous, and more biting. "Some brats you just can't teach, apparently."

Renly raised an eyebrow and nodded cordially at the younger boy who smiled back at his uncle rather wanly, since Renly had never used his considerable charm to get close to the boy or any of the trio of children, really, seeing them more as pawns in the great game than family. The fact that Robert was being so affable towards one of his sons was beyond astonishing to Renly. Still, he took it in stride for now.

Around him Brynden looked at the rest of the party shrewdly, paying particular attention to where Jamie was talking quietly to the leader of the Gold Cloaks, the King's Landing City Watch, Janos Slynt. It seemed that the Kingslayer had his own man to talk to about what had been going on in their absence. He wondered where that man stood and decided that he would assume Slynt was a Lannister supporter from now on until proven otherwise.

He tried to sidle his horse backwards through the still moving cavalcade but the men noticed him coming and the conversation halted. Brynden stopped moving his horse in that direction, leaning downward as if he had thought his bridle was loose to cover the motion. Ranma looked back at him before responding to his father order to once again get up onto his horse.

By now, they were closer to the city and Ranma could make out more features, especially against the backdrop of the ocean. The sprawling size of it for one thing was astonishing to him in comparison to the only other city he had seen in this reality, White Harbor. The walls were not as impressive and there seemed to be shanty towns built right up beside the walls on all the sides he could see and he could tell even from here that houses were built right up next to them on the inside, whereas in White Harbor, the wall was surrounded by an area given over to defense, in the form of barracks training areas and rally points. Rising out of the sprawl of the main city were three hills, upon which sat two castles and some ruins, a dome collapsed in a way that was visible from here.

Soon he could tell something else. Fenris noticed it first, followed promptly by Lady, where she was running alongside the carriage carrying her mistress. Both direwolves whined and snuffled, wrinkling their noses as if in disgust. Fenris whined, looking up at his bonded, who shook his head, smells not coming over their link as well as other senses. A few hours passed and Ranma no longer needed to try to figure out what his bonded wolf was smelling. "By the old gods, what the hell!"

The southerners all laughed at him and the other Northerners who had never been to King's Landing before. The city might be the largest city in Westeros but it was also the most squalid, and above all, smelly. It reeked of refuse, excrement, and innumerable other horrible smells. Perfume wasn't a affectation here. The Queen had long ago learned to liberally dab it on to combat the smell of the city.

Ranma had no such defense and he nearly reeled in the saddle, as did many of the other Northmen. Yet they gamely continued on, slowly becoming acclimatizing to it. He even chuckled a little shaking his head as he looked ahead at the city, remembering a line from a movie he had loved the few times he had been able to escape his fiancées to see it in the theaters. "Kings Landing, you'll never find a greater hive of scum and villainy. We must be cautious."

Loras heard him and laughed aloud, bringing some attention from the others in their party, but he waved them off chuckling a little. "Truer words were never spoken, young Stark. You must indeed be cautious here."



Not an hour later, they were at the city, the horns blaring the Kings return, the gates to the city, always open for traffic which never truly stopped, now lined with Gold Cloaks to keep the crowds back, two lines of them heading deeper into the city. It was as they were passing underneath the walls that Ranma began to feel that his life was once more going to change and possibly for the worst.

End chapter

OH HOLY HELL, I am glad the whole moving from place to place thing is done now. The plot can start to move forward!

It is... unclear if Robert knew in the books about Renly being gay. It might be an 'open' secret, but hell, he missed the fact not one of his 'legitimate' children were his, when none of them had anything of his features so... yeah.

That last bit about Jon and the others at Winterfell was meant as sort of a stopping point for their story, as well as introducing the changes that are going on there. Changes will continue there as outlined but I won't be walking you, dear readers, through them. That will let me concentrate on what goes on at the Wall – Smalljon, Daryn, Jeor, Benjen, and, for those of you who are waiting for him, Tyrion, who will be in the next chapter. I will be flipping between them, Ranma, and Daenerys for now, mainly because I like to mix action with everything else.

Thank you for reading and as always please review.

## **\*Chapter 5\*: Chapter 5**

I don't own Ranma or ASolaF. For the first, I would have made it somewhat more realistic, and for the other, well, just check my update speed man. Heh.

**In other news:** Russia creating its own internet? Um, I know I've got two Russian fans for my Harry Marvel cross, so I hope this doesn't happen. I think Putin is off his meds, I just hope no one who reads my stories is affected by his imperialist ambitions.

I would like to thank my beta Jessolt for his aid, without him, this chapter would not be at the writing level it is now.

### **Chapter 5 A Straight Line in the Land of Zigzags, a Mountain's Fall**

Theon stood somewhat more nervously than normal in front of Lord Manderly in the Merman's Court, the feast hall of New Castle. This feast hall was unique because instead of being simple stone rock with a smattering of banners, tapestries, and trophies its walls, floor, and ceiling were covered with wooden planks fitted together with care then decorated with paintings of all the creatures of the sea on a light blue/green background.

The hall had nothing to with why Theon was nervous. That was because this was the first time he had been here without Ranma and he knew that, despite his appearance, Wyman Manderly was one of the more dangerous lords of the North. Not personally, Wyman was so fat he couldn't ride a horse and at about sixty-five years old, he was one of the three oldest lords in the North. People even made fun of him, calling him the Fat Lamprey, or Ser-Too-Fat-To-Ride-A-Horse, yet for all his outward appearance, Wyman was incredibly intelligent, shrewd, and subtle.

White Harbor also gave House Manderly a position of strength that no other house in the North could match. The silver mines that they controlled plus the trade going up the White Knife and out to sea from it made them the richest house in the North as well. Only Winterfell, mainly because of their relatively new position as breadbasket of the North, could come close to matching that. Above all that, he and his House was known to be loyal to House Stark.

Wyman looked at Theon with shrewd eyes, smirking a little. "This appointment of yours from Lady Catelyn and young Jon, excuse me, young Bran, is rather openhanded, advisor to the fleet? What exactly does that mean?"

"It means, Ser, that Bran and Lady Catelyn were afraid that because you don't have anyone who is truly learned about ship to ship combat that you would need my expertise. Not, I hasten to add, that your men don't fight well but I know for a fact that you take more casualties at sea against pirates than you really need to..." His voice trailed off looking at the Lord.

Wyman guffawed, slapping his hands on his knees. "True enough, I suppose. My experienced men are spread throughout the fleet now. It's grown in the past few years, which you already know." Indeed, seven new galleons had been created in the past two years and five more before that, giving house Manderly forty ships in total, though most were trade carracks rather than war galleys. Only fifteen were war galleys but more were being laid down even now and the others weren't totally helpless. But Theon was right, in terms of naval warfare they were kind of feeling their way into it.

No one in the Manderly fleet had been part of suppressing the Iron Born Rebellion or the War of the Nine Penny Kings and, despite the nature of seafaring, sailors from the different realms of Westeros tended to keep to their own even in foreign ports. So Wyman had been unable to bring in any experts worth the money on ship to ship combat, let alone how best to organize defended convoys. Still, there were few enough pirates who plied their trade this far north, where storms were severe, ice in the rigging was normal nearly every night, and frostbite was a constant danger to your crew. However, the nature of the supplies heading to Eastwatch-by the sea; foodstuffs, men, women who were going to enlarge the small village/port there, and weapons might make some of the greedier of them overcome their dislike of the conditions.

"Very well, I'll send you out on one of the war galleys with the first shipments to go up to the Wall. Until then, lad, my city is yours. I have no doubt you'll enjoy yourself!" The Lord dismissed Theon with a wave and a laugh, turning to the next supplicant. As Lord of White Harbor, Lord Manderly was constantly called upon to adjudicate matters of law, hence why the Merman's Court was open to the public.

As soon as he had exited the hall, however, one of the castle's servants joined the younger man, moving in the same direction. Around the bend in the corridor, the man leaned toward Theon, whispering quickly. "Lord Manderly will send a servant to your room this evening to get you. He has something he wishes to talk to you about without so

many eyes around."

Theon nodded imperceptibly and moved on, shaking his head slightly at the way the Pufferfish, as Lord Stark called him, acted at times. That evening, he was promptly taken from his room (and a willing wench) and then escorted to Wyman's personal apartment.

Inside he found Wyman, his two eldest sons, Wendel and Wylis, and the servant who had brought him. "Come in, Theon." the fat lord said, no boisterousness in his manner, only seriousness. Gone was the smile, the gleam of humor in his eyes. In their place was a hard look and bright, searching eyes.

Theon did so, sitting across from the man at the table in the center of the room, a heavy thing of oak with massive feet. Wyman was so fat he couldn't even lift himself to sit upright, so he reclined on a specially made chair across from his guest, while his sons sat in normal chairs on either side. The man waited until Theon was sitting down, then began without any preamble. "Tell me what you know about this King Beyond the Wall, as well as what you boys really ran into on your jaunt up there. The truth, all of it. Lord Stark sent a letter, in cipher of all things, to me saying that there was more going on, far more than anything you wanted to report about, and I applaud that. But I need to know where the real threat is going to be coming from; to better lay my own response."

"Both sides, Sir." Theon answered promptly. "**Something** is happening down south, we're still not certain what, but whatever it is, it has to do with the Lannisters. That's all we know, though why, or even if there are factions among them or we don't know. It's almost certain some threats will come from that area. All of us at Winterfell are sure of that. We hope that Lord Stark and Ranma can stave it off for now but that's the real reason why Lord Stark didn't ask you, House Glover, House Flint of Flint's Finger, House Locke, House Dustin, or House Ryswell to send troops north. We might need them elsewhere."

This was actually something he and Jon had talked about the evening before he left. It was a rather cordial conversation between the two, one of very few they had had over the years but they had agreed about this point. Catelyn's presence had much to do with that, though Theon would never admit the wolf mother scared him these days whenever they talked about anything that could pose a danger to her children. They had decided that if he was asked, Theon was to share everything.

He didn't mention House Reed, which had little manpower to begin with and less to spare given the need to defend Moat Cailin, though mentioning House Dustin was rather beside the point as well. Oh, their minor Houses were still strong, but Dustin itself had only Lady Barbrey Dustin, who had refused for years to remarry or designate an heir. That stance had lost the House a lot of strength, though her relationship to Lord Ryswell meant the House was still considered a noble one. It would recover in time, but right now it simply wasn't worthy of consideration.

"In terms of the danger behind the Wall, that is a little harder to explain..." From there on Theon went into detail on the ambush the wolf-sworn had sprung, their injuries afterwards, and most particularly the giants they had met, which Jon had said couldn't possibly be real giants because they were too large, even for the frost giants of legend. The nature of that struggle brought all three Manderly's upright quickly, even the Lord pushing himself up with difficulty to stare at Theon.

After he stopped speaking, the trio was silent for a time before Wyman spoke. "That's quite a tale and I wouldn't believe it for an instant if you didn't have so many witnesses. Younger Hathan was silent about the battle, on orders from Ranma no doubt. Still, it tells me that I do need to prepare for both." He looked over at his two sons. "Start filling the armory and see to the defenses of the city. I want White Harbor as strong as we can make it. After that, give me a round number of men we could pull out and still retain a force strong enough to defend the harbor and the city itself. We might need to send that south."

"I would say that any such talk is premature." Theon hastened to interject. "I know for a fact that Ranma and Lord Stark will be looking for other solutions. They both think the danger on the other side of the Wall is much more important."

"Of course, of course" Wyman said nodding his head, "and I believe it too, but if these ghouls can get around the Wall somehow, then we must be prepared to fight them elsewhere just in case. As such, a quick reaction force might be necessary, certainly for our lands at the very least. I will send word to the Lockes, to the Woolfield, and to the Flints of Widow's Watch. The Flints sent up a party to the Wall along with House Karstark, so they might not have men to spare, but they can at least step up patrols of their lands.

Theon nodded and, knowing he was dismissed, moved off to the doorway. As soon as the door was closed, Wylis turned to his father with one eyebrow raised. "You didn't tell him about your plans with Lord Stark, father?"

"I haven't told **anyone** my plans with Lord Stark, yet." He smirked a little. "Ned might act the stiff-necked honorable man but that doesn't mean he's stupid. Ned's trusting us to provide him with an exit, if need be, so it behooves us to do the job properly, doesn't it?"

Both his sons nodded fervent agreement to that and they began to discuss captains they could use for this serious task.

OOOOOOO

The King's party passed through the city's outer wall using its main gate and were immediately inundated by waves of noise, made worse by being confined in the city by the high walls. The route through the city up to the Red Keep, which could be now seen slightly better without the intervening wall in the way, was lined with Gold Cloaks every few yards. These men, whose purpose was to provide order in the city, were now keeping the crowds back. Ranma rode next to his father, who rode next to Robert while Renly was on his other side. The carriage was directly behind him, while Loras was on Ranma's other side.

The Knight of Flowers waved grandly at the crowd, causing some of the smallfolk to cheer, most particularly the womenfolk. Most of the crowds, however, seemed rather indifferent to the return of their King. Most of the noise was simply the hustle and bustle of the city.

Ranma grimaced, the smell of the city seriously getting to him. At first, he thought that maybe it was his connection with Fenris. The direwolf was becoming more and more disturbed by the smell coupled with the noise but Ranma couldn't close his connection to Fenris as he needed it to control the direwolf, less he go berserk. That was the last thing they needed right now. Fenris growled, one side of his lip curling back, but understood his human didn't want him to attack any of these noisy two-legs. However, the noise from the two-legs coupled with the smell of this two-leg place was bothering him tremendously.

It was bothering Lady as well. However, she was still small enough to fit inside one of the carts and had done so. Choosing her target with care, Lady hid her nose among the ladies' laundry while the two carters laughed.

Truth be told, the smell was bothering Ranma just as much because it was a symptom of other things as well as being damn irritating. Before this, White Harbor was the only city that Ranma had been to in this world. It was clean, organized, and not nearly as crowded as this. Lord 'Pufferfish' controlled the city with an iron grip, and the shrewd man had firm ideas of sanitation, cleanliness, and organization; all of which helped in the defense of the city. It hadn't been so very long ago, after all, that the city had been under attack by pirates and no one in the North was liable to forget anything like that.

*The North remembers, but it looks as if the Southerners never learned in the first place.* He was broken out of his morose thoughts for a second as Loras reached over the space separating their horses to swat him in the arm. "Ranma, that face is not doing you any favors with the ladies. Smile, we're past the outer edge now and into the city proper."

Loras waved his hand, indicating the somewhat larger houses which were much better kept up, though not nearly as clean as similar houses in White Harbor. Then again, there wasn't any snow on the ground so maybe it was a trade-off. The crowds pushed to the side of the road were much better garbed as well and, whereas before the cheering had been sporadic, far more people here were cheering. It was a rather subdued kind of cheer but they were generally happy to see their King and his family returned out of the hinterlands safely. Ranma did notice one or two clumps of older people who, rather than cheering, stared at the men in Lannister colors with fearful eyes.

Ranma shook his head however. "You see the smiling ladies in the cheering, Ser Loras. I see the squalor, the stink, and the flaws." It made Ranma wonder if he could introduce the idea of sewers into Westeros. White Harbor didn't particularly need it, having already had rain channels on the roofs and roadsides constructed in such a way as to help with snow melt, and also strict waste disposal laws with truly draconian penalties, but this place desperately needed a sewage system. He continued to muse about that, wondering what kind of sewage system Westeros could make with its current technology (it wasn't as if Ranma was an expert after all) as the party continued toward the Red Keep.

The road meandered through the city up onto one of the hills that dominated its landscape. This one was the largest, dominated by a keep made of pale red stone. As they grew closer, Ranma could make out seven large towers at points along its outer wall, which, despite being in the center of the city, still had crenellations and buttresses for archers and were very businesslike.

Despite its martial appearance, Ranma was struck by the fact that it was actually more than a bit smaller than Winterfell. Probably more people lived here year round but he doubted that it was as self-sufficient as his home. An

invading army would starve itself in the North before taking Winterfell by siege. That thought gave Ranma a sense of pride as they passed underneath the large bronze gates. Those were definitely for show but Ranma could see a second inner gate that wasn't. The bronze gates were probably replaced with steel and wooden doors in times of war, anyway.

They entered a large cobbled square, the edges of which were lined with servants and keep residents, which were bowing to the King as he came forward on his horse. Robert laughed, waving one hand grandly around them. "Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home! Welcome to the Red Keep, Ned. I hope you and your lad enjoy it here more than I do, if truth be told!" Eddard nodded noncommittally, looking around at the servants and the keep.

After that, everyone became busy with unloading. The men-at-arms retrieved their items and went off to their various barracks. Ned sent his men ahead to the Tower of the Hand, which was a large tower set to the side of Maegor's Holdfast, the main fortress of the keep, itself surrounded by a moat and an outer wall. The Hand's tower contained a small barracks that Ser Jory and the men-at-arms from Winterfell would inhabit. There were other barracks in the Keep, one in the Holdfast, one in the White Guard Tower which was home to the Kingsguard, and a larger barracks set along the outer walls of the Keep. Going by the colors of the men arrayed in front of it, that one had been partially taken over by Lannister men.

Even here, the smell of the city still permeated enough to bother Ranma. Ranma quickly helped Tommen down from the horse and then grabbed Fenris by the scruff of his neck. With that firm grip in hand, he moved over towards the children as they exited the carriage, hearing Lady whine a little from her hiding place.

He smirked as he saw Sansa trying not to wrinkle her nose. "Dear sister," said Ranma grandly, "if I had known that the smell was what you wanted to experience most of all of civilization, I could have introduced you to a pigsty."

His sister glared at him but refrained from responding. The two of them had not been on the best of terms since Sansa had taken her fiancé's side over Fenris, since she had refused to apologize for it. They were polite and didn't ignore one another but the closeness that had characterized their relationship was gone now.

Cersei on the other hand merely smiled faintly. "It is the one aspect of the city that I loathe," she confided. "I normally have to put on twice as much perfume just to keep it away from my own sense." She deliberately tossed her head slightly so that the smell of her hair hit Ranma and he shook his head groaning internally as he backed up slightly.

She still tended to do little things to get a rise out of the young Stark, simply because she knew they did get to him somewhat, and she had enjoyed it as well as using her sexuality as a tool to try to control him. The latter might've failed but it was still fun, something the Queen didn't want to give up, strangely. "If you wish I can give you the street and name of the merchant who sells the perfume my daughter and I use."

Myrcella giggled a little at the thought, while Tommen, who had long been used to the smell, simply sniffed the air trying to decide if he liked being back home or not. Ranma simply agreed that it would be a good idea, then, with Sansa sticking to the royal ladies like glue, went over to retrieve Lady. The direwolf whined, but Ranma forcibly lifted the female direwolf in his arms, setting her down. He grabbed her by the scruff of her neck before quickly doing the same to Fenris, who looked ready to bolt for the little bit of wood they could see in the Keep.

After that, Ranma's father called for him and Ranma moved over in that direction pulling both direwolves along. Eddard smiled at that, looking down at Fenris, who was looking a little wild-eyed, his teeth bared. "I assume the smell is getting to him?"

"The smell, the noise, and everything else is getting to them both, though I'm only bothered by the smell, father." Ranma answered shaking his head. "If this is civilization, they can keep it."

Eddard smiled slightly even as Ranma's thoughts idly went back to trying to figure out a way to lay down a sewer system. He knew in general terms how they worked but he had never actually seen a plan for them or paid close attention to those he had encountered.

"There is to be a formal ball this evening," Ned replied, shaking his head. "Find someplace where Fenris and Lady will be comfortable without you there holding onto them. We don't want any trouble from that quarter."

"Agreed, I'll lock them in my room for now. Fenris won't like it but he'll understand the necessity. The Queen told me of a place where I can buy some perfumes in the city. It might make the two uncomfortable but spraying a bit on their noses every day might keep the smell of the city from bothering them and, so long as I leave him here in the keep, the noise shouldn't irritate either one. Though, I might decide to just leave Fenris in the godswood.

Ned shook his head at his son's belief in his bonded wolf's intelligence but given the alternatives, Fenris would indeed understand somewhat. They could see the godswood from where they were walking, overlooking the river at the back of the keep. The godswood looked to be about four acres, with elms, alders and black cottonwood trees, quite unlike the woods at home which were pine, oak and other, tougher trees.

The river, the Blackwater Rush, was one of the rivers that ran through the Riverlands to give that land its name. The Blackwater's mouth, where it fed into Blackwater Bay, contributed to making Kings Landing a decent port.

"So long as you warn Fenris not to eat anyone he comes across, I don't see a problem with that. Hopefully the trees' smells will overwhelm the smell wafting up from the city." Ned said half seriously. He wondered idly how large Fenris would be once he stopped growing and had the disturbing premonition that he really didn't want to know. "I trust you can find something formal to wear?"

"Plate armor and cloak, got it." Ranma quipped and Ned shook his head with a faint smile which was his public way of laughing. The two of them continued on into the Tower of the Hand and up the stairs, past where their men were setting up in the barracks on the first floor.

The second floor was servants' quarters, which were admittedly much nicer quarters than the equivalent in Winterfell. Though the windows were a bit too large to be arrow slits and neither man liked seeing them only on the second story.

The third floor had what looked like a hall, much smaller than the one back in Winterfell. It was a private audience chamber, which was rather cozy, with heavy rugs and wall hangings with a single large round window letting in the sunlight to illuminate it. There were candles in the corners for when the sun set.

The next level was the workspaces, two desks for secretaries situated in one large area that dominated the floor, outside a single room with a closed door.

Ranma paused a moment, pointing at the door with his chin, since his hands were still occupied by the two direwolves. "I assume that's your new office?"

"I imagine so, yes," Ned replied dryly shaking his head. "One of the servants probably has the key. Ser Jory will ask around for us, but at the moment all I wish is to put my feet up and have some quiet time to myself."

"I can definitely understand that." Ranma said nodding his head, before he pulled at his shirt for a moment shaking his head with a chuckle. "I'll have to find some local clothing though, the heat down here is irritating." Ned nodded, watching his son head to the stairs leading further up before turning to look at the office door thoughtfully.

The younger Stark preceded his father up to the level where the private quarters of the Hand and his family began, with several large windows letting light into the various rooms. The stairs ending in a sitting area around which were several doors leading to private quarters. A smaller staircase continued to the next floor, presumably used for storage or guest rooms.

Ranma sat in one of the chairs, grunting in pleasure as its padding shifted under him. It was big, soft, and comfortable something, he had to admit, few chairs in Winterfell could boast. The people of the North had no time for such things really, although it was getting better thanks to his mother's and his own suggestions. Those soft chairs that were there were, of course, in the women's quarters, his sisters' and his mother's.

Ranma sat in silence for a moment, while Fenris rested his large head on his thigh. With Ranma having let her go, Lady had already moved into one room, where the servants had moved much of Sansa's clothing. Ranma shook his head at her almost lap-dog attitude, then leaned further back in the chair, closing his eyes as he thought.

*This whole place gives me a very strange feeling. On the one hand, it reeks of decadence. I mean, we passed candle sticks on the way up here made from gold and those tapestries would be something Sansa would take three years to make, each. Plus the sheer number of servants, all of them better dressed than nearly any back in Winterfell. There's a certain sort of power, I suppose other people would call it majestic, yet the whole city and this keep in particular... Ranma shook his head. The city is diseased, there's no other way to put it. The smell, the disorganization, the number of people stuck here, it's a wonder there hasn't been a plague yet. It's only a matter of time though.*

In fact, Kings Landing did have a very rudimentary sanitation system in the upper levels of the cities but the squatter towns that abutted the city along its outer walls; the poorer sections; and the sections devoted to anything that by their very nature smelled such as tanneries, blacksmiths, and the alchemists guild as well as the wharves, didn't. All the refuse simply went out to sea, making the harbor utterly disgusting. Even the River Blackwater was soiled as it

passed through the city. This was just barely enough to stave off the plague Ranma was worried about, though he was correct in that it would be devastating if it ever occurred. The sheer number of rats and other vermin would see to that, as would the fact the humans ate the vermin in much of the city.

Ranma wasn't certain if he was just talking about the physical when he thought that Kings Landing was diseased. He decided to wait on deciding that until he met with the King's council. *If they are as corrupt as Uncle Brynden thinks, then it fits well with everything else here.*

As if conjured by that thought, Brynden himself walked up the stairs, shaking his head with a faint smirk on his face. "Vayon Poole, the steward your father brought along, has already taken over the keep and gotten rid of nearly all of the servants. They weren't very happy about that. Apparently, some have served here ever since the Rebellion, but he wanted none of it."

"My father's orders were rather explicit." Ranma replied with a smile, motioning the Blackfish to pull up one of the other comfy chairs. "He wanted to make certain this place was secure."

The older man did so, wallowing in hedonistic pleasure in the chair for a moment, before looking over shrewdly at his young charge. "I'm not going to be at the ball this evening. I wasn't invited but that's not the real reason. I could simply show up, after all, I am a belted knight and a nobleman, we can do these things. But I think my time would be better spent getting a feel for the city. I think it will aid us in knowing what the common folk here think, as well as the merchants and everyone else, about who are the powers behind the scenes. Did you notice that man who tried to get your father's attention after the King went off?"

Ranma shook his head and Brynden groaned. "Ranma, I realize that you're not used to playing politics but you need to be on your toes here. There are powers here that are not based on physical strength or honor. That was Petyr, the master of coin. The one I mentioned as being a childhood friend of your mother's?"

"You did, but you also said that times had changed and you weren't certain of his loyalties, something I agreed with. Has something happened to change your mind?"

"Not at all, I'm just wondering what he wants to say to your father. If he tries to get them alone, see if you can overhear the conversation. That way he won't have to be seen passing it on to me. There are also a few things that you can do to see what sort of people the King surrounds himself with..."

For an hour, the two talked about how to see if someone was trustworthy, already bought, or neutral in various ways, after which Brynden left Ranma there so the younger man could take a nap. If there was going to be a ball this evening, he wanted all his mental strength to get through it.

O O O O O O O

Joffrey was a very happy prince. They were finally home in the Red Keep, the place of power for his family and for him. Here, he had trusted servants who would do his bidding. Here, Joffrey knew his way around. And most importantly, here, he was **finally** free of spending every day with Ranma watching as Ranma came closer to Tommen while Tommen came closer to their father.

Now with the families separated, the King's family ensconced once more in Maegor's Holdfast, he could take action against his younger brother and he grinned evilly as he decided how to do just that. First, however, he sent for one of the servants that had been given to him by his mother, a trusted Lannister man who answered only to him. The man had been trained in Casterly Rock not to ask questions and to obey any order given.

Later that day, as Joffrey was preparing for the ball with the help of a few servants, the man came to his quarters. He was small nondescript sort, who could blend into any crowd, something that had proven useful more than once with both his current and past masters. Joffrey smiled at him, turning away from the servant who had held up one of his finest silk shirts. "You, I have a job for you..."

After the man left, Joffrey turned back to the business of selecting an outfit to show his status properly. The gold embroidered shirt would be especially good, coupled with the red pants, he would look like a proper Lannister, while the overcoat in brown and green would give him a Baratheon flare. Now what to select as the proper accessories...

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Myrcella was busy showing Sansa her room when Cersei came in. "There is a formal ball this evening to welcome the King and ourselves home. I trust that you will both prepare accordingly, ladies? I will be checking."

Sansa and Myrcella grinned at one another then nodded eagerly. The Queen smiled faintly at the two of them, then looked at Sansa. "Take note of southern styles when you are going through your clothing with Myrcella. I hope to see what you can come up with soon."

Sansa curtsied to Cersei and answered in an affirmative fashion that brought another small smile to her face, which faded the moment she left the room and saw Jamie standing at guard along with Sir Oakheart and Ser Mandon Moore. She didn't like Moore. The man was utterly unreadable, silent and brooding, and always staring with cold, dead eyes. She knew Jaime didn't like him much either, though he did say that the man was somewhat skilled with the sword.

Jaime followed her and the Queen frowned before smiling at him leading the way further into the Queen's quarters, saying loudly to be overheard, "Jaime, if you have time, could I give you a list of things to buy in the city? I haven't yet gone over everything..." At that point, she closed the door.

Strangely enough, she hadn't felt the need to signal her brother for one of their trysts in several weeks. Not only because of the travel time being much more dangerous, but because flirting with Ranma had been strangely satisfying on its own, now that she came to think about it. Nevertheless, Cersei didn't reject him when Jaime pulled her body back into his own with a hand around her waist. It always felt like coming home when they made love and today was no different.

Though just this once Cersei had to fight with herself to stop picturing Ranma in Jaime's place. She knew that would be impossible. There was not a hint that Ranma would go for even a fling with no strings attached and, without the need to control him, there was no need to offer such. Still, it was an odd thought and it returned as Jamie left thirty minutes later, leaving her to take a small nap before the evening festivities.

OOOOOOO

The ball occurred that evening in the Great Hall, a massive hall that was also the throne room. It was large enough for a thousand men, although tonight it only had seating for half that: courtiers, knights, and ladies of high standing from the Crownlands; there to drink to the King's return. The tables had been set up along the walls, which were covered with hunting tapestries, to leave the center free for dancing. Ranma knew that during the Targaryen reign they had been lined with the fossilized heads of dragons, which had probably added further to the presence that the Iron Throne lent the room.

Even sitting as it did behind the King's table, the Iron Throne's presence could not be ignored. It was made of a thousand melted swords, taken from the dead that had tried to fight against the Targaryens when they conquered most of Westeros, all save Dorne and the North. The North bent the knee, while Dorne was able to keep its freedom during that initial time, bending the knee only later after a bloody war and a marriage which connected their ruling line to the Targaryen.

The throne was a thing of points, jagged edges, and bare metal, with a pile of swords through which a few steps were built up to a large, very basic seat at the top. There was only a small cushion on it, since the throne was not made to be comfortable. Every jagged edge was sharp, ready to prick, cut, or even skewer the unwary. Every King had sat there, not a one at their ease, as it was designed so by Aegon the First. There were persistent rumors throughout the lands that it had even killed a few people over the years.

Ranma stared at the thing for a moment as he and his father entered, dressed in dark leather pants and jerkins dyed Winterfell black and gray, under which they wore short-sleeved cotton shirts. Their cloaks were lined with wolves' fur and clasped on one shoulder with pins shaped like a direwolf's head, with Ranma's holding a small sapphire for an eye while Ned's held an equally small diamond. Unlike the well cared for and coifed hair that was the norm for men here, Ned's hair was shaggy and unkempt, as was his short beard. While Ranma's face bore no beard, his hair was tied in the Dothraki fashion as, normal.

With their dark clothing, hairstyles, and northern, weathered looks they stood out like stones in a field of flowers but neither cared. Nor did the two men-at-arms, who were also knights, who were watching Ned's back even here. Their clothing was much the same as the Starks', though more worn and without the cloaks.

Ser Jory and the other man followed Ranma's father as he moved over to the King's table, clasping his friend's hand warmly before sitting down at Robert's right side, Cersei sitting on Robert's left.

Ranma tried to move over towards the children's end of the table, causing much twittering and laughter as he deliberately made it look as if he was trying to sneak along. A harrumph from his father called him sharply to task. He sighed and moved over to him. Still, the moment of levity was what Ranma had been searching for and he watched



carefully who smiled and how, as he and Brynden had talked about earlier. The answer, alas, did not give him much information, since he couldn't tell if any one person of the people not smiling was looking around to take their cue from anyone else. *Should've known that wouldn't work. Ah well.*

He sat next to his father and the feast began moments later. The man on his other side turned to him, introducing himself. He was a short, slender man, with sharp yet handsome features punctuated by a small pointed beard. "Petyr Baelish, master of coin at your service. So, you would be the lovely Catelyn's firstborn? Surprising, that only your eyes would tell of it. Most especially seeing as your younger sister looks so much like Catelyn did in her youth."

Ranma shrugged. "We do have a bit of a mix among us children. Sansa is my mother to the light, almost, while I take after my father save for my eyes as you pointed out, ser. Arya is pure Stark in appearance, even more than I. Brandon and Rickon are more of a mix of the two. Rickon has mother's eyes and face and father's hair, and Brandon has her hair and eyes but father's face."

"I understand you have a half-brother, a bastard-born that you were raised with? That must've been trying on Cat. In fact, I can't imagine her putting up with it at all."

Ranma was immediately on his guard, knowing that any question about Jon was one he had to tread lightly around. "I think that she got over it. I believe that Jon's devotion to both me and my siblings was a definite mark in his favor, as were the many times he kept me out of trouble in my youth." He swiftly changed the subject to one such example and moved on to asking questions about the man's own youth and his duties as master of coin, while studying him intensely.

Petyr came off as affable, intelligent, and poised but the real story was his eyes, which sometimes flitted around the room, searching and assessing. His hands, too, were similarly very mobile as he spoke, playing with a small coin or stilling very briefly as his eyes caught something. Whatever his loyalties, Petyr seemed dangerously bright as well as observant. Ranma vowed to watch his words very carefully around this man.

For his part, Petyr was watching both Starks intensely. He was a little surprised by Ranma's apparent sense of humor and outgoing nature but not overmuch, since he had been briefed by his agents among the servants the King had taken north with him. The boy was a simpleton, unknowing of the cesspool he was entering.

On the other hand, the fact that Brynden was here and he was already down in the city apparently talking to old acquaintances was troubling. Petyr knew the Blackfish of old and he was one of the most perceptive men he had ever met.

So too was the fact that thirty men-at-arms and five belted knights sworn to House Tully had arrived weeks ago. They had shown no sign of leaving the city, despite there not being any reason for them to be here at all. The most one of his factors in the city could get out of one of them was that they were here to meet their Lord's kinsman, which was a surprise and an irritating move.

He hadn't yet had the opportunity to meet with his ally Varys to hear what had occurred in the North and, like Varys, Petyr's own spies were very thinly spread in that area with most of them in the small trading post on the southern side of the Neck and in White Harbor. His main contact had been Roose Bolton but his death over a decade ago had silenced that avenue.

Unbeknownst to any, above and beyond personal self-interest, Petyr was also motivated by hatred for all things Stark. He had hated the Starks ever since Brandon had beaten him in a duel for Catelyn's hand. His hatred had solidified further when Lady Catelyn didn't return his affections, not even responding to the one letter he sent her after Brandon's death, hoping that she would consent to marry him now that Brandon was no longer in the way. At the time, Petyr hadn't had much influence but he felt certain that if Catelyn had tried to get out of marrying Brandon's younger brother Ned, she could have.

Instead, she chose to honor the deal made between the Tullys and the Starks but Petyr refused to think that she was happy in such a cold place with such a cold man. Hearing of her children made him ache inside and his hate for all things Stark renewed with each passing word. *It should have been me who she married, my children she should have given birth to, not wolf pups! Though young Sansa, she truly is the image of Cat when she was younger...* Neither this nor his burning hatred for all things Stark showed on his face, however.

Their discussion went on for over an hour, neither telling the other anything important while the meal went on. Soon the King signaled the servants, who began to play some music for dancing. Ranma stood up quickly at that and Petyr moved with him, leaning in closely so that his voice was covered by the cacophony of the crowd and the musicians. "There is something you must know, something that Jon Arryn was searching for. There is a particular book in his

library that he was looking at."

This hint would not do what he wished since Ranma was already prepared to distrust him. He had gotten the full tale of what had happened between Brandon and Petyr in their youth from Brynden and Ned. Moreover, the questions about his family and the one or two about Jon had put him on his guard further. There was also just something about Petyr's constantly probing eyes that set his hackles on end and he resolved to keep him at arms-length. "I will pass that on to my father. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Petyr was left there as Ranma moved over to Myrcella, bowing grandly to the young girl and holding out his hand. "May I have this dance, fair lady?" Myrcella blushed rosily, looking over wildly at Sansa and then her mother, who nodded her head imperceptibly. If there was one man in this entire room that she could trust not to get familiar with her daughter, outside Jaime, Robert, or Sir Oakheart, it was Ranma. Robert laughed as Ranma took Myrcella on a wild spin around the Great Hall, forcing out a whoop of glee as they sped out onto the dance floor between the tables, smirking at Sansa who was dancing with Joffrey much more sedately.

After one such dance, Ranma came back and showed Tommen how to dance with his older sister, then stood on the sidelines laughing as he watched the two move around the floor. Around him, the courtiers smiled and chuckled in a rather forced manner. Despite this, Ranma was watching Petyr and Varys out of the corner of his eyes. He was also watching the Queen and a few courtiers who looked particularly arrogant.

As Ranma spent time with the two younger two Royal children, Varys stood in the background near the Queen. He was still wondering what game the queen was playing, though he had long since come to the conclusion that the Baratheon regime was not in the best interests of the kingdom as a whole, hence why he had agreed to aid Petyr in some of his ambitions. They would weaken the kingdom in the short term, but allow a stronger family, a better royal line to take the throne. With his aid in securing the throne, something he would be well paid for, of course.

Robert had also taken to the floor, dancing some kind of raucous jig with a fat priest dressed in red, laughing all the while. The King was loud and boisterous, seemingly filling the hall with his personality, yet for some reason Ranma felt he didn't quite fit here.

The Queen however was much more at home, as was Renly. The younger Baratheon brother was in one corner surrounded by courtiers as well as several ladies, both married and not, who were laughing at something he had said, while Ser Loras danced with some lady or another from the Crownlands. Cersei was holding forth elsewhere with her brother nearby, though what she was saying Ranma couldn't tell. There were more people around her than either of the Baratheon brothers, all of whom were listening intently, man and woman.

This was a warning that Ranma had to take to heart. They had arrived on her playing field and were now away from his. He could no longer react to verbal threats as he normally would without risking making more enemies for his family than they already had. He would have to be constrained by the local rules, at least for a time.

Ranma danced with many ladies that evening, all of whom became somewhat attracted to the young man whose handsome features were dominated by the deepest blue eyes any of them had seen and who moved like a trained dancer on the floor. Many of them tried to convince him to follow them out of the hall to a dark corner or a patch of the lawn away from all the noise. All these attempts failed and Ranma kept dancing on and off, always making time for Myrcella. He danced with his sister just once, though their dancing was stilted and distant, much like their conversations these days. Unbeknownst to Ranma, his continued dancing with the Princess only served to solidify her crush on him.

The Stark heir had his mind on other things nor was he the type to enjoy casual dalliances. *Besides*, Ranma thought sardonically as he once again rebuffed an offer to escort a lady back to her chambers with simple excuse of having to stay and watch his sister, something that made the ladies all pout outrageously despite their varied ages, yet in reluctant agreement. *After sleeping with the she-bear, I might break some of these southern waifs accidentally*. Many things could be said about Dacey but fragile and docile were not among them and their lovemaking always tended to be rather **intense** in nature, at least in part.

Despite his self-control, Ranma was feeling the lack of companionship, especially with Cersei's flirtations on the trip here but he wasn't about to have a one night stand would with anyone in this city, not even the whores. *I like sleeping with someone who I don't have to watch my back or words with, thank you*.

"I understand, Ranma Stark, that you wish to journey to the perfumers Street?"

Ranma turned and nodded his head at Renly. Renly had snuck up on him somewhat, but there's didn't seem to be any evil intent in it, especially considering how confused his hearing was from the crowds. "I do indeed, Lord. The

smell of the city is rather overpowering and even in here, it is faint but still discernible. I'm also afraid that the smell will eat away at Fenris's self-control, even here in the keep, which would not be good." A mild understatement, considering Fenris had begun to exhibit some measure of ki-enhanced strength.

"In that case, you may travel down into the city with Loras and me tomorrow. The batch of perfume he brought from home is giving out."

Ranma nodded his head, then looked over to where his father was signaling him. After making his excuses to Renly, Ranma moved in that direction. Once his son was standing in front of him, Eddard said quietly. "It is time we made our apologies and withdrew. I was given the key to Jon's study by Petyr and I want to see what is in there."

Internally, Ranma cursed. He had been on the lookout most of the night but it appeared that Petyr and his father had talked without him being in a position to overhear. The man was good at sneaking around, something Ranma would have to bear in mind. "I'm all for leaving father but remember what Brynden said, we can't trust anyone here. When we get there, let me open the door just in case there's a spring trap or something."

"I'm not as old or feeble as all that," Ned responded dryly, but he nodded nonetheless and clapped his son on the shoulder. The two of them escorted Sansa to her quarters, the younger girl being somewhat tipsy and unable to coherently argue against leaving the party so soon. The good food, the wine, and the atmosphere had all been exactly as she had dreamed it would be, aided by the fact that she was allowed to drink without adult supervision nearby for the first time. Dancing with Joffrey, the elegant Renly, the handsome Loras, and several others had been utterly divine and every time she turned around a servant had been there holding a tray of drinks.

Ned put his daughter to bed motioning Jeyne forward from where she sat on her own bed to help Sansa undress. He smirked as Lady took one sniff of her mistress' breathe and whined, moving away slightly. "Take care of her, Jeyne, Sansa seems to have had a bit too much to drink. I'll inform the staff to have a hangover cure ready, just in case." Jeyne nodded, a little miffed her father had forced her to stay in the Tower that evening.

Eddard nodded back then exited Sansa's room, heading down with Ranma, who had opened the door to his room to let out Fenris. With the direwolf following them, Ned and Ranma made their way down to the locked door of the Hand's office. Despite Ranma's concern, there was no sudden trap to assault them when they opened the door, and Ranma and his father entered the study looking around.

The room was very well organized. It had scrolls and a few books of law, taxes, and other things on one side with a smaller group of books in a single shelf embedded into the opposite wall for pleasure reading. There were a few comfortable looking chairs, one of which was set by the window with a small table next to it, a book set there already. Two more chairs were set against the wall by the smaller bookcase with a small table between them, with what looked like a snuff box. In the center of the room was a desk, with two not very comfortable looking chairs in front of it and a much more comfortable looking chair on the other side facing the doorway, but this was clearly a business area, unlike the small sitting areas by the window or the book case.

Ranma moved around, lighting the candles in the corners, which gave the room an even homier feel.

"Just as I last saw it. Jon Arryn was more of a homebody than he would have liked people to think, very much enjoying any chance to mix leisure with business." Eddard murmured, moving in to the center of the room looking around with a faint smile. Fenris passed him, moving toward the back of the room.

There were a few scrolls open on the desk and Eddard advanced to look at them. He then spoke aloud to Ranma, while Ranma moved around, studying the law books on the wall. "This one is about a new taxation proposed on the ports, raising docking and unloading fees in every port of Westeros. It's been signed and ratified, though Jon seems to be wondering about the wording of certain parts, given some of the notes in the margins. Interesting but not very important. Another bit of business, a note from someone in the city named Alayaya? Sounds like a Summer Island name. About another brothel near her mother's changing hands to Petyr..."

The two Starks shared a glance, shaking their heads irritably. They knew the necessity of such places but the fact that there were dozens in Kings Landing was rather disgusting to them. Most especially, since they both knew that the madams of this city probably did not take nearly as good a care of their 'tags' as they should nor were they picky about their ages, something that in the North was anathema. Children of both genders should not be treated so and in the North, if a madam or brothel owner employed a 'tag' younger than thirteen, they would be either jailed, sent naked out into the wilds. Or, if male, sent to the Wall.

"Hmm, nothing else interesting, though there is a message about wanting to talk to a few merchant contacts to get their impression of the Crownlands economy. He also wanted to look into the balance of trade with Essos, specifically

the cities of Braavos and Pentos. The bit about Braavos seems to be much older than the Pentos addition, since the ink looks very faded. Nothing of interest at present." With that Eddard moved on, while Ranma crouched down to look at the desk from underneath, searching for anything hidden or odd little sections.

Ned had moved to the small reading area underneath the window. He reached forward for the small book that was sitting on the desk there but Fenris quickly got between the older man and the desk, growling. "Ranma," Ned said, slowly backing away from the wolf who probably weighed more than he did now, "your wolf is growling at me."

Ranma closed his eyes even as he came out from underneath the desk, reaching into his connection with Fenris. Fenris tried to share what he smelled that had his hackles on end, but Ranma couldn't make head or tails out of his sense of smell. There were just **so many** nuances of smell that the human brain just could not handle. Fenris and Ranma worked together for a moment, and finally Ranma was able to get, *Danger, bad, no eat*, from his wolf. "Something about the book bothers him father, hold on a second."

Ranma stood up swiftly, moving to the nearest candle, taking it, and then leaning over the book. He frowned, seeing a thin coat of something. "There is something smeared on this, some kind of oily stuff."

"Poison." Ned nodded grimly. "I've heard of poisons that can be administered by touch. Well that proves it, someone did kill Jon Arryn. Wait here a moment." He left, coming back quickly with a thin pair of female riding gloves, pulled taut over his much larger hands. With these on, he turned the book over to look at the cover. "'The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms', by Maester Malleon? Why would this be important?"

"I don't know, father, but that book is evidence. We need to put it someplace safe, after we somehow clean it of poison."

Ned nodded, fighting with himself the desire to read the book right then. After all, they didn't know how deadly the poison was and he wasn't about to take the chance. "I will find a place to hide it, but you're right, it is a very important piece of evidence."

"Should we go to the King with this? Poison on the book means Jon was killed. It could be part of a larger attack on the King or country." Ranma asked.

After a moment, Ned shook his head. "No. There is little chance of this being part of a foreign plot or anything of that nature. None of the Free Cities have the strength to take Westeros on unless they unite, which even we would have heard about up in the North. Nor do I think this was the start of an internal attack on the King. If it was, they would have moved against Robert immediately after Jon's death, when he was weakest. Or even somewhere on the road to and from Winterfell."

"No, this is simply a deadlier version of court politics. We have no idea who did this and, until we do, we cannot make accusations or in any other way tip our hand. It could be the people who would normally take over the investigation into such a death. We were warned by Brynden not to trust anyone and what I've seen so far proves we shouldn't trust Janos Slynt or Varys, the two people who are the most likely to take over the enquiry."

Ranma nodded approvingly and the two left the room. Ned headed to his own room intent on hiding the book then removing his gloves, only one of which had touched the book, before disposing of them down the tower's garderobe. Ranma, however, exited the tower and headed to the godswood. Fenris eagerly bounded down the stairs behind him, interested in what they would find in the woods here that were small and edible.

Almost immediately, Ranma realized the godswood here was much more controlled and trimmed than any real godswood should be. The godswood at home was made of densely grown oak, pine, and other trees, with leaves on the ground everywhere there wasn't snow, the air smelling of pine, loam, and snow. Here, the trees were spread out, with actual paved paths on the outskirts of the wood. Deeper in it was slightly better, thankfully, and it looked as if the touch of man tapered off.

He found the heartwood in the center of the woods. It was an oak tree rather than a weirwood tree, which struck him as really odd, but this was the first godswood he had been able to stop at since that time he found one in the Neck after rescuing Meera. He had hoped to stop at the Isle of Faces but they hadn't actually come close enough for him to head there and back in a day. At the moment, Ranma simply wanted to take a moment to reflect.

He was soon joined by his father, who sat down in the loam beside him, sitting there silently contemplating the face on the heartwood. It was a moment of silence, or familial understanding, far from home. A moment of peace to give them strength in this new, strange world. After a few moments, Ned left to send a message to Winterfell, telling his beloved wife and family they had arrived safely, as well as take care of a few other items, leaving Ranma there alone

with his thoughts

OOOOOOO

Tommen had spent the evening with Myrcella having a sleepover in her room. He woke up in a giddy mood, hoping to run over to where Ranma was to find him and see if he would be willing to continue their training even if they had arrived in Kings Landing. He didn't want to ask Ser Aron Santagar, the master-of-arms of the keep, because the man didn't have much time or patience for children. He didn't even like training Joffrey and only trained Tommen when Robert insisted.

Leaving Myrcella still sleeping in her bed, he left her room to head back over to his own. Tommen opened the door to his room and moved inside, frowning as he noticed that the cage which had held his pet song bird was empty. It had been a gift from a courtier, in hopes of currying favor with his mother. It hadn't worked as well as the man thought but it had still been a nice present and Tommen liked animals. He had a pet kitten at one point but it had wandered off when he was young and never returned.

He looked inside the cage and his frowned deepened at all the blood all around it. Someone had killed it or maybe a cat had gotten in? But then how had the cat gotten through the bars? He looked around, still frowning, at which point he spotted it on his bed, deliberately tucked between the covers and the pillow. The bird's feathers had been plucked and its body opened from beak to naval, letting out all its intestines.

Tommen's teeth clenched on the need to scream but this wasn't a scream of terror or, at least, not entirely. It was a scream of rage that Tommen pushed back down. He shook his head angrily, wondering who had done this, but then moved over to the bin he used for his soiled clothing, pulling out a shirt he had worn on the trip to exercise in. With it, he calmly wrapped the bird up, moving out of the door to the dispose of it elsewhere. *I won't give whoever did this the satisfaction of seeing me cry but I won't forget, either!*

His father was just coming out of his room, all ready to head out on the hunt, but stopped when he saw his youngest holding something, something which was staining the shirt containing it red. "What do you have there, boy?" Robert frowned, hoping that his youngest son wasn't following his oldest brother's footsteps.

"Someone killed my songbird, father."

The anger in the boy's voice calmed Robert's initial worries. "Oh, what do you intend to do about it then?" This was yet another way that Robert was feeling out his youngest, wanting to make certain that the changes that Ranma had wrought in the boy were real changes rather than momentary ones based off his wanting approval or attention.

"I'm going to try and find out who, father, and then, then I'm going to make them pay." Tommen growled.

Robert guffawed, clapping the youth on his shoulders staggering the little boy almost off his feet despite having held back. "That's my boy. Toss it out for now, you can hunt for clues later. Let's go get some breakfast, then I think we should see if we can rustle up enough men to go hunting, after I give the small council its marching orders, of course!"

Tommen gaped up at him. This was the first time Robert had invited any of his children on a hunt with him! The young boy nodded rapidly, then raced off to get rid of his songbird's body.

Nearby, hidden in an alcove by a window, Joffrey saw all this and ground his teeth together in fury.

OOOOOOO

Ranma woke up that morning; spent time with his family then at around midmorning went out to meet Loras and Renly for their trip into the city. They were dressed simply, with none of the court finery they had worn the evening before, but still in good elegant clothing in silk with velvet cloaks and doublets, though both men also wore swords at their sides. Ranma wore his dark leather pants, though he had forborne the cloak and wore a simple short-sleeved jerkin with his belt buckle of the direwolf's head to denote his family.

Of the three, he was the only one unarmed. They were soon joined by Brynden, who told them he had business down by the docks. The quartet of men descended into the city together but Brynden soon broke off, leaving the three men to head towards the perfumers street.

Soon enough, they were there. Ranma browsed around until he found a perfume that smelled of pine wood and needles. It reminded him of the smell of home, and he bought six small glass vials of it. He was astonished at the price of them, each one costing at least twice what they would be at home, and that with the need to transport them

up from White Harbor. He asked about it, and the man shrugged. "Supply and demand, master. All the highborn need perfumes to keep the smell of the city at bay."

Ranma grunted, irritated at the amount but still having no idea how to really propose a sewer system. Nor did he have any desire to stay in the city long enough to see it through.

"Such is the price we must all pay to keep our senses working." Renly quipped, and the trio turned for home. Ranma and Ser Loras were already talking about setting up a spar later that day. Renly was looking forward to it, though not just because it would be an interesting match.

Renly was interested in Ranma; he wanted to figure out if the young man had... the same tastes as he and Loras. The night before was inconclusive in proving that one way or the other. He could simply be a Stark, they were normally a stuffy sort, not given to much in the way of humor, though Ranma was more open than most. But perhaps he was simply more closed off about physical affection? Renly didn't know and wondered. Regardless of that, watching the two young men exercise would be stimulating.

They were hailed as they walked along by Brynden, moving through the crowds around them, followed by thirty men who were moving in a bunch, led in turn by five men in full armor. "Cousin," Brynden said, reaching out and clasping his nephew's arm, "these men are from my brother. He sent them here to meet with you and get to know you. He wants to see what kind of man his daughter's son is."

Ranma nodded cordially at the other men and fell into step with them, talking about the trip down and asking questions about Riverrun, which Ser Desmond Grell answered. He was built much like Ser Rodrick, save for the fact he had a slightly larger belly. Despite this, his arms were thick, his dark brown eyes sharp.

Loras and Renly exchanged a glance, wondering what this was about. They had yet to hear what had happened up Winterfell and had no hint yet that Jon Arryn's death had been anything but natural.

On the other hand, Ranma was well pleased with both the men and the fact this gave them eighty five swords inside the Red Keep or would once he got the men situated in the barracks in the Tower. He and his father were going to meet with Ser Jory later that day to relay to him that the former Hand had indeed been murdered. While he couldn't share that with anyone else, they wanted the men on guard to be ready for anything, so thirty more men-at-arms plus five more knights would be a good addition to their forces.

Beyond there being a possible threat against the Lady Catelyn and the family she had married into, the men from Riverrun were interested in Ranma. After all, whatever his status as a Stark, he was also part Tully. With Brynden out of the succession, that left Edmure the only heir available after Hoster died. He was a good sort but rather arrogant and headstrong and, it was felt, not a good leader. A few hoped that the idea of Hoster passing over him in line of succession would liven up Edmure's ideas, though it was doubtful if such was politically possible. The idea of a single person being heir to both the North and the Riverlands would not sit well with any of the other high lords. Still, they were here to learn about Ranma Stark, oldest of the Lady Catelyn's children, which to them, was much more important than his actual last name.

They were back at the Castle soon enough. Immediately, Ranma turned to Loras. "Seeing as these men are here to meet and see me in action, perhaps we can have our little spar now, hmm?"

Loras smirked, one hand curling at his side as if it was holding a sword hilt. "I'll just go get changed and be right back."

The men from Riverrun grinned at one another. This was indeed something they were interested in, whether or not Ranma's skill matched with the tales that had come south on the wings of bard song. Of course, skill in battle was only part of what they were here to find out. They wanted to know Ranma the man, not just the warrior. But it was a good starting point.

About twenty minutes later, Ranma and Loras faced one another across a training area outside the Tower of the Hand. It was a smaller area than Winterfell's, much smaller, in fact, with room only for about six people to exercise at a time but there was room around the separating wall for watchers, which was now crowded.

Ned had joined them, wondering if Loras was as good as the tales told of him, not having seen the young man in action before and also wanting to talk to the men from Riverrun as soon as he could. He had met Ser Desmond before and knew the man to be honorable as well as close-mouthed, which would prove just as important.

For now, Eddard set that aside to officiate the match. "No crippling blows, no blows to the face at all, and when I say

stop, you will separate from one another. Understood?" Both fighters nodded and, at Lord Stark's signal, the match began.

Loras took the initiative, darting forward one foot extended before the other in a diagonal, almost like a fencer with a rapier would. Before Ned could move two steps, Loras was within sword range of Ranma, bringing his sword around in a swift, controlled arc.

Ranma responded just as quickly, using a sword borrowed from the armory here in the Red Keep. He blocked the blows easily, matching the older man's speed. He parried back quickly, nearly taking Loras in the chest with his practice blade, but Loras dodged backwards just enough for the blow to miss, returning a series of thrusts and cuts quickly.

Ranma dodged to one side, bringing his sword up again in a cut towards Loras' leg. Loras leaped backwards, frowning. Aiming for the leg and extremities like that was not something done in normal duels and it was rather frowned upon in most tourneys in the Reach as well. Still, it was a legitimate tactic during a battle and he resolved to practice against such in the future. Now, he rolled to the side as Ranma came in pushing his advantage, bringing his sword up to block Ranma's next blow, pushing back and thrusting but Ranma blocked that as well.

Their blades locked for the moment, the two young men struggled against one another. Loras was strong, much stronger than he appeared but that wasn't really saying much, especially when compared to Ranma. Ranma easily overpowered the man, throwing him back, almost forcing Loras to lose his balance.

He was still able to block the next series of blows as Ranma came on. The watching audience began to shout encouragement to one or the other fighter while the match escalated.

Ranma and Loras stood there blocking and parrying with their blades, neither moving from their spot for a moment, until Ranma decided to change it up a little. Instead of parrying a slash aimed at his chest, Ranma ducked under it at the last second. His free hand struck like a snake upwards, grabbing Loras' sword hand right behind his wrist. Ranma pulled Loras off balance, slamming his elbow into the man's stomach, and heaving him up with that same move, lifting him into the air and over Ranma's body without even a grunt of effort.

Loras landed and rolled, despite being surprised and slightly winded, flailing around with his sword trying to keep Ranma at a distance. It succeeded, for the moment, but before he could get to his feet, Ranma's leg lashed out in a kick that caught him in the shoulder, throwing him back and off balance, loosening his sword grip just enough for Ranma's blade to smash it out of his hand in the next second. Before he could move again, the tip of Ranma's blade was tickling his throat. "My win, I think, Ser Loras."

Loras grunted a little, raising his one hand to knead at where Ranma had kicked him. "You Northerners practice a much more full body contact sort of spar than I am used to." He looked up almost challengingly at the younger man. "Savor this victory, Ranma Stark. The next time we fight, I will be better prepared."

"I'm looking forward to it." Ranma grinned. The man was good, very good in terms of normal people, he supposed. Still, he estimated Loras was a little faster, yet nowhere near as precise or controlled as Jaime the Kingslayer.

He reached down and lifted Loras onto his feet. The audience began to clap, both for this sign of chivalry and for Ranma's victory. The men from Riverrun mingled with the men from Winterfell, hearing stories and listening to their conversation, while the first group began to exercise and train with Ranma. Loras and Renly waved off further exercise, leaving to head back to their quarters together, although they would both show up intermittently over the next few months to join the Winterfell and Riverrun men in their daily regimen.

OOOOOO

Later on that day, at his father's request, Ranma joined Eddard as one of his aides during the new Hand's first meeting with the small council, just to see how things work. He was not looking forward to the experience.

The meeting was held in the Queen's Ballroom, a small meeting hall in Maegor's Holdfast. It could seat a hundred comfortably, though today the main table sat eight. Beaten silver mirrors were set behind the wall sconces, allowing the torch's light to seem brighter than normal, aided in their task of lighting the hall by arched windows sitting high up on the south wall.

Ranma had previously met Varys, Renly, Petyr, Ser Barristan, and the Queen, who was there but didn't actually have a post on the small council. Stannis wasn't here, so that left only Grand Master Pycelle of the Citadel as the only one there Ranma hadn't met. He was an old man with a bald, spotted head, alleviated around the edge by a bit of lank

hair. His maester's chain stretched from neck to breast, obscured by a long, snowy beard that ran down his chest, well groomed but still somewhat unkempt due to its length.

The King actually sat in for once, simply because he wanted to state the purpose of the meeting, which he did the moment everyone was seated. "I want us to organize a tourney to celebrate Ned taking on the position of my Hand! We'll have it two months from now, and, of course, we'll need prizes for the larger events. Nothing gets the blood thumping than a chance for glory and coin!"

"How exactly are we going to pay for this?" Petyr asked coolly, his eyes on the King, yet flicking to Lord Stark, who sat beside Robert, and Ranma, who sat behind Eddard in the place reserved for aides. Each of the small council save the Queen and King had at least two of them. "We have no money in the treasury for such."

"Bah, will make it up somehow. I'm not going to let you and your coin pinchers spoil my fun, Baelish!" Robert laughed, pushing up out of his chair and making an exit, intent on doing as he always did, push the thinking onto other heads. "Now, I'm off. I got word from the hunt-master that there was a bear reported in the Kingswood!"

The small council rose and bowed to the King as he left, the door banging behind him. There was a moment of silence then Ned turned to Petyr as they all took their seats again. "You said there is no money in the treasury for this tourney he wants to have for my appointment as Hand, though personally I do not think my appointment deserves such. Still, he is the King, so we will have this tourney. But was that an exaggeration or do you really think we don't have enough money in the budget to pay for the tourney?"

Petyr smiled thinly, his flexible fingers (which gave him the nickname Littlefinger) pressing together in a triangle in front of his face. "Alas, it was not an overestimation. There is almost literally no money in the treasury."

"How is that possible?" Eddard asked sternly. "The Mad King left the treasury brimming with gold coin."

"As you know, my lord, the King did not call for taxes for five years after his Rebellion, the better to let the realm rebuild. During that time, we began to go into debt because the work took much in the way of ready coin, both here and the entirety of the Crownlands, with the addition that the King did much as he does now. His grace has gone through it all with his excesses and then some. We are in fact deeply in debt to the Iron Bank of Braavos and to Tywin Lannister for nearly a million dragons, each." Actually, Littlefinger knew they were in debt for much more than that but sharing that knowledge with anyone else would not suit his own plans. Not until the time was right.

Ranma's and Eddard's faces closed down, assuming the 'Stark mask' at that, causing a little shiver to go up even Petyr's spine. Their thoughts, however, were not on him, but on the problem at hand.

Winterfell was completely self-sufficient. House Stark wasn't nearly the richest noble house, but it had reserves of a hundred thousand gold dragons for emergencies, some of which the Starks spent recently to pay for the King's visit. That was money the family had been adding to every year in one form or another. Though it had been badly depleted during Robert's rebellion, it was made up later by their taxes, monies taken from ransomed lords during said rebellion, and their portion of the profit from selling food from their lands (and those of the minor lords who looked to them) to other noble or minor houses.

It was more complex than that, of course, but that was the gist of it. A hundred thousand gold dragons was seen as a lot of money, more money than Winterfell needed in times of peace, really, far more than any other great house in the north save the Manderlys could call on. To hear that the kingdom was in debt to the tune of **two million** dragons was disturbing to both northerners.

"My father will not care one way or the other about such debts between family." Cersei said coolly. She enjoyed hearing of Robert's shortcomings but this one could also be laid at her door as his Queen, so she had to speak up to offset some of it at least. "Our control of the gold mines in Westerlands makes that simple enough, though my father would probably force some concessions down the line. But the iron Bank is a different matter. I believe it was you, Littlefinger, who approached them to take out a loan?"

"Of course. I am the crown's servant and their interest rates were far lower than your father quoted to me the last time we exchanged ravens two years ago. Bottomless your mines might be but his largesse is not." Petyr replied coolly, easily deflecting the attack.

"And where precisely has this money gone?" Eddard spoke, his voice as cold and controlled as his face. "A few tourneys here or there, that cannot add up to millions in debt, unless we are not taking in money. I know for a fact my factors, at least, have paid taxes to the crown, as have every Northern Lord."



That was actually a big deal in the North. Yearly, the great houses would transport their taxes for that year down to Winterfell. The portion due to the Iron Throne would then be taken out and transported down to White Harbor where it would be taken by sea to Kings Landing.

Sometimes bandits or pirates attempted to attack these transports. Ranma, Jon, and Theon had actually gone down to White Harbor with the shipment many times and even been attacked once. It had been Theon's first taste of combat and the archer had performed very well, though he had thrown up after. Ranma could remember it vividly, as well as the Iron Born's rage at being seen doing so later.

"I assure you, my lord, that those returns are not as high as you would think. Paying the Gold Cloaks, paying for the King's men-at-arms who keep the Kingsroad clear of brigands, the huntsmen, the bailiffs that keep the peace on the road into the city as well as upkeep of said. Work on the Kingsroad is continual and very expensive, as is the upkeep of the fleet. In fact, the fleet is a **major** drain on our resources. If we could cut back there..."

"No." Eddard and Cersei spoke as one. Eddard nodded his head at the Queen and she went on. "No, we cannot afford to cut back on the fleet. The Iron Born are still far too independent, far too unwilling to bow to the Iron Throne. If they try to break away again, we'll need the fleet. That and piracy is always a threat to trade."

Petyr shrugged and moved on. "We are still repairing and rebuilding parts of the Crownlands despoiled in the Rebellion. In fact, even Kings Landing itself is still being rebuilt in many areas. The Crownlands doesn't make much money that isn't immediately channeled back to them. Dorne is remarkably stingy about paying any taxes at all, the Stormlands pay little taxes because they make so little money and have areas still recovering from the war. Much, as I hate to say it, does the North, since most of those monies make their way back north in the form of foodstuffs bought by the crown via long time agreements with the North."

That comment made Ranma and Ned exchange glances. They both knew precisely how much foodstuffs came back through White Harbor and up the Kingsroad, and it wasn't near as much as the taxes the North sent to the Iron Throne. Around half, perhaps, mostly to the Stony Shore, the Flints of Flint's Finger and House Karstark. House Stark had been cutting into that more and more in the past few years, so much so that outside of Flint's Finger and those smallfolk and houses minor which lived in the Stony Shore, they were building up a nice surplus, though admittedly some of that would be sent to the Wall with the forces gathering there.

Petyr didn't know what the two Northerners were thinking and continued. "The Reach, the Vale, the Westerlands, and the Riverlands alone cannot keep the kingdom out of debt when the King is set on his excesses. This tourney is not the first, in fact, he has thrown one every year at least since taking the throne. Nor is that his only excess, nor yours, Your Grace."

Petyr shrugged eloquently, smirking internally as he threw the blame back on the Queen. In actuality, the debt would be much smaller if it was just the royals being excessive. But Petyr had been funneling much of it into his own operations. He had covered his tracks so much, however, that it would take a troop of bankers years to work it out, and not a single banker or law-master in the city would help anyone he told them not to.

Before the Queen could explode on him, Varys spoke up. "It also must be said that my own... maneuvers cost much. Keeping my little birds happy, most especially the ones in Dorne and Essos, takes money and their return is not in coin but words and knowledge."

"That is understood, master of whispers," Ranma spoke up after a subtle nod from his father. "Yet, I would be curious to see if the knowledge they carry back to your ears is worth the money fed them. I think, also, that if we cannot meet the Crown's costs then either we need to cut said costs or think of ways to raise money. For example, this tourney is sure to pour money into the inns, bars, and, as much as I personally loath the practice, brothels. I think we can look to them to help pay us back for it more than a normal city-dweller. Perhaps a special incidental tax on them, to be paid after the tourney is over but to go on the books the moment it is announced?"

Petyr, who was a major brothel owner, blanched at that but Ranma went on undaunted. "Furthermore, taxes on the Kingsroad should pay for itself. I realize we already tax the wharves and ship-carried goods but I should think that any goods traversing the Kingsroad should also be taxed..."

From there Ranma tried to bring to mind his lessons from his father and maester Luwin as well as what little he could remember about taxes and other things from his former life. Many of his suggestions were shot down as unworkable but many of them were good and sensible. Ned, of course, took part in the discussion as well, speaking of how water travel could be taxed more heavily since it was so much cheaper for the user, something that made both Varys and Petyr wince internally, since they both owned several warehouses used by merchants and shipmasters both here and in other ports.

Renly, who was nearly silent throughout the entire meeting, spoke up about having House Baratheon pay for the tourney, defraying the cost further.

Eddard agreed to this then went on to the idea of cutting costs, looking at the Gold Cloaks and the upkeep of the Kingsroad, in particular, in terms of efficiency and graft. Cersei, surprisingly, had some good ideas in that area, such as turning the upkeep of the Kingsroad over to the great houses whose land it traversed, then fining them heavily for every incident that occurred on their land or if upkeep of the road fell behind.

The discussion went on for hours with Eddard taking the reins of the council easily, with Ranma interjecting as he could. Petyr, Cersei, and Pycelle took part in it wholeheartedly, while Barristan sat, merely observing throughout.

As the sun began to dip down in the sky beyond the windows, Ned finally called a halt. "I think that is as much headway as we can make today. Thank you, gentlemen and Your Grace, for your time. We've come up with a lot of good ideas today to turn this debt around. I will want to look over the books of law and taxes before we meet again. Lord Renly, I think the tower has copies of all the present law books but if any laws have been passed since the Rebellion, write their numbers out so I can find them."

"Petyr, if you could get me the ledgers for the years since the Rebellion by the end of the week, I would be grateful. Varys, I'll want to see your reports on the great Houses after that. If any of them haven't paid taxes, I want to make certain their reasons match up to reality. We will talk further on cutting costs to your web but for now we have more important things to do."

Varys winced at that comment while Petyr and Renly both nodded. Renly looked a little doubtful at his task, not having truly cared about the laws before this. But at Ned's grim expression, he realized he had some work to do.

Petyr, however, was confident. He had several sets of ledgers, both 'real' and not. Ned had surprised him by the force of his personality plus the knowledge he and his son had about taxes. While this was unexpected, he had buried his manipulations beyond literally dozens of layers of falsehoods, notes, and bankers' tricks, none of which could be linked to him but to his predecessor. He would come out looking like a hard working person trying to solve an insoluble issue while also keeping a demanding master happy; perhaps also someone who shouldn't be trusted but in politics that was the best any sane person would hope for.

With that Ned stood, bowing his head to the Queen as she left the room first. She looked at father and son as they came out, staring hard at them before nodding her head gravely and moving on. Ranma and his father exchanged a glance at that, wondering what she had been trying to say with that nod, but shrugged it off for now.

The two Starks were silent as they walked back to the tower of the Hand, remaining so until they were alone in the family suites at the top of the tower. "You do know that he lied, right, father?" Ranma asked.

"Perhaps Petyr lied or perhaps he is merely trying to stem the flow of blood from an already gaping wound. Remember, he has only been master of coin for four years now. This debt could have been building up long before that. Yet, if every realm is paying taxes, even as 'low' as the North does, there is no way the kingdom could be in debt, despite all of its ongoing expenditures and the King's excesses, unless the money isn't being used well. Dangerously low on ready funds, perhaps, but..." Eddard shrugged grimly. "I will have to look at the books to be certain, of course, but someone is definitely at fault here. Whether it is tied to Jon Arryn's death or not, I do not know."

Ranma nodded. "Makes me wish we brought maester Luwin along." Beyond his passion for the occult and supernatural tales, Luwin was a wizard with numbers, while Ranma and Eddard were only fair. Jon was better than Ranma but not up to Luwin's ability.

His father barked a laugh but went on more seriously. "The Blackfish is busy making contacts in the city. I think we need to wait and see what develops there, with the ledgers, and with my investigation for now. I won't ask you to sit in on further meetings, my son, so until I find something or your prospective fiancé arrives, you'll be at loose ends. I trust you'll keep yourself busy, perhaps a bit of exploration?"

"Oh, have no fear of that, father." Ranma replied, smirking slightly. With what he had shared with his father about his abilities, that line could mean anything and basically meant Ranma could do whatever he liked so long as he didn't make a fool of himself. "I'll find something to occupy my time."

For the rest of the evening, Ranma explored the Red Keep, finding some things of interest and some oddities, including what might be part of an escape route out onto the cliffs overlooking the sea that backed the Red Keep. Ranma marked that in his mind, stopped exploring, and went to bathe and get ready for dinner.

That night, after yet another feast with the King (thankfully it wasn't a ball), Ranma took Fenris out to the godswood. The large direwolf had responded poorly, at first, to having perfume dabbed on his nose but after a bit realized it really helped block out the smell of the city. Lady had seemingly liked it a little since Sansa used the same perfume that she wore. Thankfully, it didn't impair their sense of smell entirely.

Once Ranma got across the order to not leave the godswood, Fenris happily went off in search of anything small and edible. He had eaten earlier but meat given on a plate never tasted as good as meat he personally took. To Fenris at least, Lady never turned down being waited on hand and foot. She was becoming more and more domesticated with every week.

Ranma wished his wolf good hunting, then wrapped himself in the Silent Thief technique, turning invisible to all. With that, he jumped onto the small wall between the back of the godswood and the Blackwater, then out over the river to land on the other side. Even for him, that was a hell of a leap, one he barely made, but it served his purpose to get him out into the city, though on landing his attention wavered on the technique for a moment as he fought for a foothold on the heavily sloped roof.

"Ere, what's 'at? Anyone 'ear somethin' just den?" An oafish voice sounded below the roof of the house he had landed on.

"Yer hearin' things Marl, I don't see nothin'." Another voice sounded, one heavy with drink or something else that slurred his words badly. Ranma grinned then jumped to the next roof, once again wrapped in the Umi-Sen-Ken as he took to the skyline of the city, leaving the two arguers behind.

This gave him a birds-eye view of the goings on of the city, which was a mixed blessing at best. He saw at least three murders in the lower ends of town, all by groups of men. He was tempted to step in but the men killed had all been armed themselves so didn't. He did however throw bricks taken from the rooftops at several would-be thieves and at one man who seemed about to buy a young girl from her parents. Why the parents were going to sell her, Ranma had no idea but he had to stop himself from doing more to help her. At least they would have the bag of money the man had on him. He waited there for a moment as the parents grabbed the money, the girl, and then ran off before he moved on.

That first evening, Ranma didn't see anything unusual or strange that could tie into Jon Arryn's death, the Lannisters spreading their influence, or anything else. What he did see however, was a few Gold Cloaks taking money from shop owners. *So, the Gold Cloaks are a protection racket more than a true city watch? Lovely.* Later, he would learn that Janos Slynt was as corrupt as Blackfish had first told them but Robert kept him on, fearing his replacement would be worse. This would mark a small argument between him and Ned but nothing would come of it just yet.

For now, Ranma would spend the next few evenings getting to know the layout and feel of the city, a task he did not in any way enjoy for many reasons, not least of which was his sense of honor forcing him to step in occasionally. Over the next week his acts, unseen by all, spawned an urban legend of the Rock-Hurler, defender of the downtrodden, women, and 'justice', though, thankfully, none of it was linked back to him.

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"Come now, my sweet, wouldn't this be the ultimate thrill? You know you like the idea of using that big padded chair of his for a better purpose than merely a home for his ass for hours on end." Domic's voice was like honey and wine, enticing and enflaming.

The maid who he thus addressed was a young thing named Varyth, only two years older than Daenerys herself, but for all that, she was far worldlier than the Targaryen princess. She was also very sexual and knew how to use it. She enjoyed the thrill of coupling in interesting ways and places, the thrill of possibly being caught stirring her juices like nothing else. That was why Domic had chosen her for this particular 'dalliance'.

"I don't know," she said coquettishly, blushing and looking away in a fetching manner. "What if master Illyrio wakes up and hears us?"

Domic sighed and put his hands around her, pulling her against him as his hands began to work at the ties of her bodice. "Playing hard to get are we? I thought you were the one who likes the thrill of exposure?" If not I suppose I could always go see Sieganta."

That older maid was actually the only one on the household staff that Domic felt was Varyth's equal in her zeal to try new things and places. He pulled away as if to go see the other woman right now.

He stopped as her hands grabbed his and she pulled away slightly, pulling him behind her towards the doorway they had been talking in front of. "Fine, but let's do this quick."

"Of course." Domicer murmured, already kissing the back of her neck while one hand fondled her rump even as he opened the door, closing it quickly as they stumbled into the room. The moment he did, he felt her hands on his breeches as she turned in his arms, kissing him hard and pulling him forward by his belt buckle, moving through the magister's study.

Three walls were lined with shelves containing books, scrolls, and a few dozen very expensive looking nick-knacks. The far wall was filled with floor to ceiling glass windows, which allowed the moonlight to light their amorous activities. That was pretty damn expensive Domicer well knew but what interested him was the large desk and the door leading into Illyrio's bedroom.

For his paramour, however, the large comfortable looking seat that the magister used on the other side of his desk was much more interesting. Soon enough, Varyth was gasping and moaning as Domicer pounded into her while she sat there, his face buried in her hair by her neck, although he had moved them around slightly so that he could watch the door to the bedroom. As a bard, he was very good at multitasking.

The girl climaxed twice before Domicer finally came, eliciting a gurgle of pleasure as she felt him eject deep inside her. For a moment, they murmured sweet nothings to one another, then he pulled out of her, causing a whine of protest but the girl straightened up quickly.

He smiled at her, patting one of her naked thighs. "You should get yourself cleaned up and get back to the others. Mistress Wendyll will be searching for you." Mistress Wendyll was the head of the household here and ran a very tight ship indeed, although that had not stopped Domicer from cutting a wide swathe through her younger workers. "You wouldn't want her to find us together, especially here, would you?"

He pulled up his breeches and reached into a pocket, pulling out a handkerchief. With that, he began to clean the seat as soon as she stood up and smiled at her. "I'll clean up here, you go on."

Varyth giggled at him and sashayed to the door, doing up her bodice. "The next time you want a quick roll, come find me. As long as you're willing to pay for the moon tea, I'll be fine with **anything**."

Domicer smirked at her and waved as she closed the door, then quickly turned and got to work. First, he took out a small rectangle covered by cloth, which upon unwrapping showed itself to be a small block of clay. Taking out a small bottle of water, he wet the clay, getting it read to be molded, then flattened it to the size of his hand. He carefully placed it in a pocket then moved towards the doorway leading to the magister's sleeping area, pulling it open gently on oiled hinges. He knew they were, because he had been in here three days ago to make sure.

The moment Domicer opened the door, he heard the snoring of at least three people, causing him to smile. The fat man liked to sleep with at least two of his sex slaves but the spiced wine Domicer had plied him and his two chosen doxies of the evening with seemed to be doing its work. The trio would be out of it all night, which would let Domicer do his work.

He moved stealthily towards the huge bed, shaking his head at the opulence of the room as well as the garish colors used, only visible thanks to the moonlight at present. Thankfully, too, the covers were pulled up, else Domicer would have had to remove his eyeballs later.

Moving closer, Domicer saw a glint of gold around the fat man's neck lying on the pillow next to him, between his head and one of his doxies. Slowly and quietly, Domicer reached across the woman to gently lift up the key lying there. With his free hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out the rectangle of clay, applying it to one side of the key, folding it over the key, setting a bit of silk along the edges to keep the clay from forming entirely around it. He held it there for several nervous moments as the clay slowly solidified, before bending the new mold and removing it quickly. He made certain to touch the key again, making certain the clay didn't leave any residue. It had, but only by the handle, thankfully, and he removed it with quick, dexterous finger nails.

After that was done, he quickly left the room. Domicer waited inside the study by the door for a moment as he tried to discern if anyone was walking the corridor outside. Not hearing anyone, he quickly slipped out into the hallway, closing the door behind him just as quietly as he had the one to the bedroom, before making his way towards nearest window. Unlike the windows in the study or in the bedchamber, this one didn't have glass, the magister not seeing any reason to waste that kind of money on any area of his household beyond his personal rooms and the dining Hall. He looked outside for a moment, making certain no one was around, then leaped out, landing lightly on his feet a story below. He then made his way into the connected kitchens, to finagle the kitchen helpers out of some food,

determined to act as normally as possible.

The next day, Dominic headed out into the city, his balalaika on his back. The reason he had given the magister that morning was that he wanted to see what he could find out about any news from Westeros on his own. "Sometimes bards will tell one another things we won't tell anyone else." he said quietly, so as to not bother the magister's headache or draw Viserys' attention from where he sat at the other end of the table.

Daenerys wasn't with them, since neither her ribs nor the injuries to her face had healed. Domicer estimated another month before she was fit to be seen in public, whereupon she would probably be swiftly married off to this Dothraki Khal, Drogo.

For a time, Domicer did as he had told the magister he would, contacting a few other bards in the city and exchanging news with them. He learned that Eddard Stark had been made the Hand over the strenuous objections of the Lannister Queen and her supporters. Domicer felt this was a good move in some ways, horrible in others. Eddard was an excellent organizer, manager, and leader. What he wasn't was a politician or even a good dissembler. *This could be very bad for the Starks. They don't play the game of thrones as the south does.*

*On the other hand, Ranma went with him to meet Margaery Tyrell, which in itself is curious. As a Tyrell, I have no doubt she is politically savvy and ambitious plus with him there if it becomes a physical contest it will go... poorly for their opponents. I have no doubt he has only become better since he was younger.* For a moment, as he strode down the sunny, noisy street, he was once more back in his father's dungeons, blood splashing on the walls around him, watching in awe and not a little fear as a boy of twelve smashed his way through experienced men at arms, a wild snarl on his lips. *Better to be part of the pack than its prey...*

Other than that, he found a few interesting nuggets of information, mostly about a strange Red Witch that had been seen on Dragonstone and rumblings of something going on between the Iron Throne of Westeros and the Iron Bank of Braavos. That, for certain, would interest Illyrio. The Iron Bank was perhaps the most powerful bank in the world. If there was trouble brewing there, then chaos was sure to follow and from chaos, opportunity.

After a little while, his questions changed to his real purpose, though what he found out was not to his liking. His next contact was a man who Domicer had aided once when he and his band of wandering players had been waylaid by a group of bandits. The man's eyes narrowed as soon as he saw Domicer and the moment his set was done, he motioned the ex-Bolton to join him in the back room of the inn he and his band were staying at.

The moment the door was closed, the man said earnestly, "I don't know who you've taken up with Domicer but someone put out a notice to the city guards with your description. The dockside guards aren't supposed to allow you on any ship, the guards at the gates aren't supposed to allow you out, and the city guard is supposed to watch your movements as they can without being obvious. They've enlisted the thieves the beggars, innkeepers, and even some of us to watch to make certain you don't run. Whatever you've gotten yourself into, they don't want to let you back out."

*Makes sense I suppose, they've brought me deep into their confidence. I could hurt them particularly with the fact I know how deeply Illyrio is involved. Without him, Viserys loses his power base and, as good as his guards and food tasters are, anyone can be assassinated for the right price.* Domicer thought to himself, while on the surface simply smiling placidly ensuring the man he wasn't all that dangerous to know at present. He'd found a rich client, who wanted to keep his music all to himself. The bard didn't believe him but didn't care enough to press. "Anything else happening in the city?" Domicer asked.

The man shrugged. "One of the magisters is building up support for something and the pauper prince has been seen traveling to and from all of the high magister houses. I have no idea what that's about, though there are rumors of them all putting together some kind of purchase to be paid back later. But what they might be buying, that I don't know."

Domicer nodded and left the man. The story was the same elsewhere. Viserys and the magister were going around drumming up support. It appeared as if Daenerys forcibly halting the first plan of the two had forced them to actually think ahead for a change. Domicer had no idea what they were going to purchase, although it sounded as if it might be ships going by a few rumors he heard down by the port.

*If so, they are obviously planning further ahead than I had expected, though they still haven't figured out how to convince the barbarians to cross the sea.* Domicer mused, as he returned later that evening. In his pouch, he held a small bar of pewter. With that and some things from the kitchen, he would soon be able to fashion a duplicate copy of Illyrio's secret key.

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Daenerys groaned in pain as she finished her porridge, having opened her mouth a little too wide. The damage that her brother had done to her face and body were on the mend but nowhere near healed yet. Most of the black and blue marks had faded on her chest and arms, but her face had come in for special punishment. The cuts and bruises there were still prominent even if she no longer resembled a mottled blueberry. Despite this, her thoughts were clear as she leaned back in her bed, frowning as much as her face could allow without pain.

To say that the beating had opened Daenerys' eyes to the manner of person her brother had become was an understatement. She could remember when they were younger, when he was her protector, her rock in the world after they were evicted from Ser Willem Darry's house by his servants. But the years of moving from place to place, relying on others for hospitality, then selling off all they owned, even their mother's crown, had stolen that from him. That aspect had worsened as the years went on but, until recently, she had still hoped he could be pulled back from the brink. But it seemed with a clear plan ahead of them to reclaim the Iron Throne that Viserys had gone power-mad, giving in utterly to the madness that was so prevalent in their line.

Daenerys wished it could be otherwise but the anger and fury that Viserys showed, the disregard for the cost of reclaiming the throne both to them and to those they would rule, told her that should he ever become king, it would be a disaster, not only for their line and its history but for the people of Westeros. As she had said to him, it wasn't enough to reclaim their throne; they then had to rule from it. They couldn't do that after building a mountain of skulls as he seemed to think they could. They didn't have dragons to overawe their enemies and, even if they had, dragons alone could not keep them on the throne.

*A king cannot rule through fear, though perhaps the Lannisters are an example of how such could be done, she thought sardonically then shook her head. Yet, that is also because they are good governors, not just ruthless ones. Ruthless and pragmatic, that I could live with but Viserys isn't pragmatic, merely ruthless and wrathful. He wants to hurt everyone who didn't support our family, whatever their reasons, and he doesn't care how he does it. That is not only shortsighted but self-destructive.*

Daenerys looked up as the door opened and Domicer walked in. She nodded towards the seat by her bedside and asked quietly, her mouth barely moving. "What news?"

Domicer shrugged looking over at her nurse, who sat in that nearby chair reading. There was always someone present in the room as both nurse and chaperone. "Well, there is some news in the city." He began to a few tidbits of gossip about runaway magisters daughters and sons, as well as other little things like that while the woman kept reading.

Eventually, another nurse came in. This one was one of Daenerys' watchers who Domicer knew had decided to switch her loyalties to the Princess. She exchanged positions with the nurse who had been there before and, almost as soon as the first woman was out of the room, Daenerys glared at him. "Now real news, please." she said firmly, not having enjoyed the gossip at all, such things were beneath her now. Somehow, her facial wounds did not take away from her sternness at that moment.

"Well in terms of real news," Domicer replied "I was able to get a certain item but it will take many days before it is ready. Many nights, at least a week, maybe two to avoid suspicion. After which, we can satisfy your curiosity about that particular issue. In other news, the magister and Viserys seems to be rounding up some backing among the other magisters. They're not having it all their own way, at least according to rumor, but a few have signed on for something big. They're also apparently commissioning ships to be built, which could be what they're rustling up money for, I'm not certain. I have no idea how much a ship costs, though I imagine it would be quite a bit."

"Possibly," he murmured, leaning back a little now, "if they figured out a way to convince the Dothraki to cross the sea, their plan could work. They could, at the very least, win your brother the throne if they had the element of surprise, though keeping him there would be something else entirely. If they didn't have surprise,...the Dothraki really don't have any tactics that would be applicable to taking fortified castles or holdfasts save by storm, which they are unsuited for. They are cavalry; take them off their horses to, say, scale a wall, and they lose most of their training."

Daenerys frowned thoughtfully, leaning back. Sometime during or after her beating she had decided that she would do everything in her power to keep her brother from the Iron Throne, the madness in his eyes as he spoke of taking it by force haunted her. Oh, a part of her wanted it for herself; it was after all their birthright. Viserys was right about that, at least. But now the majority of her thoughts were about not being his tool in his quest to take the Iron Throne. She looked him in the eye and said simply. "When the time comes, are you with me?"

Domicer knew she was speaking about more than just helping her with her present schemes, something he had been

doing at least in part for the amusement of it. "Daenerys," he said gently, "I'm just a bard. I'm decent with a sword, good at ferreting out information, at sneaking around a little, but I have no idea where we would go, what we could do long term."

"That's not what I asked. Are you with me?" Daenerys repeated, her violet eyes locked with his brown ones.

Domeric looked at her, sitting there still somehow projecting an air of regal nature despite her wounds and despite being in a bed, this young woman who had begun to become someone who he would gladly give his allegiance to. He finally sighed and nodded. "I am with you."

"Good." Daenerys leaned back a little, sighing faintly and relief, then opened her eyes and stared at him again. "Find out what the magister is hiding in that storeroom of his, there must be something we can use. Something expensive we can take to pay our way. I know a few captains who would be willing to take us aboard to get us out of the city regardless of our circumstances, so long as we can pay for our passage. We can worry about where to go once we are on our way." Domeric nodded, then listened as she spoke a few names, committing them to memory.

Over the next week, his efforts to procure the times he needed to first harden the makeshift mold and then melt the pewter into it bogged down badly. He had overestimated his cleverness in that area and he was forced to head out into the city in stages, lest he attract attention by the unusual nature of what he was doing.

More bad news piled onboard when he went to inquire at various taverns about the ship captains Daenerys had told him about. Not only did he have to ditch several followers whenever he neared the port section of the city, but neither of the two captains were in port at present. He eventually learned that one hadn't been heard of for over a year now and there was an order out for his arrest from one of the magisters. The second was due back in four months.

That evening, Domeric relayed that news to Daenerys. "I agree fleeing by sea is the way to go, the land route is too long and Illyrio's arm too long for that to be a good idea, especially if he informs the Dothraki that I have 'stolen' a gift he wished to give to their Khal. The problem is, your wounds will be healed in another two, possibly three months. After that, there is no way to get out of your marriage to Khal Drogo."

Daenerys' face firmed underneath her still present wounds. There was no way she was going to be married off to a Dothraki barbarian to serve her brother's mad schemes. "In that case, it would seem I must anger my brother once more."

OOOOOO

While the Winterfell men and their Riverrun allies settled into their keep and pursued their own interests, Joffrey now continued his campaign against both of his siblings as well as Ranma, with the aid of a few servants as well as his knowledge of the keep. His attempts to bother Ranma were mostly foiled simply because he couldn't get to his room, guarded as it was by Fenris. The massive direwolf scared Joffrey more than anything else because it was both massive and it lacked the self-control that Ranma possessed. Ranma, for example, wouldn't simply attack Joffrey as a matter of course. Fenris had never warmed to him and his attempt to injure his brother on the trip down from Winterfell had solidified the wolf's low opinion of him.

Tommen felt the brunt of many of his tricks. Joffrey would randomly catch and mutilate an animal somewhere on the keep's grounds and leave some blood or other bits in his room. Of course, he was very careful never to let anyone see him doing this. He still didn't understand why this was different than his father's hunting expeditions but he understood that his father at least thought they were and Joffrey was leery of angering him. He also went out of his way to belittle the boy, ruining a few of his favorite books, his better clothing, and his playthings.

Myrcella was also bullied but not in this manner. Instead, Joffrey messed up her dresses, when he could at least. She was a much tougher target since Joffrey had no real reason to be in her room and sneaking in while one of her maids was there, which was almost constantly, was very tough. Still, he ruined a few of her dresses and, whenever they met in the hallways, he would suddenly become clumsy, stamping on her toes or otherwise attempting to injure her.

Neither sibling went to their parents. This wasn't anything new, after all. For Myrcella, Joffrey had been doing little things like this for the last few years, increasing his depredations the longer he went unpunished. She was happy thinking that, for the most parts, she was simply his new target, not realizing that he had moved on to other things with Tommen.

Tommen of course didn't know who was behind it but the young boy was growing angrier and angrier with every incident. It was a strange sort of anger, oscillating wildly between the urge to lash out at anyone nearby and the desire to run and cry. He was determined however to handle this himself and with every week that went by the desire

to do so increased with the dream of thrashing whoever was behind it.

Other than seeing his young trainee's anger at times, Ranma didn't know anything about this. In response to the visible emotion, he had started the boy on some mental tricks which seemed to help, though he was surprised that Tommy didn't just tell him what was wrong. Besides this, Ranma was, not exactly fitting in, but making a home for himself, in a way.

The tax ledgers had arrived within a week as they hoped so Ned and Ranma spent most of their mornings going over them. Neither had been able to make much headway but it was still early in Ned's tenure. Brynden, along with starting up his own small ring of contacts in the city, was also on the lookout for a competent money lender or law master they could hire to help. So far, he had no luck in finding such whose opinion they could rely on. Renly, for all his title as Master of Law, was no help whatsoever, leaving most of the daily business in the city to the Gold Cloak commander, Janos Slynt, who was a weasel of a man, if Ranma had ever met one.

While Ned spent the afternoon meeting with Renly, Petyr, and Varys, Ranma would exercise with Tommy, then move on into his own exercise against the men from Winterfell and Riverrun plus occasionally sparring against Ser Loras before spending some time with Myrcella and Fenris. The Flower Knight stayed in the city, ostensibly because there was no point in going back to High Garden just to turn around and come back for the tournament and Ranma didn't really care enough to look into the matter further. Those in the know however knew why.

A few of the White Cloaks joined them and even a few Lannister knights. Eventually, the training segued into multiple enemies against one, something that the few White Cloaks (which included Jaime) and Loras seemed to enjoy, since it more resembled an actual battle than one-on-one combat. Ranma lost a few of those, as well as one or two matches against the other blade masters, to keep up the appearance that he was merely an extremely skilled youth rather than the physical monster he really was.

During the evenings, Brynden would join Ranma and Ned for dinner, simple fair thankfully, since even Robert didn't throw balls every night and Ned only had to use the phrase 'working dinner' to make the King realize he didn't need his friend's presence at every meal. The Blackfish would tell them about his own investigations during this time, though in a nutshell it boiled down to 'nothing yet'. He had yet to find anything in particular concerning Jon Arryn's death, though he had found quite a bit about opinions about the North, about the Starks in particular, about the Royal family, and everyone else.

The Starks were seen as outsiders but honorable and friendly enough. They were known to be prickly and the civilians knew it. While many of them seemed to approve of it, many also saw it as a weakness. The merchants in particular seemed rather dismissive of the Starks, seeing them as poor barbarians. The men-at-arms did nothing to dissuade this opinion nor did Ranma or his father. Truthfully speaking, the only person from Winterfell who **wanted** to really fit in to life at Kings Landing was Sansa. To everyone else, this wasn't home, it was a foreign city where they were forced to abide.

Ranma personally felt the place was just vile in many ways so he loved the monthly evenings where the trio of Starks and Brynden would meet to listen to the notes from Winterfell. Even Sansa enjoyed listening as their father read out the messages, though there were bits of it that they did not share with her. Sansa was a sieve for secrets at the best of times.

Yet in terms of Kings Landing, there was much more industry and people here than even in White Harbor but the city was a cesspool from the top down. Ranma knew his father was doing all he could to clean up the top of the pool but it had yet to even begin to trickle down. He yawned, as he crossed the grounds toward the entrance of the keep, heading into the city today instead of training. His sense of honor wouldn't let him sleep when he could be out and about, hidden under the Umi-Sen-Ken, so he was out till early in the morning doing what he could to cut into the massive amount of crime in the city.

He had hoped to use his cloaking technique to spy on the potential enemies but Varys, Petyr, and the Queen all had set areas where they went to talk about anything and always locked their doors. Well, Varys and Cersei did, Petyr had other means to cover his discussions that he used, such as using the noise of a kitchen to obscure his voice or having it in plain sight at the evening table. Varys did that as well.

"Ho, Ranma, where are you off to?" Ranma turned to see Ser Loras, resplendent as always in the latest court fashion. Ranma felt it made him look a bit like a popinjay but he knew the other man had skill enough hidden underneath the softness. Ranma, in contrast, wore leather pants and a silk shirt he had bought here in the city. Ranma had missed the feel of silk since being reborn, though he did have to argue about not needing anything but a simple white shirt with the shirt-maker. Ruffles, lace, and pantaloons were idiotic ideas in his opinion.



Today, Ranma also had his warhammer strapped to his side and several scroll sheets bound together in his hand. Despite being in a bit of a rush, he smiled in welcome. "Morning, Loras. I'm heading out down to the Street of Steel. I need to order a new blade and its best to put in the order now, before people start to arrive for the tourney."

The other man smiled eagerly at the mention of the tourney, always keen to show off his prowess with the lance or even a sword. "I see, well I shall accompany you then. I have a friend arriving for the tourney whose name-day is coming up. A good knife would be an excellent gift, I think."

Ranma looked at him askance as the two men walked on. "This friend wouldn't happen to be your sister would it? I assure you, I won't do anything she'll need a knife to respond to. Your stories about her thorny side have been more than enough. Oh, is Renly finished that work on the laws my father asked him for?"

"Hahaha!" Loras laughed. "It was not my intention to scare you off her entirely my young friend, merely warning you what you are getting into." In truth, Loras had been rather miffed about his family deciding to pursue a match between Margaery and the Stark heir. He had hoped for a while that Margaery would marry Renly, giving him and Loras the perfect cover for their own love. Margaery was comely enough that so when the time came Renly could have gotten an heir on her. For the rest of the time, well Margaery had been known to dally with maids a time or two and certainly had some interest in that direction.

"The knife is in fact for a friend in the Stormlands, Ser Bryce Caron. He's a good man, though the last time we talked he was speaking of trying to learn how to fight with sword and dagger at once. And yes, I believe Renly was nearly finished up with the work your father, the slave driver, has assigned him." Loras laughed again and the two men made their way down into the city.

About forty minutes' walk brought them into range of the clangor of smith's hammers. "You will be seeing Tobho Mott, won't you?" Loras asked. "He's the best there is, he claims to be able to work with even Valyrian steel."

Ranma's eyebrows shot up at that claim. Brynden hadn't mentioned that when he recommended the name to him before they even arrived at the city. "Aye, I am, though that is surprising and encouraging." The two men continued up Visenya's Hill, each shop more expensive looking, until they came to the very last shop. This shop was larger than the others in the street with two stone knights riding a griffin and a unicorn on either side of the doorway. The door itself had a hunting scene carved into its ebony and weirwood panels. Ranma's eyes widened slightly at recognizing the weirwood and he shook his head sadly at this misuse of the wood.

The two young men entered, hearing the ring of hammer on metal from the back of the shop, which was separated from the front by cloth. There seemed to be two hammers at work, one far lighter than the other clanging away almost constantly, while the other was measured, steady. The other walls held a few examples of the smiths work, four fantastic pieces of armor in various colors though not by paint, a few swords that looked amazingly sharp and well formed, and two magnificent helms shaped into the likeness of a dragon and a lion.

A small desk sat along one wall, behind which a young man stood. "Yes, can I help you?"

While Loras began to look around the smithy, Ranma nodded. "Hey, I'd like to speak to the smith Tobho Mott, please. I'd like to order a sword but I have some specific requirements."

The man frowned and tried to convince him to buy a sword from the wall but Ranma gently tapped his warhammer, replying he had some specific requirements for a second time. The man frowned, then went into the back room, momentarily allowing Ranma to see the forge beyond.

After a moment, the steady hammering was replaced by a hiss, as steam appeared around the cloth. A few seconds later, a man came out to see them, staring at them with deep-set, intelligent eyes under a balding head in a face that had seen a lot of years go by. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. You see, I wish to order three weapons, all of which I have very specific requirements for. I would like all three, two knives and one sword, to be made to my specifications and with a very specific mix of ores." He held up the papers he, Jon, and the armorer in Winterfell had made during their attempts to make Arya's blade. He began to tell Tobho about how he and the smith in Winterfell had worked together to create an entirely new (at least to this world) type of blade with an equally new way of mixing the various ores together.

Tobho at first was merely humoring the highborn fool who seemed to be trying to sell the smith a new way of making blades but, while many of the things Ranma described didn't seem too surprising, the nature of the steel they eventually made was. It almost sounded like Valyrian steel, except not worked to that high a heat or with the magic added in. Still, it was only a step below that. "I'll see if this alloy of yours really works, lad, but for now, show me the

specifications for the blades you want."

Ranma had in fact drawn the blades. While his handwriting was abysmal, his sketching was pretty good. He had sketched out a katana but not like most he had seen in his former life. The one he based it on was made during the period where guns were being introduced into Japan. As such, it didn't have as much curve, it was slightly longer, and it was double edged. The groove was larger as well. "This is the sword I want. As you can see, it doesn't precisely match anything out there."

"I also want to order two knives, made like this." The knives were even more unusual. A very heavy triangle shaped blade rose from a peculiar handle which was made up of two parallel bars connected by two cross-pieces, one of which met the blade, the other just below it. The handle thus resembled an 'H' wide enough for a man to grasp the crossbar in his fist. The notes in the margin said it all had to be made of steel and all of it one piece.

"That is an interesting weapon lad, though I'm not certain how effective it would be." Tobho cautioned. The new weapons grade metal the lad had described however was interesting enough for him to ignore that.

Ranma smirked. "Trust me, in the right hands they can be deadly." In fact, given the chain and scale mail prevalent in combat in Westeros, the katar would allow a normal person to slice through them. The blades were going to be gifts. One would go to Tommen once he was ready for it and the other to someone else among the wolf-sworn. Ranma wasn't certain who just yet, although he had thought of another type of short sword he could order for Jon but wouldn't until he was going to be sent back to Winterfell.

As for the katana, such a blade would normally be at a disadvantage against plate or scale armor but with enough of a cutting edge and Ranma's speed and strength, that equation changed. Not even considering his new abilities in strengthening his weapons.

"Well, it's your coin, Lord Stark." The smith shrugged.

"Really? So you wouldn't be using this new type of sword steel in other projects if it works? I think I should have some compensation there, don't you?"

Tobho snorted. "Tell you what, Lord, I'll make the blade first. If the metal comes out as you say, I'll make the knives for free."

That won a gasp both from the man manning the desk and the young man who had just come out from the back of the shop, carrying a helm made to look like a stag's head, with sharpened horns rising from its helm. "You not charging full price for work, are you alright, master?"

"Enough out of you, Gendry." The man turned from talking to Ranma to take the helm from the young man. He held it up, turning it this way and that as he examined it critically. "That'll do, I suppose, lad. Take a look at these sketches. I'll be doing the mixing for these but you'll be doing the crafting for the knives once we see if the mix for the sword actually works. And as I was saying, if it doesn't work, you'll pay for the knives and the materials besides."

"So long as the blades come out as I want them to, I'll agree to that." Ranma nodded.

Loras had listened with only half an ear to the conversation but after catching his coming out of the back from the corner of his eye, the Tyrell knight had been studying Gendry closely. Gendry was a large framed young man, with wide shoulders, blue eyes, and thick black hair. He looked almost like a young Robert, save somewhat more muscled, and he seemed more given to brooding if his face was any indication. "Who is that helmet for, might I ask?"

"T'was the last of suit ordered by Ser Stannis Baratheon." Gendry answered. "Though I hear he's no longer in the city, hasn't been for months. Pity, it's one of my best pieces."

"Yours, hah! I was the one who made it, lad. You've just done the horns and the polishing, though I'll say you did an adequate job." Tobho barked, looking at Loras shrewdly. "Now back to work with you, Waters."

Gendry grimaced at the use of the last name, which denoted bastard status in the Crownlands, but did as he was told. Loras hummed thoughtfully to himself, then turned back to the smith, asking him to recommend a knife suitable for someone using a longsword and a knife at the same time.

After showing the Knight of Roses a few samples, Tobho sold him one of them and then he and Ranma finalized their agreement. After that, the two men left, with Loras going back to the keep, while Ranma wanted to explore the city for a bit. In actuality, he was meeting up with his uncle for lunch in the city at a tavern the man had found where they could hopefully talk without being overheard. Even with the job Vayon had done vetting the servants here and

replacing as many of them as he could with those that had come with them from Winterfell, neither Brynden nor Eddard trusted anything they said wouldn't be overheard.

Brynden and Ranma were at this inn ostensibly because it had the best Vale mead in the city. Vale mead, made in the highlands of that mountainous land, was better and more alcoholic than any other sort but it went sour quickly, so exporting it was tough. Brynden had ostensibly gained a taste for it during his tenure as Knight of the Gate. He was also friends with the innkeeper from a while back, before said worthy had moved to King's Landing, and the noise and bustle of the tavern room covered their conversation.

"So, anything new to report?" Ranma asked, his lips hidden behind a mug of mead. The honey added to it made this the only alcoholic beverage he actually liked the taste of, despite the need in his new life to fake it at times. "Father will be in meetings all day and he's been so exhausted of an evening we won't have times to talk about anything then.

Actually, that was only partly the case. The rest was that, despite his natural intelligence, Eddard Stark was ill-suited to thinking in terms of secrets and plots. So while he was bearding the small council about its open graft and running a small investigation of his own into Jon Arryn's death, Brynden and Ranma dealt with the more subtle side of things in very different ways.

"The Queen has been sending bought agents through the city, searching for something, asking questions. No one was willing to tell me what that's about, but it is something to watch out for." Brynden took a sip from his own tankard, letting it obscure his lips as he added his next nugget of news. "I have also found out two important bits of information. One, that Grand Maester Pycelle took over Lord Arryn's care almost as soon as he fell ill and sent the Lord's own healer away."

Ranma frowned at that. One of the first things they had found out was that Pycelle was a loyal voice for the Lannister cause on the council. Varys and Petyr were more or less neutral, but Pycelle wasn't. Whether he reported to Tywin or Cersei was up in the air though, as he and the Queen, did not always agree when she took part of the small council discussions. "And the other?"

Brynden actually hesitated. "I don't know if this is actually important or not but Lord Arryn apparently had a mistress in the city. Or at least, he was seen a few times visiting a brothel, although he was only seen talking to the mistress of the place and her daughter. It is a very high end establishment, so getting any information about him out of anyone who worked there will be next to impossible, but a few other clients gossiped about it."

After a moment spent tugging at his pony tail, Ranma muttered. "See if you can find out who owns the brothel in question by tonight. If it isn't owned by Littlefinger, then it might be a clue to something. I'll try to sneak in and see what I can find out. The name of one of the girls wouldn't be Alayaya, would it? That name was mentioned on a message Lord Arryn had left on his desk."

"Yes it would, though I would take anything found there with a grain of salt." Brynden cautioned. "They had the key and plenty of time to clean up anything incriminating. Anything that was left there was left for a reason, like the poisoned book."

"Agreed, but it could still be worth a look. Other than that, be on the lookout for Northmen down on the docks at the Inn called Davey's Rest. If you hear of any, don't try to contact them; come and tell my father." At Brynden's intrigued look, Ranma chuckled a little. "My father might not be good at skullduggery but he is good at thinking ahead and Lord Manderly does have a trade fleet..."

Brynden nodded, hiding a smile behind a hand. "I see." He shrugged. "Other than those silver stag bits of information, I haven't come up with anything just yet. It's very hard to make any headway here; there are so many people who already have agents. Varys has personal agents as well as hundreds in his role as Master of Whispers. Petyr has both his own and agents of his office, the Queen has some, the High Septon has some, and Lord Renly has a few in the higher end districts. The Gold Cloaks have quite a lot of influence as well. I've also found at least a dozen 'king of thieves', small time criminals, who have agents here and there."

He sighed sadly. "As good as I am at noticing things, at reading people; this isn't a task I've ever even tried to do before. It has definitely been touch and go. Still, I'll keep at it. There is something big hidden here, some secret that the Lannisters are hiding. I'm not certain if it's connected with Lord Arryn's death but I don't believe in coincidences like that." What he didn't tell Ranma was that it was also personally dangerous. His life had been threatened more than once since coming to the city, and he had been assaulted twice.

Both times, it appeared to be a common mugging gone wrong but he had his doubts, hence why he now went around with five of the Riverrun men disguised as common toughs. They were actually sitting at a nearby table even now,

waiting for him to finish talking to their Lord's grandson.

After that, the two men finished their mead, then parted company, with Ranma heading back up to the Red Keep. As he did so, Brynden made his way around the city to the market district, wanting to meet with a money lender to see if he could find a banker or someone else who was trustworthy enough to bring in to help Eddard and Ranma go through the tax ledgers.

OOOOOOO

*Ironically, at the same time that Brynden and Ranma were talking about the difficulties the Blackfish was running into setting up his circle of contacts, Petyr Baelish was contemplating that very thing. I've been able to stymie the Starks push so far, Petyr thought. But The Stark pup and the Blackfish are proving difficult to get a handle on. I'm almost certain the boy's found a few entrances to the secret passages plus the Blackfish has made a few contacts and even created a safe zone for himself. He isn't making any headway beyond that, yet, but he is still too bright for me to be happy about allowing him to continue his activity in the city.*

*That doesn't even consider the headway Eddard's making in cleaning up the books and the small council. It's only a matter of time before he pushes for Janos to be replaced and, without him, I'll lose that cover among the Gold Cloaks. I'm also concerned with how much headway he's made pulling the Crown out of debt. He and Renly are now loosely allied and he is sometimes able to talk the Queen into agreeing with him. Plus, his push toward standardized ledgers and book keeping is worrisome. My own position is secure so far, I have too many cutouts in the books I gave them for them to connect me to the debt I've devised. Yet, if that push continues, I may have to use all of my cutouts, both in the books and in terms of pawns.*

*I thought Eddard would already have been following up on the clues I left him but he is surprisingly suspicious of the obvious. A good attitude, but a very unexpected one coming from a damned Stark. Couple that with the fact I can't be seen doing anything to Robert's bastards here in the city, since the bitch Queen already knows about them all. I need to be subtle in any further attempts to push their interest in that direction.*

*Is it Brynden's influence I wonder? That man has always perceived more than those around would suspect. While he isn't at home in this realm of secrets and spies, he knows enough to at least, as the sailors say, tread water. And that steward of Starks has done too good a job clearing out the servants in the tower of informers, both mine and others. I only have one left and she's a scullery maid with no chance she could leave or remove anything in their rooms without being found out.*

*I need to aim the Starks at the Lannisters further, yet I dare not do so in such a way to show my own hand. That will be a little tricky. I suppose it comes down to figuring out which of my operations to sacrifice to keep Eddard amused and myself free of at least the 'lions' share of their suspicion, which has so many different meanings here.*

Petyr chuckled, then rang for a servant.

OOOOOOO

That evening, after Brynden had subtly told him that brothel in question, named, 'Flowers of All colors' of all things, wasn't owned by Petyr, Ranma moved over the rooftops of King's Landing, cloaked as always in his Umi-Sen-Ken in search of it. This was made more difficult by the nature of the brothel in question. It didn't advertise itself like most such establishments, being **very** expensive and discrete as well, relying solely on word of mouth among its noble, or at least **very** rich, clientele.

Eventually he spotted the small sign outside the large building declaiming his target. It was a very large building, two stories tall and at least as long as four regular houses. It had a single entrance protected by a silk awning right under the sign and all of its windows seemed to have blinds covering them.

Ranma jumped down to the street, waiting a moment by the doorway, clad in his stealth technique, for it to open. A moment later, a small group of richly dressed men entered. Ranma recognized one as a courtier but the others he didn't know. In any case, their opening the door allowed Ranma inside.

They entered and almost immediately came to a halt due to an argument in front of them. Inside was a large sitting area with a small bar, dozens of large cushions and chairs, and scantily clad young ladies moving around the clientele with a large staircase leading up to the second floor. Both whores and customers had moved well away from the source of the commotion.

Two heavily armed and armored bouncers stood with a statuesque black woman in a green silk vest with what looked

like peacock feathers of yellow and green sewn into one shoulder. In front of them was a squad of four Gold Cloaks. They didn't have helms on, and seemed to have come here for some fun, but something had set them off. The two girls they must have been sitting with, a young black woman who wore an orange silk dress with a gold choker around her neck and a girl with dirty blonde hair wearing a cream colored dress, were being held by their arms by two of the men. The second girl had a bruise already beginning to form on her face.

Ranma however noticed that one of the Gold Cloaks, a man at the far back of the group, was looking around the room as if searching for something. He looked between his search and the girl with the bruise out of the corner of his eye.

"And I tell you we have already paid! If you gentlemen wish to partake, you will have to pay for yourselves and agree to the rules of the house just like any other customer! Protection payment is the way of the world but I will not pay one copper star more nor will I let you beat my girls as if they were common trollops!"

The Gold Cloak who had been looking around answered her, apparently the leader of this group. He snarled angrily. "And I tell you, woman, if you don't want further trouble you'll let us UNG!"

The 'UNG' was caused by Ranma having moved around the courtiers to where he stood right behind the Gold Cloaks. While he couldn't use ki techniques while clad in the Umi-Sen-Ken, he could easily punch, kick, or anything else. So he simply smashed the Gold Cloak leader upside the head, knocking him out easily.

The three remaining Gold Cloaks whirled, looking for whoever had attacked them, glaring at the courtiers who were the closest to them, having come right through the doorway. This allowed the two bouncers to move forward and, before the trio could do anything more, they found the bouncers with drawn blades at two of their throats.

The third man was the one holding the black-skinned girl and she took the opportunity to wrench out of his grip. He tried to grab her but a thrown rock came out of the air to slam into his forehead, sending him senseless to the ground. The girl laughed aloud, a tinkling sound in the air. "It would seem the Rock-Hurler has decided you should go, gentlemen."

Now the two conscious Gold Cloaks had blades at their throats and the unseen presence of the Rock Hurler. Speculation was rampant in the ranks of the city watch on what the Rock Hurler was, some kind of spirit, a single name given to dozens of people 'fighting the good fight', whatever that meant, or something else entirely. What was known was it was no respecter of rank. Several Gold Cloaks going about their regular business had been accosted before this and not a single clue as to who the attacker was had been left behind.

They decided to do the intelligent thing and raised their hands. A moment later, they were being escorted out of the brothel and a runner was sent toward the nearest barracks carrying an account of what happened. That way it would be their word against hers and the proprietress, whose name was Chataya, was well known among the noble and rich. The Gold Cloaks would be reprimanded severely for making trouble in what was one of the most nobly favored brothels in the city.

While her mother was dealing with this and the Gold Cloaks, the black-skinned girl was looking in the direction the rock had appeared from. There were no clients of any of her fellow girls in that direction and she wondered how it had happened.

After a moment, she turned back, only for a whisper in her ear to halt her movement, her eyes going wide in shock before she regained control. No one was close enough to overhear the voice and luckily business had once again begun around her so no one noticed her sudden start. "Is your name Alayaya?"

Alayaya froze, then nodded slowly, making as little movement as she could. The unseen voice responded promptly. "Good, I work for the Hand, Eddard Stark. From the old Hand's notes, you were one of his informers. I'm here to follow up on a rumor that Lord Arryn came here. What did he talk to you about?"

For a moment the Eastern Island girl stood, weighing the nature of the rumors of the Rock Hurler against the unseen nature of this voice and his proven capabilities. Whatever magic was keeping her from seeing the man she didn't know but it was obvious he could take action despite it. She decided to trust that at the very least, the voice meant her no harm, and replied by flicking her hair at the stairs. She moved in that direction, stopping to gather the injured girl to her, then moving on to a room on the second floor, following after the other girl.

This room wasn't made up as a normal prostitutes room would be, instead it was a nursery. There were five cradles in it, though only one was occupied at present, and there were even a few toys around. Whores did, after all, sometimes have children despite the moon tea and other methods to protect against that. Chataya took the pragmatic view that it

was better to offer aid right here rather than kick out girls who might have many devoted customers because they didn't drink their tea. If the men didn't have to suffer, there was no reason the women did.

"I told you your baby would be fine, Mheagan." Alayaya smiled, watching the other girl play with her baby. "Though, I still say having him in the first place was a mistake." She nodded her head sharply to indicate to the unseen man that this was what Lord Arryn had been here to see.

"I don't get it," the voice confessed behind her confessed.

With Mheagan's back to her, Alayaya groaned a little, even as her lips twitched upwards at the amusing note of confusion in the whispered voice. Suddenly feeling a little braver about all this, she leaned back deliberately and almost shivered as she felt her back hit a warm solid surface. It was **very** solid and she could feel through her thin silk dress that it was powerfully muscled under an equally thin shirt of its own.

She was forced to move out of the doorway when Mheagan came toward them carrying her baby. "I need to go change Baara and then feed her before putting her down again. You don't suppose the mistress would let me out of working the rest of the evening?"

"Not a chance. My mother might be kind to us all but she is also a star-pincher of the first order. I'll head down in a bit and tell her you're busy but that's all." A moment later, they were alone, and Alayaya looked around. "Where are you now, Rock Hurler?"

"Over here." Ranma said, from where he was leaning against the wall by the doorway. "Why would Lord Arryn be interested in the baby? I mean, she's cute and all but I'm certain he'd seen babies before."

Alayaya actually giggled at that before moving in the direction the voice was coming from. She held up a hand, waving it around until she hit something solid. She touched what she hit, feeling the muscles of a man's chest under her fingers. There was something about this whole situation that was exciting, like the tales of her ancestral home that her mother had told her; about how jungle spirits would sometimes come alive to mate with a man or woman they desired. The idea of an invisible lover was thrilling to her.

Still, the black-skinned courtesan kept her mind on the task at hand. "If it were not for the good you've done throughout the city, I would not even think of sharing this with you. But that girl, she is a bastard daughter of the King. He was here a year and a bit ago and Mheagan didn't take her moon tea in time."

Ranma frowned in thought, wondering what would interest the Hand about one of the King's bastards. *I mean, I've heard there's something like a dozen of them around, spread from here to the Neck and down to Dorne. What's one more? Still, it's a part of the puzzle, just like that book we found the evening we arrived here. Something about the bastards and the Baratheon line? I'll pass it on to my father; this is a bit too odd for me.*

He was interrupted as Alayaya's fingers moved up from his chest, questing for his face. "I don't suppose I could convince you to dally with me a while? My mother's stories always said the jungle spirits were... ardent lovers. Can the same be said for one who has some of their tricks?"

Ranma shivered a little at her continued touch. It had been a long few months since he and Dacey had been together back in Winterfell, especially with the Queen and her little acts adding to it. Even a few of the servants had hit on him, making it worse. Still despite that and the blush suffusing his face, the heat of his body now threatening to break his control of the Umi-Sen-Ken, he answered in the negative.

"I'm afraid not. Sorry." And he really was. Despite his dislike for her profession, this girl was extremely attractive, with medium sized breasts, long, toned legs and a face that was simply beautiful. She was also seemingly gentle, sweet and intelligent, which added to the attraction. It would no doubt have been an amazing time. "I'm not one to have casual dalliances, no matter how tempting."

Alayaya sighed but did not leave off her questing hands. "Pity."

Ranma caught her hand in one of his, then dropped a large bag of gold dragons onto a small table set by the door beside him. "For your troubles, lady, and if you hear anything, get word to the inn 'Mountain Honey'. More will be paid then."

When she opened the bag, she gasped. Inside was enough money to pay for her time for a week of pleasure. "Are you sure I can't interest you in staying?" When she turned, however, she saw that the small window in the far wall was open, letting in the night breeze.

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Two weeks after that incident, a party from High Garden arrived. There were fourteen knights from the Reach who were going to be entering the tournament in various ways, though none had as high a standing as Ser Loras, but that was beside the point. They had served as guards for Lady Margaery, her two maids, and her chaperone, septa Nysterica.

This was the first time Ranma was going to be introduced to his prospective bride and Ranma's first impression of her was that she was very pretty, with thick, curly brown hair falling to just above her bosom, large brown eyes set into pretty face with unblemished skin accenting a slender and shapely figure. In the formal stilted world of the welcoming ceremony, which both he and Robert surprisingly agreed were rather stupid, they couldn't get to know one another. That evening however was different.

As her prospective fiancée Ranma was allowed to escort her to a ball accompanied only by her chaperone and Loras, who stayed several feet behind them. The ball this time was being thrown by the Queen for their arrival and the arrival of several other parties for the tourney over the past week, not just from the Reach but also from the Stormlands, the Crownlands, and even from the Westerlands. This included Lancel Lannister, her cousin, who was going to take part in the melee and the joust, representing their family along with Jaime. Most of these were lords and ladies, and they roomed in the keep, filling it almost to capacity. Those of not so high a status got first choice of the inns in the city prior to the event.

Ranma didn't particularly like the look of the knights that had arrived from the Westerlands, particularly Lancel, who looked just as arrogant an asshole as Joffrey without as much reason to be. Thankfully, he had been taken aside by the Queen within an hour of his arrival. She ordered him to steer clear of Ranma and his father if he couldn't act as befitted his station on pain of sending him back in disgrace to Casterly Rock. Cersei still felt that Ranma's physical abilities were too dangerous to rouse if they could avoid it.

Margaery smiled at him, reaching forward with her hand to grasp his and leaning in close to kiss his cheek, a move that caused her chaperone to hiss behind them but Margaery was an old hand at this. "Good evening Ranma, we did not really get a chance to talk earlier. I know you have as many questions for me as I do for you. This whole marriage idea of our parents came out of the blue to me, though obviously I can see its advantages. I trust you do not find it too arduous?"

She tilted her head so that her hair fell to the side coquettishly and Ranma chuckled a little. She was acting like a sort of mix between the Queen and Nabiki, hiding so much while trying to be friendly, poised, and seemingly outgoing, but definitely manipulative. He decided to lay it on a bit thick to see how she responded. "On the contrary lady, I find myself well pleased with the arrangement so far. Of course, I am not going to immediately say I am in love with you but at least the rumors of your beauty understate the case."

Margaery smiled pleasantly at the complement, while her own eyes roved over Ranma. Despite the fact that he wasn't exactly dressed in the height of fashion, he still was pleasing to the eye. He was wearing leathers and a jerkin the same as any workman would here in the South, though of quite a bit higher quality. The wolf's head on his belt buckle was distinctive and certainly set Ranma apart. So too did his handsome features, which were rather startling to her.

She had been prepared for a stern Stark face. Ned was certainly known as dark and somber but Ranma's features were very handsome despite being almost pure Stark. And those eyes, those deep dark blue eyes that she could almost feel herself falling into. Suddenly the idea of marrying this young man wasn't so distressing. The fact he had his hair in a style almost like a Dothraki ponytail was sort of strange though.

Margaery Tyrell had been around fighting men most of her life and could tell from the way Ranma moved that he was one. She had also asked Loras his opinion on the young Stark upon her arrival and had been frankly surprised by the way that Loras spoke of them. There was actual admiration there for his martial skills. The fact that Loras had never actually beaten Ranma, save with several others fighting him all at once, had shocked her. She could count on the fingers of one hand the number of people in the Reach who could fight her brother on an even footing and the number was even smaller for those people who could beat him.

"You know," Ranma muttered to her as they walked, "I've never done this before, this whole meeting a stranger and trying to get to know them since you might be married to them thing." This statement actually included his previous life. Most of the times when he met a fiancée something else would come up and conversation had become somewhat easier, or they were 'friends' (for however short a time) before said announcement was finalized. How did you break the ice in this situation anyway? Ranma decided to go with his strength and simply asked out loud. "Er, so, tell me about yourself."

Margaery chuckled but found the direct approach rather refreshing. "Well, I'll start with the small things first I suppose, other than the things you already know such as my age and family." she smirked as Ranma snorted. "Besides that, I like to garden. I spend as much time as I can outside in the rose gardens of High Garden. I make my own perfumes when I can. I'm somewhat decent at embroidery and dressmaking, though nothing to write home about. I've heard your sister Sansa is excellent at both of those, I might ask for some pointers."

"Sansa would love that, I think she'd love talking to you at all really. She and Myrcella get along well, and the idea of talking to another highborn lady from the South, especially from the Reach, will delight her. After all, your home is known as the home of chivalry and fashion, even to us in Winterfell. But that's not really what I asked. I asked you to tell me about you, not the socially acceptable things you do."

Margaery looked at him with shock for a moment, somewhat appalled by how direct Ranma was, yet, at the same time, enjoying it. "Such a question isn't normally asked, at least not at this point in the courtship."

"I don't play by the rules." Ranma replied blandly. "So tell me, what do you think of Kings Landing for example, how much perfume do you have to put on daily to ignore the smell? Beyond gardening, what do you do when you can get away with it. Do you have any books you like?"

"I like horseback riding and I take care of my own horses when I can convince the stable hands to let me." She did indeed, though this was also an excuse she used so she could practice kissing with some of the stable hands, the handsome ones her own age anyway. One of them in particular had been very young and handsome, though of course she never let it get any further than kissing. The ramifications of not having her maidenhead would be a political nightmare for her family and could be grounds for the annulment of the marriage.

"In terms of books, I like history books, romances of course when I can find them, new ones for preference. I don't normally have to put on much perfume to ward away the smell but I do have an extra strong perfume I use exclusively while I'm here. I've been here a few times over the years since the Rebellion, mostly with my father, so I knew what to expect." She didn't actually answer his question about King's Landing since that could too easily segue into politics. That was an area she didn't want to go into with the Stark heir, not if she could help it.

Ranma looked at her as she spoke and Margaery found it rather flattering that his eyes did not stray down to her bodice, which in her current dress was rather on display. "I prefer my own feet really, mainly because I can out run any horse I've come across, so far." He paused as they came to the doors into the dining hall, where the festivities it would commence. "So tell me, and I'd like the truth milady, what was your first reaction to this whole marriage idea?"

The brunette heard a faint cough behind her and groaned mentally. It would appear as if her older brother had said something he shouldn't have and Margaery frowned, trying to think of a way to salvage it. Yet, something in Ranma's eyes made her pause. He was asking for the truth not an embellishment or some kind of pretty, flowery response.

She decided to go with honesty for the moment, at least. "I was against it. I didn't see the point to it. Winterfell and the Starks are seen as sort of weak here in the South. Yes, you command the North and the North is large but that's all it has going for it. You can't match the coinage of any of the other nations, you can't match the trade, and you can't match the manpower. It's estimated that, at best, House Stark could raise two thousand men before impacting its own lands horribly and the majority of them would be untried smallfolk. I can name several houses in the Reach alone that could exceed that, let alone my own house."

"But then we began to think about the political aspect. Your father is a close friend of the King and we thought that perhaps he would be joining his house to yours before word even reached us that Prince Joffrey was to wed your sister. This way we also join with the King's family and become that much closer to the crown. Personally, I don't look forward to Winterfell, if we do get married. I have never felt the cold as I'm certain my brother told you." Margaery turned to glare back behind her and Loras chuckled, waving her off. He had long since become immune to her glares, mores the pity. Her grandmother's glares could curdle milk but Margaery had never really gotten the hang of them,.

"Physically," she went on turning back to Ranma, "I have to say that I'm glad I am to wed someone of my own age. Too often ladies of standing are married off to people much older than ourselves. So while I am somewhat displeased with the idea of moving to Winterfell, I cannot say I am displeased with the match itself." Ranma nodded and they continued on their way. "So tell me about yourself?" she said nudging him in the side slightly.

Ranma had wondered what exactly to tell her when she asked that question. Telling the truth never even crossed his mind. Her response to his last question, however, told him a bit more about her. *There is a mind behind that pretty face, though if she is trustworthy, I don't have a clue about.*

Luckily, if he decided that he and Margaery would not be a good match, his father had given Ranma permission to



back out from it. His mother would be unhappy, rather a vast understatement there, but Ned at least would understand and there were other considerations at this point as well. "Well, beyond the obvious, I am somewhat of a savant when it comes to anything combat related. I have been from a very early age. This has got me into quite a bit of trouble at times but for the most part has served me well. I like telling my younger siblings fairytales, most of them I make up myself and they're a big hit. I regaled the two younger Royal siblings with them coming down from Winterfell and they loved them. I suppose if I wasn't my father's son I could've become a bard somewhere."

"That reminds me of a song I've heard about you, detailing the fall of House Bolton. Was there any truth to it?"

Ranma growled a little, a sound that was rather more primal than anything else Margaery had ever heard, and it sent a little shiver through her. "There is **some** truth to it I suppose. The fact that I was captured by Lord Bolton's bastard son is true enough, though there were no flowing locks and there was certainly no damsel in distress. The damsel was in fact Lord Bolton's true born son Dominic and I refuse to speculate as to why he changed his role in the affair to that of a woman."

For a moment, that phrase didn't register and then Margaery burst out with laughter, while Loras looked a little irritated, for some reason, behind her. She sent a teasing glance his way and then snuggled into Ranma sighed cooing gently "I don't know either." before pulling back at a hissed warning from the septa. She noted that he had stiffened at her touch, moving away slightly.

Ranma realized he was missing something there but shrugged it off for now. "Anyway, I like to travel, though mostly by myself or with a few other people who can keep up with me. Most of the time when I travel I have to do so as my father's voice but it's still fun nonetheless."

As he went on to describe his friends, Margaery listened intently, rather shocked by what she was hearing because she could see through the friendships to what they represented. Oh, she didn't doubt that the young men were friends but what really was happening here was the Lord of the North strengthening ties to every other highborn family in the North, making his own position that much stronger. It was a startlingly subtle way of strengthening your position. Though Margaery could tell that Loras was more concerned about the Wolf Sworn, as Ranma rather jokingly called his friends, than she was, rather than what they represented.

The rest of their discussion was made up of anecdotes from their childhoods, the two of them getting to know one another, which Margaery, rather surprisingly, found was more fun than she thought it would be. She was careful however to not become too friendly with the boy, despite her flirtations. The fact that Ranma too seemed to wish to keep her at arm's length was a surprise but his self-control surprised her. When she leaned in for a kiss, Ranma turned his head slightly to kiss her on the cheek rather than the lips. When they left her brother and the septa behind for a moment as they made their way into the holdfast, Ranma didn't try anything and he always made certain they stayed at a decent distance from one another.

During the festivities, they separated as Margaery went to sit with Loras at one side of the Royal table while Ranma sat with his father. Studying them together, it was clear to Margaery that the two of them were close, though neither was exactly easy to read. She wondered if the way they stood out was deliberate or not. Even here in a royal setting, the two of them dressed simply as they could get away with. Where most gentlemen wore doublets and hose, fine silk shirts, and pantaloons, the two of them wore dark leather pants and simple jerkins, well-cared for and clean but out of place here. She was almost certain that it **was** deliberate, yet it seemed so out of character for the Starks from what she knew of them and their family.

Prince Joffrey Baratheon was at the opposite end of the spectrum, however, and she studied him intensely. She was very well aware of her grandmother's injunction to see if she could somehow seduce him and convince the Queen, at the very least, into backing a marriage to her rather than to Sansa Stark. On the surface, that job seemed to be relatively easy. The boy's eyes had followed her the moment she and Ranma entered the hall, like many others, and even now, while he was supposed to be speaking to Sansa, Joffrey kept on glancing her way.

The obvious adoration and possibly love, she couldn't say for certain, in Sansa's eyes for the Prince was rather off-putting. The country girl didn't seem to realize that Margaery was checking Joffrey out and vice versa but after a few minutes, Margaery stopped, sighing mentally.

Physically at least, Ranma was a much better prize than Joffrey. Joffrey was handsome in a sort of... lukewarm way. He certainly was dressed in the height of fashion and she saw he knew his way around the court as she watched them later that evening. But after Ranma's discussion with her earlier, that didn't appeal to her as much as she had thought it would. There was just something so **real** about Ranma, as if he was the most solid individual in the world, a poor description perhaps, but still one she could form even mentally into words.

*Perhaps it's because he seems so exotic to me in comparison to what I'm used to. He is direct, where others would be using the flowery rhetoric other suitors have attempted. He wants to know what I think not just what I say. He watches me, my face, not my body. He is so composed, yet there he is now, laughing and playing as if he didn't care that they were in the middle of the court, where all eyes watch constantly.* Margaery thought as she moved away from her brother, who had claimed the first dance.

This was an old family ploy, allowing her more time to analyze the flow of the party and figure out if there were any factions at work among the womenfolk and for a moment she left off thinking of her possibly betrothed to see what she could see. There didn't seem to be any factions, among the women at least. Every woman she saw was in some fashion either paying homage to or dancing attendance on the Queen if they weren't with a man or dancing in truth. Even Sansa was. *As a betrothed, there should be a clear limit on how much time she should spend with her betrothed over her family but either she doesn't realize that or doesn't care. Odd, is that something I should put down to her being from the North or how besotted she seems by the prince?*

The only exception to this rule was the young Princess Myrcella. She chuckled lightly at watching the Baratheon princess giggling her way around the room once more on Ranma's arm with Ser Jaime, let off for the evening, smiling and waiting his own turn. Ranma seemed to treat her as a younger sibling and it was attention that the young girl was eating up. *I can understand that. I doubt the Queen or King have much time for the younger siblings and, judging from the stories he had told, Ranma was a perfect guard and big brother figure. Sort of like myself and Willas.* Despite their deference in ages, Willas, the oldest Tyrell sibling, had always treated Margaery kindly and with great affection, always making time with her and telling her stories.

The glances the young girl sent Ranma's way from beneath her long eyelashes however told Margaery that her feelings were definitely not sibling-like. "Oh dear, someone seems to have a crush." she murmured tilting her head just slightly to the giggling girl in Ranma's arms as the pair went by.

Loras chuckled. "I have seen the same thing, though I will say that Ranma hasn't done anything to encourage her one way or the other. Well, other than dancing with her at occasions like this. That is more to defend himself from the affection of the ladies of the court, though it also serves as a warning to others." His face and tone became grimmer with those last words. "If I could direct your attention to one of the Kingsguard, Ser Maryn Trant? You can see him over my left shoulder, at present."

"He is an odious looking fellow." Margaery kept her own voice light and airy, lest they be overheard. In the hustle and bustle of the Hall, this was an almost certainty but tone sometimes mattered more than words, though it was a warning to Loras as well. He took it with aplomb and nodded faintly.

"He is that. Luckily, he isn't assigned to one of the siblings. I shudder to think of what he might try. He seems to be one of those that like little girls. Fortunately, Ranma seems to have missed that or the King would be short one **more** Kingsguard."

"Surely he wouldn't be so foolish as to simply attack the man with no proof."

"I have spent time talking with him and I have come to the conclusion that young Ranma is almost frighteningly direct at times. And if he is direct with Ser Trant, the man's body will be found in the morning, dead. He killed Ser Greenfield in Winterfell did you hear?" After that, Loras related the public story of what had gone on in Winterfell.

"I see." Margaery murmured, now a little worried at how many enemies Ranma's attitude would add to the list his family already had. Her brother wasn't one to know anything about politics, really He let that to his lover, though obviously she wasn't supposed to know that but it was one of the worst kept secrets in High Garden. "And what does Renly think of him?"

"Sharp, intelligent, direct were his words, I believe." Loras showed no concern about his younger sister asking her that question. It wasn't exactly a secret that he and Renly were friends, after all. "He hasn't made any enemies yet, but he will, Renly is certain. Direct people tend to not last very long here."

"Which makes me wonder why you've done so well, brother dear?" Margaery murmured wickedly as the song ended. The two of them bowed to one another once more and moved apart. Her brother merely laughed.

She made certain to dance with the Prince several times, getting the measure of Joffrey through discussion and the way he held himself. He was arrogant young man, she thought grimly. Yes, he was intelligent enough, yes, he could carry on a conversation but he didn't seem to be really listening to her. He didn't seem to pay particular attention to her words, only her body. When they touched one another as part of the dance, he did so with exactly the right amount of strength and energy, well-trained but there was still something about it that bothered her. *His cockiness,*

*too, is the kind that will get him or others killed and as the Crown Prince, it is far too likely to be other people. I must do some research among the servants here however, the better to discern his real character.*

Margaery wasn't the only one watching of course. While Robert and Ned were oblivious to the games going on, Varys and Petyr were not. They both frowned wondering what kind of game High Garden was playing. The Queen too frowned, wondering what was going through Margaery's or, better yet, Olenna Redwyne's head.

Ranma too noticed, though he didn't do anything about it right now, merely watching out of the corner of his eye. Brynden had warned him about things like this. The Tyrells were known to always be on the lookout for ways to better their position and even marriages were weapons in the game of thrones, as Cersei had called it.

Later that evening, Ranma confronted Margaery in his usual blunt manner. "So, is it by personal preference you're trying to get close to the Prince or is that an order from your family?"

"You are smarter than you look, though even asking such a question is breaking all rules of decorum." Margaery replied with a faint smile, taking his hand as he once again escorted her back to her quarters in the Maidenvault. She would remain there with her two maids as well as her female chaperone, who, with Loras, was even now following them once more. "I was ordered by my father."

"You mean Lady Olenna." Ranma interrupted. At Margaery's cocked eyebrow, he shrugged. "The Blackfish is remarkably good at ferreting out information from rumor. He also apparently met your grandmother at one point. He gave me a quite interesting description of her and then warned me never to cross her, **ever**."

"Sound advice with dealing with any highborn girl." Margaery said rather wickedly smirking at him.

"So you are being told you're going to have to play both of us." Ranma frowned, moving back to the current discussion. "I will not lie, lady. That bothers the hells out of me. Not just the fact that you're willing to do it, or even can do it but the fact that your family made an agreement with mine to see if this could work and still ordered you to try for a greater prize." That last word was said with scorn, although Margaery could not tell if he was directing it at Joffrey or her family and her for making the attempt.

In fact, it came from both what Margaery was doing and his memories from his past life. Ranma could all too easily see both himself, much as he didn't like to admit it, and Akane, leading on more than one person, in how Margaery acted. Not to mention Genma, who would have no problem breaking one agreement for a better one.

"Such agreements are not worth the paper they aren't even written on, Ranma," she said and flinched slightly at the look in his eyes. Normally, if someone looked at her like that, Margaery would become angry or even respond hotly but there was something so disheartening about it coming from the Stark heir.

She went on anyway. "Your honor is seen as something old-fashioned and useless, most particularly in Kings Landing. The game of thrones is at its most serious here." she went on noting that Ranma seemed to recognize the phrase, although why he flushed a little she didn't understand. "Family is everything, getting closer to the throne is the goal. If I can, I will woo Joffrey away from your sister, for the betterment of my family's position.:

"I might prefer you over him and indeed I do," she said earnestly looking at him and holding both of his hands in hers, though that wasn't something she would have considered sharing and actually being honest about, as little as a day ago. "But family comes first and the great game means I must make an honest attempt."

Ranma sighed heavily, looking down at her. "I cannot condemn you for following the rules of this game as it is played out here in the south. But neither will I play along with it. I do not play games, lady, not of this sort. Not with my heart or with my honor."

"This **isn't** a game! That's just a stupid name that someone came up with long ago. Politics is deadly serious. Who would you have closer to the throne, us or the Lannisters? Or Dorne? They have no knowledge of the rest of the Westeros; they care not for our ways of life. We must, my family must move ourselves closer to the crown."

She neglected to say that High Garden was both one of the most powerful of the realms and, yet in a way, the most vulnerable. It had none of the natural defenses of the Vale, nor did it have the equivalent of the Moat like the North, the protected pass into Westerlands, the deserts and the mountains of Dorne, or even the harshness of the land to dissuade invaders in the Stormlands. The Crownlands, The Riverlands, and the Reach were the most vulnerable and open of the nations. The Reach was the richest land of the three and could field larger armies without damaging their economies than any of the other lands but still they were vulnerable defensively.

"If we wed," Margaery continued, "If we wed, I will be loyal to death. You need never have any doubts about my fidelity or loyalty once our vows are said. I will never take any other man to bed. I will never do anything to dishonor you. I will be loyal to you and to our family, both sides, once our vows are said. But **until then**, I have to keep my options open and play the game the best I can."

"I said I wasn't preventing you doing it and I meant it." Ranma replied mildly. "Continue to act as you see fit, just do not expect me to treat you as anything more than an acquaintance until I know I can trust you. My heart is only open to family and friends, lady, and by your own words I cannot trust you with it yet."

By this point, they had covered the walk to the Maidenvault and Margaery felt her minders moving up from behind them as they came to the entrance. Margaery nodded. "I suppose I cannot fault you for that." Ranma smirked at her, causing Margaery to actually flush a little, then raised one of her hands to his lips, kissing the back of it gently before turning without another word and walking off.

Margaery watched him go, her thoughts rather more clouded than they normally were. Ranma was much more handsome than she had thought he would be but she could have easily ignored that. Handsome men were a copper star a dozen. But he was also much more observant. He didn't have nearly enough knowledge to make sense of the court or the factions, and he seemed uncaring of how much influence mattered. Despite this, she found herself rather interested in him. His direct manner, his honor, his sense of humor, once he got past that initial moment of confusion and embarrassment, was rather fun.

She wasn't certain the two of them would get together. She had told the truth, despite her own misgivings about Joffrey having now met the boy, she still had to make a strong try for him. Yet, it was obvious that Ranma would not be willing to simply play along. Margaery would have to make an honest attempt to be with Ranma as much as with Joffrey, which was a prospect she didn't find bothersome at this point.

For now, the Rose of Tyrell shook off that thought, concentrating on a note she would be sending her father, really her grandmother, via raven the next morning. It was going to be interesting what the 'queen of thorns' made of this.

OOOOOO

Myrcella had hated Margaery at first sight. To be sure, she had met the older girl one or two times and had gotten along with her as well as could be expected from such a wide difference in ages. Yet the moment Margaery showed up, hanging off Ranma's arm as they came into the hall, Myrcella had hated her. Since they had arrived, Ranma had made time to be with her when he could, solidifying their friendship and making Myrcella's crush on him grow further, into something she felt she could rightly call love. He had tried at first to make time to be with Sansa but Sansa still refused to apologize, causing an ever widening rift between them with every week that passed.

She had been ecstatic when instead of monopolizing the beautiful (even Myrcella had to admit she was that) Margaery's time during the dancing section of the evening, Ranma had made time for her just as much as he had that first night upon their arrival in Kings Landing. She was also very pleased that he didn't seem to be as taken with her beauty as, say, Joffrey was. Joffrey seemed to oscillate wildly between staring at Margaery and staring at Sansa, who Myrcella could tell were indeed the two most attractive girls around their age there.

Throughout the evening Myrcella was torn on what to do. On the one hand, she could see that Margaery was flirting with Joffrey almost as much as she seemed to flirt with Ranma. In fact, she seemed to switch almost entirely to Joffrey once Joffrey made his own interest in her apparent. Sansa had looked rather hurt but haven't done anything about it and seemed mollified when Joffrey apologized later about having had a little too much wine. In a way, Myrcella had to hand it to her brother. He was becoming very good at hiding his true personality behind that friendly face.

*Maybe if the façade was the reality, I wouldn't be ashamed to share blood with him.* Myrcella thought coldly, as she was assisted into a simple everyday dress by one of her maids. Her loathing for her brother had solidified in the time they had spent on the road and it had not changed for the better since their arrival back home. Though he was very careful to never show anything more of his real personality to Sansa, their mother or anyone else, Myrcella knew the beast underneath the disguise. *If Margaery is willing to make a play for him, that might actually work to my own advantage. If nothing else, I need to make certain Ranma isn't taken in by her.*

With that thought foremost in her mind, the young Princess moved from her room in the Royal suites down to where Ranma could be found every day exercising with a few men from Winterfell. Not many were up this early since most had begun to follow local custom to sleep in as much as they could, most particularly the men-at-arms, who were free on their off hours to visit the fleshpots of the city, though Myrcella wasn't supposed to know about it.

So focused was she on her mission, that the Princess didn't even notice when Ser Oakheart followed her like a silent shadow from the moment she left her room. Even here in the Red Keep, every member of the Royal family still had his or her shadow among the Kingsguard. Ser Oakheart in particular took his duties seriously, assigned to Myrcella nearly 24/7, with only Ser Jaime and Ser Moore spelling him, mostly at night. Ser Trant had at one point been on the detail for the Princess as well but he and Oakheart had argued about his actions during that time and Ser Barristan had changed the man over to guarding only the King.

Ranma was indeed already up, running around the inside of the outer fortifications of the keep, moving as fast as a sprinter despite having already completed several circuits. He'd already been up for several hours and had taken off his shirt to better preserve it for later in the day. Unlike Sansa, Ranma didn't have so much clothing as to go out of his way to destroy them.

He slid to a halt as soon as he spotted Myrcella, moving quickly in her direction with a smile on his face that again caused her to flush, along with his shirtless chest. It made her wish yet again that he was smiling at her for reasons other than welcome. There was this warmth hidden underneath Ranma's Stark features that was astonishing coming from someone from the North or, indeed, anyone really. It called out to her, aided by his looks and the fact he saw her, Myrcella the young girl, rather than the daughter, the Princess, or any of the other hats she was forced to wear.

"Hello, little princess," Ranma said in his most informal manner, bowing grandly to her before grinning. "To what do I have the pleasure of your company this morning? You normally sleep in after an evening of dancing like that. Is something wrong?"

"I..." She paused and flushed even further under his blue eyes. "I hoped to speak with you before you met with Tommen later." This was her cover but it was also a bit of a truth. She wanted his opinion on what was bothering her youngest brother. "Have you noticed a change in his attitude since coming home?"

Ranma nodded seriously, moving over to where he had left a towel before he began his run. He started to towel himself off, never noticing how Myrcella seemed to follow the movement with wide, blushing eyes. By the time he turned around, she had managed to gain control of herself. "I have, I thought that maybe one of the courtiers or one of their kids was doing something that keeps making him angry. He seems to wish to handle it himself however and until he comes to me for help I'll let him. I can't solve all of your problems for you two after all, you can't learn that way."

"I suppose..." Myrcella replied hesitantly. Normally, she would simply put it down to Joffrey but he seemed to be spending most of her time targeting her or with Sansa, which was what Myrcella wanted. But the really was worried about her younger brother, he seemed so angry these days whenever he was with her, their mother, or their father, who was spending more time with him. Robert and Tommen's relationship had grown closer since coming back, though Tommen still tended to read a little too much for Robert. The King had even taken the young boy out on a few hunting trips. "It's just I worry."

She came closer to him, touching his arm lightly, as she had seen her mother do at times to a few men. "I also wanted to warn you about Margaery. I," she paused, then went on hurriedly. "I saw her flirting with Joffrey last night."

Ranma looked down at her, smiling faintly as he ruffled her hair. "Thanks for watching out for me, Merry, but Margaery and I talked and I warned her that so long as she was willing to play these games for her family, I would respect her decision but I wouldn't let her close to me."

Myrcella breathed a sigh of relief, for much more than the words. "That's good." They stood there for a moment then Myrcella realized that she really shouldn't be alone with him regardless of whether or not she was physically safe with him. She could see Ser Oakheart well out of hearing range, but they had turned around slightly from her arrival however so that she was mostly hidden by Ranma's bulk.

Knowing Ser Oakheart couldn't see her and feeling greatly daring, she leaned up and kissed him quickly on the lips before darting around his startled form. "In that case, Lord Stark, I bid you a good day." With that ultra-formal ending, she raced off, blushing hotly.

Behind her Ranma stood there rather stupefied for a moment then shook his head with a chuckle. *I guess she's got a crush. I wonder what I did to deserve that? I was just being me. Hopefully she'll get over it; I wouldn't want things to be awkward between us.*

"Well that was interesting," said a voice behind him and he turned to see Margaery coming towards him from around a bend in the tree line of the Park where he had just been running, followed by one of her chaperones. "You look like a poleaxed deer." she said critically.

Ranma barked a laugh, shaking his head. "What, no flowery, impassioned words this morning, my lady?"

"You seem to like plain speaking; I shall do my utmost to oblige you. Was that the first time she tried something like that? The Princess should be careful. Loose lips could sink her ship, if she is seen to be flirting with you in such a manner."

Ranma laughed a little louder at that. "I wouldn't worry about it. That's the first time she's tried that and I have no doubt it's just a silly little crush. My sister, for example, used to have a major crush on your brother Loras just from the tales we heard about him in Winterfell. Alas, her preferences changed to Joffrey when they met. What was your first crush, my lady?"

The Tyrell maiden joined his laughter, shaking her head, yet she answered readily enough that she had a crush on one of the knights that served her father, a somewhat older man but who was among the most dashing she had ever met. In her mind however, Margaery wondered if the princess' crush was really a simple crush or something more serious. *Still, if the little girl thinks she can handle adult matters, then I may have to disabuse her.* She never even noticed how possessive her thoughts about Ranma had already become as the two of them walked off to the morning meal.

OOOOOOO

Melisandre, priestess of R'hllor, had always felt **definite** in her path. Ever since she had first begun to have visions of the Azor Ahai, the warrior of light, she had known her path was to find him. Her furor for R'hllor and desire to convert the heathens had alienated her from even other Fire Lord worshipers but she cared not. If they did not see their duty to convert those heathen followers of the Seven or other Gods, then she would make up for it with her own efforts. Her visions had brought her to Dragonstone and she set to converting Lady Selyse Florent, Stannis Baratheon's wife, to the worship of R'hllor, the better to get access to her husband. Of course, this way she would also already have a powerbase before having to prove her powers to him.

Of late, most of her attempts to see the far future had produced little usable information despite her best attempts. The short term future she could still see and interpret easily enough but the rest was a muddle of images. Too many for her to separate, of lions, wolves, and stags, all locked in battle and of a strange image, a wolf-man holding a kind of fire, not R'hllor's holy fire, in his hand. It was as if the future was in flux constantly. Something had changed, something R'hllor refused to, or could not, share. That was worrisome and when that thought first occurred, she had wondered if she had somehow failed her god. Such a thought was so foreign though that it could not remain in her head, however.

Soon Stannis would come to see her power as well. Soon Cressen would make his misguided attempt to poison her. His faith in the Seven would not save him from R'hllor's fire and, after that, the Azor Ahai would come to believe in her powers. Together they would march forward into destiny.

OOOOOOO

After she arrived, Ranma split his time between his normal routine and spending time with his fiancée, though this was no great hardship despite his decision to not get emotionally involved with her at this point. Besides Margaery was very intelligent and some of her comments, now that she knew she could play it straight with him, were rather biting when it came to Kings Landing.

Her sense of humor was fun most of the time, though Ranma noticed a certain tension whenever she and Myrcella were in the room. He liked Myrcella and he didn't know why Margaery thought that her little crush was anything really important. And later that week, Margaery's initial reaction to Fenris hadn't been her best moment.

OOOOOOO

"Ranma," Margaery said sweetly as she closed the door to his room, calmly, very calmly. "Why in the Maiden's name do you have a **monster** in your room?"

"Oh, that's just my direwolf, Fenris." Ranma replied from where he sat in the sitting room, smirking at her after setting aside one of the ledgers of the Gold Cloaks that his father had asked him to look at. Janos' bookkeeping skill wasn't exactly organized but he was uncertain if this was deliberate or not yet, much like his father's impression of Petyr Baelish. Margaery and her minder had come in to spend some 'supervised time' with him. She had offered to play him in a game of chess and had gotten up to get the game board from his room. "Don't worry, he won't hurt you. Well, he might lick you to death but that's about it."

"This is a very expensive dress I'm wearing Ranma." she muttered, calming down a little from her shock. "He better not try to lick me." She reopened the door and gulped again at how **huge** Fenris appeared simply sitting there in front of the door. She had been around her brother Willas' dogs many times but even though they were hunting dogs, big and tough, they weren't this big or this wild looking. Sitting up on his hind quarters Fenris as he was now, he was almost as tall as Margaery, and much more massive. "Um, good dog?"

The growl that sounded from deep within that cavernous throat signaled something she said bothered him.

"He doesn't like being called a dog." Ranma said, waving one hand to indicate she should get out of the way. "Something about status, I think, or maybe he doesn't like the assumption he's domesticated."

Fenris padded around Margaery, his nose lifted haughtily in the air as he moved toward his bonded human. Ranma grinned, rubbing the wolf's head for a few moments, paying particular attention to his neck fur as the large beast rumbled happily. Margaery watched the two of them together for a moment, then decided that Fenris was relatively harmless and went to get the board.

It took Fenris two and a half weeks to get accustomed to Margaery and the particular smell of rose and honeysuckle that she used in her homemade perfume, primarily it must be said, because the honeysuckle reminded him of a bit of an adventure he had many moons ago during the trip down to this man-place. Bees may be small but their stings hurt!

But to Margaery that was time well spent. It had taken her only two days to realize that Fenris was much more intelligent than any normal animal should be. He was also much more dangerous, going by the fact that he alone was able to fight Ranma on an almost even footing while seven men-at-arms couldn't do the same thing. She had seen both of sorts of matches since her arrival here and understood what that meant.

Still Fenris was a little too large for her and he didn't seem to care one way or another about her either. Where Fenris would let Myrcella or Tommen pet him, scratch his ears, and even curl up with them, acting like a furry sofa for the children while they watched Ranma exercise before Tommen took his own turn, he would only let Margaery pet his head.

Myrcella seemed to take this a sign so while she didn't flirt with Ranma she made a point of spending time with him. But this did not go unnoticed.

OOOOOO

Myrcella entered the Queen's chambers with a bit of trepidation, not knowing why she had been summoned. "You wanted to see me, mother?"

Cersei sat on a small window seat, gazing out over the city with a grim sort of set to her mouth, though her eyes weren't exactly tracking until she heard her daughter's voice, upon which Cersei came back to the here and now. "Yes, come in, sweetling, and close the door. The two of us need to talk."

That did nothing to settle Myrcella's nerves but she sat across from her mother willingly. The relationship between the two was somewhat odd. Myrcella knew Cersei cared for all her children, yet she always took Joffrey's side in any argument. She was stern, always making certain none of the children acted improperly according to their station, yet still allowed Joffrey to act out far more than the others, though that had changed somewhat since their trip back down from Winterfell.

Since Myrcella had noticed her favoritism, she had become more distant with her mother. Still, there was much the young Princess admired in her mother as a queen and a woman. Some she didn't, of course, but she tended to ignore those unless they impacted how she treated the children.

Cersei looked at her and tsked. "Grab up that hairbrush over there, your hair looks like it needs a good brushing." Myrcella obeyed and then came back, turning around so her back was to her mother, sighing faintly as the brush began its work. Some of their best moments began like this so it was a good sign that Cersei was so mellow right now.

After a moment of familial silence, Cersei began to speak. "I have heard rumors from the servants, from Jaime and others, that you are spending a lot of time at the Tower of the Hand. Specifically watching young Stark, Loras Tyrell, and others exercise. And that you seem to be spending time with Ranma, as much as you can."

"I, yes, mother." Myrcella nodded her head.

"Good, you didn't try to lie to me." Cersei's voice was now tart but there wasn't any kind of angry edge to it that the princess could detect and her hands kept working on Myrcella's hair. "I have heard no reports of you acting like a strumpet or anything of that nature, which is good, you are still acting as a princess ought, if a little too willful. But do you honestly think this fascination with the Young Wolf will go anywhere? You know Joffrey is to wed his sister. There is no way you would be able to marry him. Tying the two families together twice would be politically impossible and you have yet to have your first bleeding, unless you have something you wish to share? And whatever little game Margaery Tyrell thinks she's playing, Robert would never allow the betrothal between Sansa and Joffrey to be broken."

*And whatever my own thoughts on the matter either, Cersei thought, with well-worn anger. I can see the benefits of such a marriage far outweighing that of getting a Stark married to a 'Baratheon', but no. Robert's too Stranger-be-damned set on uniting his and Eddard's line.*

Myrcella flushed at the mention of her period, which she indeed hadn't yet had. Her body had developed somewhat more in the past months but she was still a child, something she wavered between being thankful for and cursing wholeheartedly. "No, mother, I just... he's just... I know nothing will happen, mother, but will you let me have my first crush for a time. Can you remember yours?"

The Queen actually smiled for a moment, though her eyes were far away, remembering how deeply in love she had been with Prince Rhaegar after her father told her they would wed. The Dragon Prince had been seen as the height of chivalry, handsome, kind, intelligent, and strong. Even as his father descended into madness, everyone had held out hope that Aerys would hand over the reins of the kingdom to his son. She had been besotted with him for years before he decided to marry the Dorne princess, Elia Martell, even after she and Jaime had begun to experiment with one another.

She had understood at the time that it was a political decision. Her father's position as Hand already made their family too powerful. There had to be balance but it had struck her sore nonetheless. Looking back on it she wondered how much of her life would've been different would've been better if that marriage had gone ahead. *I wouldn't have had that damn 'wise' woman and her prophecy hanging over my head for one, though I wonder if Jaime and I would have begun our affair even so.*

*And it isn't as if I haven't had a few dreams of Ranma myself. That endurance... Stop that, it will never happen and you cannot afford to see him like that, not when he could become such a dangerous enemy. Ned Stark is like a damn wolf himself on the scent and eventually he might be able to uncover why I had Jon Arryn killed. I can't allow my response to that to be clouded sentimentality.*

For now, Cersei ignored her daughter's question and kept to the meat of the matter. "I won't say you can't spend time with Ranma sweetling but that is all I will allow. If I even hear a murmur that you have been alone with him or done anything to 'get his attention', we will be talking again and that conversation will be far less pleasant. I won't let my daughter act like some lowborn trollop; you are a lion and you will act like it."

Myrcella could have asked what a trollop was but she could read the context well enough, though she thought her mother was acting rather unfair. She had seen the way the Queen sometimes acted to get men to do what she wanted, including the way she too looked at Ranma once, though, of course, the Queen never went beyond glances or simple touches.

She idly wondered why their mother always went out of her way to call them lions when alone. Surely they had as much stag blood in them? But Myrcella also knew better than to point that out so merely nodded. "I know, Your Highness, I'll do nothing to dishonor our house."

"See that you don't." The Queen said, then moved on to a happier topic. "Now, your hair is becoming curlier than I expected it would naturally be. We'll have to change the styles we wish you to be seen in..."

OOOOOO

While his son was making something of a place for himself in the city, Ned was busy at his new job. For the two of them, King's Landing would never be home. Winterfell was their home and it always would be. The crisp morning air, the homey touches here and there, the familiar stones around them, and the warmth of family; Ned and Ranma missed these things dearly. Sansa, on the other hand, seemed too busy running ahead to see what she was leaving behind.

However, Ned's job as Hand didn't leave him any time to woolgather. Indeed, it took up practically his every waking moment. Simply sorting out the problems that had been building up was a momentous task. Not only was the tax



system and records horribly disorganized but the amount of graft that was there at the lower levels was astonishing.

"How did Jon Arryn let it get so bad?" Eddard asked himself, not for the first time since taking up his duties, a question that was never really answered to his satisfaction. "It couldn't have gotten this bad since Jon's death, while that was over a year ago now that still wasn't enough time for the kingdom to have gone through the massive amount of money they owed to the Lannisters and the Iron Bank. Jon had to realize that they were going toward bankruptcy. There literally was no money in the treasury to pay the loans back and not enough money coming in either. Taxes haven't been raised, not since Aerys died, but they should still have been enough to pay off any monies needed during the time Robert canceled them in order to boost the reconstruction."

Oh, Petyr had devised a few new regulations that meant merchants had to pay more taxes but all that money flowed back out to pay for too many items they shouldn't be, let alone the king's extravagances, which were much more considerable than Ned had thought before going over the books. Still, that was perhaps a tenth of the money being spent, considerable yes, but nowhere near the total.

He was also, unfortunately, still working alone on this. Brynden had failed thus far to find a trustworthy secretary/banker and Eddard, while being good at numbers and sums, wasn't up to the task in front of him. He still hadn't figured out if Petyr was a loyal servant of the crown or not but Ned had jailed several secretaries for stealing from the crown. That was treason and they would soon be given the choice of the Wall or the axe. The laws, too, weren't as streamlined as they could be but Ned had decided to put off that problem.

Needless to say, his job wasn't made any easier by Robert's desire to throw at tourney for him. The money spent on that, in particular the cash prizes, was exorbitant in his mind. Winterfell ran on less for a year than was being poured into the tourney. On top of that, Eddard also had to work on actually organizing said tourney. He had often joked with Robert about that over the past few weeks; that the best gift he could give a Hand would be to give him a few days off and take the reins himself. But Robert had merely laughed and told him that the tournament would be worth it and that he would enjoy it once it started.

That just proved to Ned that his friend didn't truly understand him. To Ned Stark, a good time was spending time with his family or a good book from Winterfell's library. War was a serious business and contests like tournaments didn't interest him at all. Of course, Ranma was looking forward to it but Ned knew his son was far more into battle and combat than he was and had proven that he could be serious when necessary.

Because of this workload, his investigation into the death of Jon Arryn hadn't really gone anywhere since they arrived. Oh, he had the book. The book was exactly what it said, a look at the noble families of Westeros, a genealogy book, yet for every family not just one. He wasn't far into his investigation of even the book but he it interesting, as was the knowledge that every Baratheon of the last five generations had black hair and blue eyes.

That was strange considering the Royal children but none of them had married into Lannister so it was inconclusive. Since he could barely read a few pages a day, given how exhausting his new duties were, that was as far back as he had gone just yet. It certainly wasn't proof of what the book's connection to Jon's death seemed to imply, especially taken along with Jon's final words. It was a horrifying thought even so, made worse by Ranma's description of the young baby of the whore's. He hadn't had time to follow up on that nor had Brynden had much luck finding out what the Queen's agents were doing, but he feared...

*Regardless, there is something very wrong with Joffrey, regardless of his parentage. I have heard rumors about a cat that he mutilated when he was younger and he is cruel to animals when he gets away with it. I have seen that with my own eyes. I have also heard he bullies the servants a time or two but even that is not enough. That plus his arrogance might be enough for Robert to remove him as heir, however, despite being the oldest.*

*The others, on the other hand, are much more like they should be. Young Myrcella might be a copy of her mother physically but she has a sweet, gentle nature. Ned had also noticed her crush on his son but given her own older brother, it was easy to see why she and Tommen had grabbed onto Ranma when he was friendly with them. It wasn't as if Ranma really went out of his way either, he simply acted as he always does. It's why all the youngsters of Winterfell like him, not just his siblings. But the effect he's had on Tommen...*

Tommen was turning out to be a mix between Renly and Robert in temperament. He liked to train since he be had begun with Ranma and had continued even on those days when Ranma couldn't spend time with him. He also willingly read when he could, like Renly was supposed to, and played hard as well, much like Robert, although his play had yet to become like Robert's, a good thing in Eddard's opinion. *No, despite his looks those two are almost certainly related. I need more proof than this, proof positive that I can take to Robert about Joffrey and, much though it pains me to admit, possibly the Princess. I just hope there is some other reason that Jon died, if true this could rip the realm apart.*

OOOOOO

Prince Oberyn Martell looked over Kings Landing a few weeks after Margaery Tyrell and her party had arrived. He could've been here much sooner, but they had decided to put off his coming to Kings Landing until news of the tournament had officially reached them, to give him an excuse to be in the city. Now he stood here once more looking out over the royal city, wishing he was anywhere else.

That feeling had little to do with the squalid, smelly, and above all trash infested port of Kings Landing but it certainly was endemic of his real reason. The very limited sanitation in the city simply consisted of the 'better parts' of the city pushing everything into the river, which carried it into the port to join the rest of the refuse. It was a pity, because without the despoiled water, the port would have been decent. The sight of the rocky hill, on top of which the admittedly imposing Red Keep could be seen, only made the image of the dirty port below it even worse. "Like above, so below," he quipped.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that ser?" Daemon Sand, Oberyn's squire asked. He was a handsome youth with a strong jaw, light blue eyes, and sandy brown hair. He was also attempting to grow a beard but he had been meeting with limited success in this endeavor, as yet.

Oberyn certainly wasn't going to encourage him; he much liked the young man better without a beard. "I said, so above, so below. The small council, the court, and their politics are a cesspool, where the shit rises to the top. The city and most particularly the port is a cesspool, where the refuse rises to the top and is then eaten by those below when they can. Like above, so below, you see?"

"At least you're used to the smell, Your Highness. I haven't been here before; it's the most I can do to keep myself from adding to the mess down there." Daemon pointed down to the water over the side of their ship.

"True, the city is a bit of an acquired taste. Did you bring enough perfume?"

"I did, though I don't know if I have enough for both of us and our stowaway."

The Prince chuckled. "She has my daughters Obara and Tyene to look after her. I imagine she won't run into too much trouble while here in the city so long as they stay out of the slums, at any rate."

He had known the moment she had arrived on the ship. Arianne wasn't really very good at hiding her intentions from her family, though she was surprisingly good at sneaking around. If Oberyn had to guess, the Prince thought that only he, his squire, and his two daughters were aware of her presence on board with possibly the kitchen maids back home knowing what she had done. Other than that, she had been able to hide herself remarkably well.

*Still, she wasn't supposed to be here at all. If my brother finds out that I knew she was with us when we set off and did not immediately put her on shore, he will be very cross.* Still, the girl was intelligent and it would be interesting to see what she can do on her own.

As the two men made their way deeper into the city; Arianne, Obara, and Tyene waited in the hold of the ship. Once Oberyn and Daemon were out of sight, the trio, wearing heavy, form-hiding cloaks, made their own way into the city.

In fact, the Princess of Dorne had planned rather better than either her father or uncle would have thought. The girls already had a destination in mind, a small hostel that dealt with high-end merchant clients who dealt in jewels and thus preferred to travel discreetly. It had its own security force; all of them experienced men-at-arms from the Vale. It was located on the Hook, a long curved road that led from the River Gate, which led out of the city south, then up to Aegon's High Hill. It was a relatively decent area, though not very rich, it was law abiding.

The three young women made their way through the city, being careful at first to let none of their features or feminine curves show. The wharves area was heavily patrolled but the area between them and the rest of the city was a hive of hovels. If you were on the main roads, you were safe enough but why take chances? They soon arrived at the 'Humble Hearth', which was the descriptive name of the inn.

Obara cracked her neck explosively, pulling off her cloak to reveal the short sword she had strapped to her side and a buckler strapped to her back. Completing the ensemble was a long whip, which she had tied around her waist like a belt. She was a tall, big-boned woman, who considered herself a warrior. She was decent enough with the sword she had, as well as in the use of the whip, though her preferred weapon was a spear, much like her father. "So, now that we're here, what exactly are we going to do, Arianne? You promised me excitement and I suppose hiding away like we have has been fun but I hope you have something else lined up for us."

Arianne dropped her own cloak on the middle of the three beds, smirking at the older woman as she stretched, her full chest pushing out for a moment as she popped some of the joints in her back. "Why dear cousin, what we do is simple, we snoop. Men never think that women, particularly women such as myself and Tyene, are capable of speech, let alone intelligence. In any case, we will be able to hear what is going on in the city, which way the wind is blowing and then see if there is anything we can do take advantage of it, either for sport, for family, or to irritate the Baratheon king or his cats and dogs. Hopefully we will find the animals are already at one another's throats, but if not, well, I'm certain that we can find a way to make trouble somehow."

"That sounds interesting, Ari, but I should warn you to watch what you eat in the city, even in the better quarters." Tyene was a fair skinned woman despite coming from the arid wastes of Dorne with golden hair, sky blue eyes who radiated innocence from every pore, a sense that was extremely false. The dress she wore underneath her cloak was her normal light green with creamy white highlights, a high modest bodice, and long sleeves, highlighting her innocence as Obara's leathers heightened her martial appearance.

She was a poisoner by preference, and had a wicked tongue on her that could ever so politely flense a person's hide or lie with the face of a virginal maid. "I have heard of the food used in the poorer sections of the city and, judging by the smell, we should only eat at the best, most expensive eateries. I would also like to stop by the markets; I didn't bring any supplies with me."

"Tomorrow." Arianne replied firmly. "For now, let us find a nice upscale alehouse, preferably by the perfumer's street or possibly the Street of Flour. I want up-to-date news, cousins, before we move into our hostel tonight."

After they found a suitable establishment, the odd trio discovered that the city itself was abuzz with the news of the coming tourney or, at least, the middle-class and upper-class were. The bottom class didn't care one way or the other, their subsistence existence not really allowing for time to wonder what their betters were doing.

They heard some odd stories about someone called the Rock Hurler, as well as some news they were interested in. They also noted where the Lannister supporters were staying. Tyene, in particular, was very interested in the stories, although she was also interested in the fact that someone from the palace was seen down on the Street of the Sisters, which held both the Great Sept of Baelor and the Alchemists Guildhall.

Obara was interested somewhat in the tourney, though as a woman she probably wouldn't be able to enter. While she wasn't attractive, she still had womanly hips and chest so there was little chance of her tricking her way into the tourney.

Arianne, on the other hand, cared not for either of these tidbits. What she cared about was that Margaery Tyrell and Ranma Stark had been seen together. Despite what she told her cousins, she was planning much more than making trouble here. No, what she wanted to do was see if she could in some way break up this upcoming marriage. Barring that, she would be willing to seize any opportunity to further Dorne's position, as well as her own, by weakening everyone else's positions, if she could.

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Single knights and groups of men intent on winning glory for themselves and their family names began to trickle in from the Stormlands, Riverlands, and elsewhere in Westeros, outside of the North. Of course, the North was also going to be represented by Ser Jory, Ranma, and a few of the others from Winterfell, so that really didn't matter one way or the other.

Like he had been joking all along, Eddard still found himself in the unenviable position of being the one in charge of everything, which put even more of a strain on his time. He was so swamped, he was forced to turn over almost all it to Ranma and Ser Jory. While this got Ranma out of the city to oversee the construction of the various tents and stalls, it also cut into his training time tremendously, something Ranma didn't like.

It was early morning on one such day when Joffrey made his first mistake since trying to push for Fenris' execution. The Prince knew that Ranma would be busy all day with the preparations for the tournament and thought that perhaps it was a good time to escalate things with his younger brother. After all, soon enough he wouldn't have to worry about Ranma any longer. The specific **item** he had wanted from the alchemists was almost ready and could not be traced back to him, which was why it had taken so long. But for now, it was time again to put his little brother in his place.

Joffrey had become emboldened since coming home to the Red Keep, not only because he felt this was his place of power but because of how Tommen hadn't been reacting. At first, Joffrey thought he might run to their parents to spill out the story about the dead songbird but that hadn't occurred nor did he go to them after Joffrey upped the ante,

leaving bits of dismembered animal in his room randomly.

He was all set for tears, which would work in his favor and prove to their father that Tommen wasn't a son he would be proud of. Not like Joffrey saw himself, if Robert could only see past his looks, which was the reason Joffrey felt the man never appreciated him like he should. The fact that Tommen hadn't done that meant he was too scared of reprisals, at least in Joffrey's mind, which meant Joffrey was free to escalate things further. The mantra of the bully was the same no matter your station or reality.

So when he came upon Tommen heading out of the Royal suites down to the Tower of the Hand, where he would exercise, Joffrey decided to twist the knife. He said jokingly, "I haven't seen your little songbird around lately, brother, did it escape? I would hate to think that it has sung its last refrain."

Tommen had been on tenterhooks for months, getting angrier and angrier every time he found a dead animal in his room, with no one to direct that anger at. While on the surface his older brother's jocularly was mostly in keeping with the older boy's sense of humor, if the term was used very loosely indeed, Tommen was in no mood to see it as simply a joke at his expense. So instead of reacting verbally or simply running away as Joffrey had thought, Tommen turned and roared, jumping towards him.

"Don't make jokes like that, you, you RAGH!" Other than that, there was nothing intelligible in his shouting but his charge took Joffrey completely by surprise.

Joffrey was a young man, spare and thin of body but still almost a grown man, who had kept up on some of the sword practices he had to do to keep in shape. Tommen was merely ten years old, yet a small fireplug of muscle thanks Ranma's training. The young Prince found himself bowled over by his little brother. He barely got his hands up in time to protect his face as Tommen began to pound on him.

All the younger Prince' training about where to punch, something he had only begun to learn in the past month and half, left him thanks to his fury. As strong as he was for his age, the blows weren't doing any real damage but Joffrey wasn't exactly a strongly built person, either, and they would leave welts and bruises that would last for days.

Luckily, for the older prince's body and ego, Tommen's wordless bellows of rage had been heard throughout the Royal suites. About thirty seconds into the assault, Tommen found himself lifted off Joffrey by a massive hand grabbing the back of his shirt. "What's all this!" roared a voice, their father's voice, in full fury. "I'll not have my brats arguing like this, rolling around on the floor of the hall like dogs!"

At the sound of that voice, Tommen subsided nodding his head and let his hands fall. He soon found himself planted feet first on the ground, while Joffrey sniffled a little bit on the ground nearby. Robert stared down at him with contempt in his eyes before flicking his gaze over to Tommen. "Well, what happened here?"

Behind them, Myrcella and Cersei came out from deeper within the suites, having heard the noise and Robert's roaring bellow. Unlike Robert, who was all set for the day to head out to see the preparations for the tournament before getting in some hunting, the two ladies haven't quite gotten ready for their day. Cersei had hastily pulled on a robe to cover herself, which was the only reason that Robert beat her out in the first place because the King's chambers were several doors further down than the Queen's. They used to share a chamber but Robert had decided on this arrangement so he could more easily bed willing wenches than a frigid lioness.

Myrcella made to rush over to her younger brother, unmindful of the fact that her robe wasn't tied closed until a stern injunction from her mother made her stop. She looked down at herself then blushed before pulling the robe around tightly around her body. She shivered a little inside at the look she caught out of the corner of her eye from Ser Trant, who had been standing guard with Jaime on Robert's door. Jaime, however, stepped between the two, moving quickly in front of the Princess, motioning her back to her mother. Her mother's stern glance and hand on her shoulder forced Myrcella to go back into her room but it also forgave her slightly. The shouts and mindless screaming had startled the Queen as well.

Robert didn't notice this, simply staring down at his youngest son. "Well? What you have to say for yourself?"

Instead of trying to make excuses, Tommen stood up straight and stared up at his father. Ranma had been teaching him quite a bit more than just physical exercises; he also been teaching Tommen how to truly be worthy of being a noble and he said steadfastly, "I have no excuse father. My brother made an ill-timed joke and I overreacted."

Robert's lips twitched a little from their frown, pleased that his son owned up to it like this. More and more the stag in the littlest lion was coming out and he was happy to see it. That didn't mean he was any happier about the two boys fighting like this where any servant could see them. "And what kind of ill-timed joke was this to make you lose your

temper, boy?"

"He made a joke about my songbird, Sir, about how he hadn't seen it lately."

Despite having his own strong suspicions in that area, the King hadn't done anything about it since his youngest seemed to be handling it well enough on his own, seeing it as another test of his youngest boy's mettle. Now he simply stared down at Joffrey, who was still sniveling a little as he sat upright on the floor. "Get up." Robert snarled contemptuously. Joffrey hastened to his feet standing there, trembling. "That joke is ill-timed, given what happened to his bird while we were all away. I'll hear no more jokes or quips about that. Are we clear or do I have to thump you as well?"

Joffrey shook his head rapidly; the fear of his father's wrath overcoming his desire to see Tommen punished and his anger at how Tommen had manhandled him, which was growing in him now that the assault was over.

Robert turned his attention back to Tommen. "On the other hand, we can't just have you attacking your older brother like this. He is the Crown Prince after all and some things just can't be borne. Do you understand me?"

Tommen nodded, looking down for just a moment before looking back up at him. "Good." Robert said nodding his head firmly. "You're confined to your room for the rest of the day. I'll send the maester to you to give you extra lessons and lines to write out, which will be all I'll do for this first offense but if it happens again boy, I'll take my belt to your back understand?"

The young boy nodded looking over at his mother who stared at both boys, her face unreadable at the moment. She was thankful that the King hadn't handed out a larger punishment to either boy and she decided to watch her oldest son more closely from now on.

She didn't understand what was going on there, having been busy herself with the small counsel as well as her own duties, responsibilities, and plots (of course). Cersei had been able to get a spy onto the Tower of the Hand's staff so was hoping that she could have the incriminating book that caused Jon Arryn's death removed before too long, hopefully before Ned Stark could push forward with his investigation. She also had her agents in the city 'removing' other pieces of evidence.

Joffrey knew when to back off. He decided then not to torment his younger brother with the dead animals any longer. He'd leave a few, spaced out intermittently so it seemed as if it had nothing to do with this assault but after that he would let it peter out. No, Joffrey was beginning to realize that the changes Ranma had made in Tommen were too deep for him to just go back to his old ways of dealing with him.

With that Robert dismissed both boys, but he gave Tommen one silent nod of approval as the boy turned away.

After that, Robert moved backwards, entering the Queen's chamber, an area he didn't normally enter without being drunk first. Cersei quickly closed the door behind them, looking at him thoughtfully. "Your son might have been up to his old tricks lately." Robert growled, looking at her angrily.

The Queen bit back an angry retort, not liking anyone to attack her little lion. But she was a politician, and had played this game for a very long time. She knew how to play for the long game, not just the here and now. "There is no proof of that, still I will have words with him about being more sympathetic to his younger brother. That joke was certainly ill-timed."

Robert looked at her. Seeing her unkempt like this made him remember how beautiful she was, just like she had been on their wedding day. It made it easy to see why she was still counted as one of the most beautiful women in all of Westeros. Yet for all that, there was no love between them, or even lust, frankly. She wasn't Lyanna, the only woman that Robert felt he could ever have truly loved, and there had been too much bad blood between them since. "What if I said," He said abruptly, "that I was thinking of naming Tommen my heir over Joffrey?"

Cersei had thought this might be coming for months now, well before they arrived in Kings Landing in fact. But despite that forewarning, her anger at the very idea nearly caused her to explode at him. Yet, her self-control was such that she was able to fight back the angry words. "I would say that it is premature. Tommen is a young boy barely 10 years old now. He has not even reached his eleventh nameday, while Joffrey is sixteen going on seventeen. He is also due to be wed, further strengthening the crowns position and uniting House Stark and House Baratheon."

In fact, it was only how deeply in debt the kingdom was and Eddard's insistence that they at the very least shave that by half before having a large wedding ceremony that was staving it off at all. Sansa had been bleeding for over three years now so there was no physical reason why they couldn't be married. Ned had grabbed onto that excuse with

both hands, both he and Ranma seeing that match more and more as unfitting for their daughter/sister, no matter what she herself thought. The row that caused was now entering the stuff of legends among the servants of the Tower.

In fact, right now Sansa was commiserating with Joffrey outside on the lawn while his parents talked. She was going to have a stern talk with Tommen about his brother's dignity. Ranma would have a talk with him as well, which would be more along the lines of a critique of his form than anything else.

Robert's temper cooled a little in the face of his Queen's cold analysis. "Aye," he muttered, "you're right. But if Joffrey doesn't show himself to be a man rather than a little puling whelp before they wed, I'll name Tommen my heir and send Joffrey and Sansa out to one of my brothers. Hah, maybe Stannis could stick a spine up his ass!" For all that he disliked Stannis, Robert knew him to have a high sense of honor and to be a personally brave and intelligent man. "*Stiff as a corpse, though.*"

Again, the words almost acted like a whip to Cersei, trying to force her to respond, to shriek at the very idea of **her** son moving away from where she could protect him. But her self-control once more came to her aid. "If it pleases you, that seems appropriate. I would say however," she hastened to add, "that we should not discuss this with anyone else. Let them both continue to act as they have, in that manner we will see whether or not either is truly changing."

Robert grunted again and headed for the door leaving without another word.

The Queen stood there for a moment in silence thought. In the end, it mattered not to her which son took the throne, though she felt that her eldest had the best mind of the trio and **was** the eldest, therefore should be the heir. And yet, she no longer felt as powerful or as certain in her position, not only with Joffrey but as Queen as she had a year ago. The fact that Eddard still had possession of the book worried her with each passing week, despite knowing how much time and energy he had to put into his duties as Hand.

The Starks were too powerful, too strong with the support of the King plus the ninety men they had on call here in the Red Keep for her to want any kind of physical confrontation, certainly not with Ranma added into the mix. Even with the men her cousin had led here from Casterly Rock, that would be an unwinnable fight, even if she was the only one who could see it.

Tommen with his friendship and sort of apprenticeship to Ranma would have the Starks backing, since the way he was acting seemed to indicate he truly was the King's son, even if his looks argued against it. Of course, if certain truths came out not even that would save her personally.

With that thought uppermost in her mind, Cersei left the room, not realizing that the entire episode had been seen by several servants, one of whom answered to Littlefinger. When he heard about it, he merely smiled, contemplating how best to use this to his advantage in his ongoing quest to topple all the other players from their high seats.

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About a week after that incident, Margaery accompanied Ranma into the city to pick up his sword. It was more because she had her own shopping to do than anything else, as well as the fact that it gave her an excuse to get away from Joffrey. More and more she was worried about him, loathing the task at her grandmother had set her. She knew it was all for the good of the family but right now there just was no contest in who she would be willing to marry. That, plus the fact that Ranma was keeping her at arms-length until she proved trustworthy was driving her a little batty.

Of course, there were her grandmother's orders and pithy comments about Ranma and Joffrey to consider as well. 'Honest, upright, a Stark,' she said in her letter, 'a fool other men will follow, let him try to keep his distance, I am certain our rose can wind her vines around him.'

As for Joffrey, Margaery was still ordered to try and get close to him, until she had solid proof to back her uneasy feelings. 'For all your misgivings, the boy is a prize. He is heir to the throne, much better a match for you and for him too, if his father wasn't a fool, and such a man can be led by his appetites, whatever they may be, making out position all the stronger.'

Today they were walking through the streets, accompanied by her chaperone as always. No guards were with them as Ranma was guard enough all on his own. Soon enough, they were on the Street of Steel, winding their way up the hill. Margaery wrinkled her exquisite nose at the smell and further at the noise. Ranma chuckled. "You didn't have to come with me, if this offends your Tyrell sensibilities, you know."

Margaery huffed irritably. Ranma had been poking fun at her family in this manner for a while, seemingly amused by how her family held themselves to a high standard of beauty and decorum. Her shots back at his uncouth nature were taken with aplomb, leaving her with no set retort. "I am not so lack-witted as to let you out into the city without a minder, Ranma Stark. Who knows what kind of trouble your barbarian manners would get you into? I need to protect my family's investment, after all."

This had become a familiar refrain between them, oddly enough, a sign of the budding friendship between them. While Margaery was dealing with her issues, the two were becoming friends, something she would never have expected to be able to say of her prospective groom. He was kind, funny, honorable, which was part of the problem in getting closer of course, and **intelligent** something she would not have thought in all honesty.

Moreover, he had a level of charisma that was astonishing in one so young, a tried and tested core of strength, unlike the posing and the pomposity of other men their age she had met before. Those youths were too young to have fought in even the Greyjoy rebellion and they thought battles were like tourneys, with rules and mulled wine waiting for you. The difference between that and true toughness was something she never would have recognized until seeing the real thing in Ranma.

There was a mutual respect growing between them and, despite the fact her inability to get closer to him using her normal charms drove her up the wall, most of the time Margaery found herself enjoying this process more than she would some torrid whirlwind romance from a bard's tale.

For his part, the more time he spent around Margaery, the more Ranma compared her to Nabiki from his last life. They were both very observant, very intelligent, and devoted, Margaery to her family, Nabiki to herself. Though, where Nabiki had few real scruples when it came to her dealings with others, Margaery had limits she would not cross and her methods were entirely different.

Her political acumen was extreme, however, and Ranma had called on it a few times to aid him in his dealings with various nobles of the court, a few knights, and most particularly, Lancel Lannister, who had only obeyed his cousin's injunction for a week before trying to make trouble in the court. He found himself stymied easily by Margaery and Ranma.

That Margaery was attractive, there was no doubt but the mind and the personality was what interested him more than that. She was funny, gentle at times, sarcastic and snarky at others. Mutual respect and amusement as well as attraction seemed to be working very well as a basis for their 'relationship'.

The two continued to snipe good-naturedly at one another as they continued up the hill. They soon reached Tobho Mott's store. Entering the sales area, Ranma found the same young man manning the front. After exchanging greetings, Ranma asked, "I received a message that my sword was ready?"

Tobho's gruff voice sounded from the back. "Aye, it is and an odd job it was. Still, I'm happy with it. The cutting blade is good, lad, but I'm worried about the durability of it." The man came out, holding his customer's finished blade. "Yer new steel strengthening techniques worked and, ye gods, the edge is something I could use like a razor but that very sharpness means it will be more prone to wear and tear in a long battle."

"Let me worry about that, old man." Ranma grinned, taking the blade and holding it up to the light. It was just as it looked in the sketches he had shown the blacksmith. It even had the lines, the faint wavy texture to the steel. The katana had a faint curve to it, was a little over 40 inches long, longer than a normal katana would be, with one side having an edge all along its length and the other down half of it. The point, too, was wicked and Ranma smiled as he looked down its length.

Ranma brought the blade down to one side, holding it there for a moment before performing *laidō*, a fast draw cut, then bringing it back across just as swiftly, the noise of the sword through the air making a whistling sound. "Nice, **very** nice. The weight is perfect, the steel looks good too, and the cutting edge..."

He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket. Throwing it into the air, he brought the katana up to slice neatly through it. "Looks good. I don't suppose you have some steel ingots I could test it on?"

"I've got a sword you can test it on, if you want. I wouldn't mind seeing what it can do, either." Tobho shouted toward the back for a moment. Gendry came out, carrying a simple, yet very well made longsword.

Margaery immediately noticed the young man's features and she frowned thoughtfully.

Gendry looked at the very pretty high born girl and flushed, effected by her beauty, before looking at Ranma. "I'll just

swing this and we'll see if that fancy edge of yours keeps up."

"Hah, you just swing it, Waters." Tobho growled. "None of your lip."

That made the Tyrell girl glance at the smith sharply, noticing how the man had called Gendry a baseborn. *Interesting and the man made certain we knew it. That possibly means he understands the Queen's views on her husband's bastards. Or could it be her policy against them is more... proactive than I thought. Something to think about, as is why...*

Ranma, however, simply nodded at Gendry. The young apprentice swung the longsword through the air between him and Ranma. Ranma waited a split second and then swung his katana. There was a 'Spang!' as the two blades met. There was silver blur in the air, then a solid 'Thunk' as a foot of the longsword's blade impacted the wall. Ranma grinned. "I think the blade works, master Tobho." He held the blade up, showing that the edge hadn't even been marred. "So, how much do I owe you?"

A few moments of haggling later, Ranma and Margaery left, with Ranma having been told a time to expect his two 'odd short swords'. He had run into a man who used a similar weapon before, which was where he had gotten the idea for them.

Halfway back to the Red Keep, they were hailed from an open door bakery to the right of them. "Is that the maid of High Garden I see? And you must be young Stark? You've got your father's looks to be sure."

They turned and Margaery's eyes widened, recognizing the man from a painting she had been shown of her family's enemies. "Prince Oberyng." she said bowing her head and curtsying with all her formidable grace, despite being in the middle of the street with the hustle and bustle of traffic moving around her. She moved forward, forcing Ranma and her chaperone to follow. "I did not know you were in the city. When did you arrive?"

"Oh, a few days ago." the Prince replied blandly. "Alas, I do not have the sea legs to get off a ship and go immediately into combat so I had to arrive early and, as you well know how little affection I have for the Royal family, best to get here early and get a good room, yes? I don't suppose your older brother Willas is here, is he? I have a lot of respect for that man, particularly in animal husbandry, and there were some questions I wished to ask him of a new line of horses coming out of Essos."

Margaery laughed politely, though what he had said hadn't actually been funny and the mention of Willas was undiplomatic in the extreme since he had been crippled by a bad fall from a horse in a tourney against Oberyng himself. "I regret to say that my eldest brother is not here, though, if you wish, I would be happy to send any correspondence you want to him via raven. But I find I have forgotten my manners. Prince Oberyng, be known to Ranma Stark. Ranma, this is Prince Oberyng of Dorne."

Ranma nodded sizing the man up. "Uncle Brynden mentioned you were in the city, Ser, though he didn't tell me you were going to enter the tourney."

"Yes, I imagine he would, a most intelligent man, your uncle. A spear user like myself, at times as well, though not as speedy as I. I found it informative he was here in the city serving you and your father in such a fashion. It made a good first impression to be sure, though I have to wonder, are you three still able to wend your way through the pits of this place? Or have they begun to move toward you?"

"A little bit of the former, possibly more of the latter." Ranma shrugged, knowing not to say anything more. Brynden had told him about Oberyng's being in the city. Ranma and Ned were both of the opinion the man was here as the Dornish equivalent of a vulture, circling for opportunity. *You don't trust scavengers, you keep them in sight.* Luckily for the Starks, both Brynden and Eddard felt Oberyng was no threat to their position, yet.

Next to him, Margaery kept her polite smile from becoming rather more crooked with difficulty. *So, Ranma can act circumspectly; where in the Seven Kingdoms has he been hiding it?* Margaery knew nothing about how much of his skills and abilities Ranma was hiding even from his father, how much he had learned of the city, and how it worked over the last few months. Ranma preferred the direct approach, especially in matters of the heart (or betrothal). That didn't mean he couldn't be subtle or secretive.

She kept that thought off her face for the moment, studying Prince Oberyng closely as she could without appearing anything but the perfectly poised, demure noble lady. High Garden and Dorne were not friendly with one another; they had long been enemies over the Dornish Marches. This competition had been overtaken in recent years with the hatred Dorne and its Royal family held for all things Lannister since the Rebellion.



Still, Margaery wondered how the Prince would affect the power struggle going on behind the scenes here. The Lannisters and the general corruption of the court were very slowly losing ground against Ned Stark and his dogged, determined approach. With every month that passed, he pulled the nation slightly more out of debt to the Lannister family as well as the Iron Bank of Braavos. It was precisely what he had to do but it was only a matter of time before the Lannister faction began to push back, though, strangely, she felt the Queen wasn't interested in it or, at least, had something on her mind other than the battles occurring in the court and small council.

"Come, sit with me." the Prince said. "I have heard a wondrous tale of you, boy, was there any truth to it?" He raised a hand to the serving girl, who quickly returned with two mugs of beer.

Ranma rolled his eyes, then pulled up a chair readily, sprawling out in it with one hand negligently falling to the pommel of his new sword while Margaery and her chaperone took seats nearby. The smith had been damn good, even if he was slow. The sword was excellent, if as expensive as Tobho cautioned it would be but Ranma would get his money worth when the smith finished his katars. Well, one would be Ranma's, he thought the other might be a good nameday present for Tommy, after he got his parents' (really his father's) permission first, or maybe one of the wolfsworn, as had been his original thought on it.

"Some truth, not so much derring-do as the song states. Any kind of battle in the enclosed space of a castle is more about blood and death than courage as I said to the giggling girl over there." Indeed Margaery was giggling. Any mention of that song would set her off a bit. "I rescued Domeric, the trueborn heir of Roose Bolton. I have no idea nor do I wish to speculate on why he changed his part in it to that of a woman."

The Dornish prince guffawed loudly at that, slapping his thigh. "I see! Well, in any event it should be interesting to see what you do in the tourney."

"Are you going to compete?" Ranma asked. "I've heard stories about how good you are with a spear. I imagine it would make the melee more entertaining."

"Alas no, I they have no wish to enter the melee or the jousting. I'm here for the wrestling and archery competitions. "I'm quite afraid that I would lose control if I were to face anyone who backed Robert in his rebellion."

Margaery's face went blank at this blatantly indiscreet talk but Ranma merely shrugged. "I can't say I like the man much. He doesn't seem to really be reign as I understand it, being more of a figurehead than anything else. But your comment seems to have had a bit more than sheer disgust there. I understand that Dorne's relationship with the Crown is bad, although I thought it was mostly the Lannisters you hated."

"I hate them all," the Prince growled, his self-control for fraying slightly as this well-worn topic came up. "I hate the Lannisters for what they did, I hate Robert for not punishing them for it, and I hate your father and your family Stark for backing it and that bastard's rebellion!" He reined himself and with difficulty. "Though at the same time," he went on, almost against his will, "I...can't fault your family for what they did. You were certainly given enough provocation."

"I can understand that," Ranma said nodding his head, showing no reaction to the Prince's sudden violent reaction. "But Robert was at war and it was the Lannisters who were at fault for the death of your sister and her children in the sack of the city."

"Hah!" Prince barked a sound that was in no way a laugh. "Death? You make it sound so clean. You have no idea what the Mountain and his men did, do you? It wasn't merely that they killed my sister Elia but what they did to her and her children."

A cold feeling began in Ranma stomach and he frowned. "I know the Mountain killed them in cold blood and I've never understood why Robert didn't demand his head at the very least but what else did they do?" He asked, not certain he really wanted to know the answer.

He didn't. "**Ser** Gregor Clegane and Ser Amory Lorch killed Aegon, Elia's young son, in front of my sister and then raped her as Lorch killed her baby daughter while she watched. The Mountain's soldiers bragged about it after!" he said, his voice harsh and grating, his hands clenched on the stein of beer he had been drinking from so hard that the wood actually creaked a bit under his hands. "I hate them, I will always. I hate Tywin Lannister for ordering it, for the slight of Aerys choosing to wed Rhaegar to Elia over his daughter the bitch queen. I hate Gregor Clegane and Lorch for doing the deed. And I hate '**King**' Robert Stranger-damned Baratheon the First for not punishing even the murderers as he should have!"

Oberyn was silent, breathing deeply as he tried to get control of himself. "It is because the Mountain will be in the tournament that I dare not enter. I would have tunnel vision. I would charge him with everything I had and another

Lannister supporter would take the opportunity to slip his sword between my ribs. Accidents happen all the time on the field of the tournament, after all."

Ranma went cold. Even Margaery, who had heard rumors of the real story about what happened during the sack of Kings Landing before, had been horrified by this simple, unadorned tale. Ranma too had heard a version of it before but certainly not the full story. Enough to make him hate the Mountain That Rides but now, knowing the full story, his emotions shut down almost as if he had entered the Soul of Ice. "I did not know that." he said quietly, his voice quiet.

Yet something about it made everyone in the vicinity, even those passersby who didn't even hear the conversation, shiver and move on quickly. Margaery and Oberyn stared at him, as Ranma's hand, with no apparent effort, crushed the stein of beer he had had been holding into so many splinters. Ranma didn't even notice, simply staring across at the Prince. "I didn't know but I do now."

That was much worse than what he had thought, that it wasn't even simply a horrible death caused by the heat of battle as maester Luwin had told him in their history lessons. *This was cold-blooded and premeditated torture and rape, and the Lannisters and Robert allowed that monster to go free? No longer.* Ranma's voice was so cold it could have frozen the water of the port. "I do now."

He stood up, bowing abruptly to the Prince. "We have to get back soon, so we will take our leave now, Prince Oberyn."

Oberyn was rather shaken by the sheer force of Ranma's voice and the unrelenting, yet cold fury it held. *Truly it is said that Stark blood has ice in it.* he thought to himself, shuddering a little. He knew his own temper ran hot and that in the heat of a moment he would do horrible things. Had done horrible things in his mercenary years. Yet, that voice had unnerved even him, a core of uncompromising purpose, something of the unstoppable nature of winter itself in it.

Soon enough, however, he recovered and shook his head, smirking a little at having done, albeit without plan or attempt, what he could to sour the Stark heir's opinions of the King and the Lannisters. *A good day, still, I wonder what that young man will do now?*

The walk back to the Red Keep was silence and Ranma said not a word as he dropped Margaery and her chaperone off at the Maidenvault before heading straight to the tower. There were five days before the tournament began and Ranma now knew what he was going to do.

OOOOOOO

After that event, in the days leading up to the tournament, everyone that interacted with him noticed the change in Ranma. There was an edge there, a sharpness to his movements. No longer was he going out of his way to have fun with Merry or Tommy. Now he exercised nearly all day, his movements sharp, controlled, and edged with a deep and abiding fury.

The third day of this had Eddard calling his son in to talk. "Something is bothering you, my son, everyone can see it. Even Tommen and Myrcella have been walking on tiptoes around you the past few days. Can I ask what is wrong?"

"Gregor Clegane will be in the tourney, correct?" Ranma said, turning from the window to stare at his father, his blue eyes dark as the depths of the ocean.

"He will." Ned responded, hesitantly staring at his son. "We received word from Castle Clegane several weeks back that he will arrive the evening before and to put his name down for both the melee and the tourney."

"You never told me the full truth, Luwin never told me what really happened in the sack of Kings Landing do Elia Martell and her children." Ranma said.

"No, I did not." Eddard replied simply. "There are some things too horrible to speak of, that was one of them."

"And you knew what my response would be to it."

"Yes, I knew."

"Then you know what I'm going to do."

Ned looked his son thoughtfully and nodded. "Yes, I do. It is long overdue, my son, though I am not so sanguine about risking you in a fight with that monster. Still, if something should happen to him, then I will thank the old gods that such a one has been removed from this earth."

Ranma nodded and the two men shared a firm handshake before Ned let his son go. He stared after the younger man for a moment, shaking his head. In actuality, he had worried, after Ranma's initial run in with the Bolton forces and what had happened then, that Ranma would have simply ridden off to hunt down the Mountain, despite the distance between castle Clegane and Winterfell. The mental scars left by Ramsay Bolton were deep and had never truly healed. Added to this was Ranma's sense of honor, something that Ned fully shared. Still, Eddard couldn't have allowed that, but now, in a tourney? Well, it would still make trouble but it would be much easier to handle. *And I really will sleep better knowing that one more beast has been removed from this world.*

OOOOOO

A month after her discussion with Domic, Daenerys did precisely what she had said she would; she goaded her brother into hitting her again. She did so this time by attacking his basic intelligence and goading him by comparing him to the many madmen and women their family had produced. Viserys had been pulled off her much quicker this time by a guard stationed outside her bedchamber, but the majority of the damage had been done to her face, making her once again unsuitable to be married off.

The old Daenerys might have cried out or become more fearful of her brother after his attack, even if it had been her plan in the first place. But Daenerys had changed; no longer was she that young woman, who was willing to let others control her. She wanted to control her life and physical pain like this was a paltry price to pay for that.

So a brief, painful, yet heartfelt smile appeared on her face when she heard magister Illyrio cordially ripping into Viserys outside her door. "I fail to see what kind of strategy you are following when you assault your sister so, Your Highness, perhaps you could enlighten me? Because from my perspective, these bouts of Targaryen madness do nothing but weaken our position." Daenerys' smiled slightly at that and the hissing indrawn breath from her brother that came with it.

Outside the Princess's room, Illyrio glared at Viserys, wondering if he might have been better served to separate the two Targaryens and ditch the older sibling to concentrate on molding the younger. But it was too late for that now and, in all honesty, these bouts with his sister were the only real issue he had with Viserys. "I have been pouring my goodwill with Khal Drogo out like water in the desert to apologize for this but this will cost us. Luckily, Khal Drogo was planning to leave soon on some kind of errand, something purely Dothraki that I don't understand. Regardless, he will be back in three months, by which time the Princess **must** be presentable. No more delays will be allowed or else Drogo may believe we are slighting his honor. If that happens, the whole city might pay the price for your madness."

Viserys ground his teeth but he nodded. "You're right. I shouldn't have reacted as badly as I did. She's just a child, lashing out at her superiors because she doesn't like their plans for her." Illyrio nodded encouragingly, his spiky beard bobbling, but inside he was wondering if Daenerys knew precisely what she was doing. Viserys went on, moving away from the door to his sister's room. "Anyway, how far along are we with our other plans?"

"I feel we might have enough political clout." Illyrio pulled at his beard thoughtfully as he followed the older Targaryen down the passageway. "Money has never been in much doubt but we could use more aid among the magisters whose holdings are centered on the shipyard. We've bought a lot of new hulls but if we don't woo them, those hulls might be postponed as long as they can get away with to pay back that slight. Other than that, there are one or two magisters we might wish to appeal to in order to aid to our war chest."

"Very well, get me a list of them, as well as some information about them, and I will see if we can convince them of the rightness of our cause." Viserys had been doing very well with wooing the magisters to believe in his cause, now that he had a backer like Illyrio.

Most of these magisters were not on the ruling council, being slightly below that, but two were and their influence was decent enough. Not enough to truly change the balance of power in the city. None of them, for example, were linked to the 'city watch', the small standing army that patrolled the city streets and ostensibly protected the city from exterior threats but were in reality mere strong arms for the council. Nor were the magisters who dealt in foodstuffs, always a city's main weakness, represented.

Still, Viserys had charmed enough magisters to bring in about twenty times the amount of money and resources Illyrio alone could call upon. "I trust you to be your normal, urbane, convincing self." Illyrio murmured as the two continued on their way.

Behind them, a door opened slightly and Domic came out, looking a little thoughtful as he turned to make his way to Daenerys' room.

Over the next few weeks, Daenerys busied herself by reading every single book she could get her hands on: about

warfare, about taxes, about laws, about anything really; both from the Free Cities of Essos and from Westeros. The Westeros books were few and far between, hence why Illyrio had allowed Domicer into his house to make use of his knowledge. Still, they helped expand her knowledge of the continent that her family had called home for three hundred years.

While she was doing this, Domicer memorized the guard schedule and became friends with a few of them, trying to figure out a way into the magister's vault without having to fight his way in. If he had to do that, they would never get out of the manse, there were too many guards. He was decent with a blade but not that good. Of course, he was also called upon to put forth his input whenever Illyrio or Viserys asked his opinion on anything Westerosi.

He was writing up some notes on the Vale lands for Viserys when they were interrupted by Illyrio coming in, looking thoughtful. "We seem to have attracted another Northerner to use, ser bard. A Jorah Mormont is here to swear his service to the Targaryen siblings. Do you know him?"

At that name from out of the past Domicer's eyes widened in shock, while Viserys looked at him in amusement for his sudden lack of control. "Jorah Mormont? Yes, I know him very well or, at least, knew him well. He and I fought together in the Greyjoy Rebellion. We were among the first Northerners to storm the walls of Pyke."

"Is he trustworthy?" Viserys asked. "And is he so good with a blade that he would be an asset?"

"As a blade he is around my level, I think, though he was also trained as a troop commander, something I never had interest in learning. However, I doubt he would be able to tell you anything I could not about Westeros. You see, he is an exile. He fled his House's Island in front of a sentence of death for slavery. He was selling people from his own clan's land and others into slavery to pay for keeping his second wife in the comfort she had become used to."

Viserys rolled his eyes. He had spent most of his life in Essos, where the slave trade was a major part of the continent's economy, so he had never developed the Westeros attitude toward the practice.

The bard knew this and cautioned. "Do not make the mistake of assuming that the slavery issue is a small one. Even smallfolk in Westeros are free, the concept of slavery is anathema to nearly everyone both in power and not."

"Hmm." Illyrio murmured. "I'm going to have the guards escort him here, let us see what he has to say."

Moments later, Jorah Mormont was shown in. Like all his House, he was tall, broad shouldered, and strong. Also hairy, with a beard that had seen better days and hairy arms shown in the short sleeved shirt he currently wore. He had been stripped of sword and mail before being allowed into the magister's presence.

When he was ushered in, his eyes lit on Domicer and widened in shock. "Domicer Bolton! What by all the gods old and new are you doing here?!"

"I could be asking you the same question, Jorah." Domicer's voice was cold and Jorah flinched at it. "I take it your ventures into slavery have failed to keep your lady happy, so you are here to pursue another profession?"

Jorah winced further, then barked a unhappy chuckle. "You always did have a tongue on you. But no, I'm here for me. My wife left me; she's fucking some merchant prince in Lys. So much for love!"

It was Domicer's turn to wince. "Throwing away your honor and your family to keep her happy wasn't enough? Ouch. I apologize for my tone, Jorah."

Viserys barked a harsh laugh. "Such loyalty will eventually reap its own rewards, yet we are getting far afield of the real topic. Why are you here, man of the North, and what can you offer us to take you into our service?"

If anyone objected to Viserys' use of the royal 'we', none commented on it. Jorah shrugged. "I had thought to give you another perspective on Westeros and its people but I have no doubt that Domicer has already filled that role. I will say that I have connections still in Westeros, particularly in the Vale and Westerlands. Other than that, I am an able blade and a good leader of such. I have taken a hard look at Robert Baratheon's rule and I think that a return to the glory days of Targaryen rule would actually be best for Westeros in the long run, so if you'll have me, I'll be your sworn man."

That comment won Domicer some looks, since the bard had not in fact sworn any oaths to either Illyrio or the Targaryens and had been blunt about his being torn between them and his loyalty to House Stark. Viserys however simply nodded. "Blades we have but field commanders used to the Westerosi methods of war could be useful. Still, that is a long way into the future, so what information can you give us of Westeros to make employing you now useful?"

That conversation continued for a time, since it appeared that Jorah had some way of getting news from Westeros that was more up to date than Domic's. The news that Lysa Arryn nee Tully had fallen into some kind of paranoid madness was interesting and potentially very useful. A land without a clear leader might be more vulnerable to conquest, despite its mountainous nature. The news that a King Beyond the Wall had risen was useful, as well, and something Domic hadn't heard a hint of. It implied that, at worst, the North would be too busy defending that border to add its weight to anything happening further south, at best, forces from the rest of the realms could have been sent to the Wall, weakening them all.

Despite this, Domic was more than a little suspicious of his former friend, which he confided to Daenerys later that evening. "His information is too new for someone who has spent years in Essos after his exile. I have no idea how he is getting it, he waves that off saying it is from contacts he made during his slaving years but that doesn't make sense. Those kinds of friends are fair-weather at best, why would they continue to share news with someone who has nothing to offer them back?"

Daenerys frowned, wincing internally at the pain this caused her face. "Could he be an agent of the eunuch? The master of whispers is supposed to be very subtle, after all, and these tidbits he's shared could simply be there to get us to trust him." Here she spoke of Viserys and Illyrio, really, not her, but the point was still applicable.

"Hmm... I would have said no before I heard of his crime all those years ago, but now?" Domic shrugged. "You must understand how slavery is seen in Westeros, Princess. It is a social taboo on the order of, of, offering violence against someone once you have taken bread in his or your own house. It is something that would make you anathema to all right thinking people. His reasons were such that I can commiserate with him but never condone his actions."

The young Princess took this in, though inside she still didn't understand the Westeros reaction to slavery, having been raised from a young age here in Essos. Still, she understood enough to make note of it. "I see. How will this influence our plans?"

Domic shrugged. "I'm waiting for an opportunity but I have come to the conclusion we might have to go for a smash and grab, as it were, and we are still going to be waiting some months before the ship captain you think will aid us is here to spirit us off. I will warn you, however, that this is a onetime proposition; when we try to break into the magister's vault, we won't be able to back out.

"I understand that." Daenerys actually smiled slightly, despite the pain of moving her mouth. "I understood that the moment I began to plan this out. We must, as the saying goes, risk all to gain all."

OOOOOO

Two days after speaking to his father, the tournament began and Ranma signed up for the melee and the joust. Gregor Clegane would be taking part in both. Ranma cared not for winning any longer; that would've simply been fun and amusing but now he was a man on a mission. The years since the crime occurred did not change right and wrong and, because of his experience upon meeting Ramsey Snow, he could all too easily imagine the pain, anguish, and terror Clegane's victims felt.

The tournament was situated a morning's journey away from the city in a large clearing that was about two miles across. In the center, with wooden bleachers surrounding them and a two story Royal box between them, were the fields for the two main events, the jousting and the melee. The jousting area would also be used for the archery tournament, while the melee section, a wide, circular area of gravel, bare ground, and grass, would be segmented up for the wrestling and fisticuffs competitions, as well as a few others, like knife throwing, spear hurling, and others.

Stalls had been set up all along the edge of the tournament selling food, alcohol, whores, and many other things. At Ned's direction, the money those vendors earned would be taxed quite a bit so both they and the crown would see a profit. Well the crown wouldn't, not given the large size of the prizes Robert had insisted be given out to the winners of the biggest competitions, archery, melee, and jousting.

The crowds had gathered already, as Ranma arrived with his father and the few knights from Winterfell who were going to enter the tournament. Many had thought to enter but that number decreased, once they saw how grimly Ranma acted about his own entry. Ser Jory, Mattimeo Cluny, and Ser Thomas Willowtree, were the only ones who still intended to enter the melee or the jousting, while six others would be entering the archery competition. Twelve men from Riverrun were participating, spread out in the melee and in other competitions.

Willowtree was the fourth son of a minor House that was beholden to House Manderly and was the only Ser among

them, other than Jory. He, like Jory, had won his Ser in the Iron Born rebellion for defending an ally. He was also the only person amongst the fifty men that had come south that believed in the Seven and he had been heavily disillusioned by the High Septon since their arrival here. In his own words, he desired some honest, wholesome battle to lose himself in.

Jory had his eye on a maid of the Queen's he had been flirting with the past few months and hoped to use the prize money to help in wooing her. Mattimeo wanted to make a name for himself. He was the youngest of the three, a humble, smiling lad who got along well with Ranma most of the time, though he wasn't nearly as serious about his martial skills as the others, knowing he would have to go home, eventually, to his family's coal mine.

That first day of the tourney was a half-day devoted entirely to the melee. This would allow those contestants who had also signed up for the jousting and were injured during it to heal somewhat over the two weeks of the tourney before the jousting began. Before that, of course, the tourney had to be formally begun by a speech from Robert.

Ranma stood among the other melee combatants while all around them crowds began to gather at the edge of the area set aside for the melee. He wore a half-plate armor, which bore his family's crest done out in black on the burnished steel and a single blue eye. At his side, he wore a simple longsword, borrowed from the Red Keep's armory.

For the melee, you had to blunt your blade as part of the security of the event so not as many people would die. Maces, hammers, and other blunt weapons were made lighter and had to submit to inspection for that purpose. His old warhammer hadn't passed inspection but Ranma had refused to blunt his new sword. That seemed almost like sacrilege, given the magnificence of the blade the master smith had forged for him.

The King's family, several nobles, and the Starks sat in a special two story pavilion that had been set up alongside the two areas for the main trio of events. It was covered with an awning that would give them shade from the sun, although all its sides were open. The chairs could be twisted around from one end to the other so that they could view both the jousting and the melee from the same position.

Margaery sat next to Sansa with Myrcella on her other side, a sitting arrangement that none of the three girls liked. With Joffrey sitting beside Sansa and then the special area for the King and Queen next to him, this left them with the current sitting arrangement, since Myrcella wanted Tommen to be sitting as far away from Joffrey as he could. Not that Myrcella was happy to have Margaery anywhere near her but her friend at least was a somewhat decent buffer so she wasn't tempted to claw her eyes out when she cooed about how handsome Ranma looked out there.

Sansa didn't like the fact that Margaery had been occasionally flirting with Joffrey but that seemed to have died down of late, which she was very happy for. She hadn't been prepared for it at all, though her womanly instincts had served her enough to step up her own flirting with him to keep the Crown Prince interests where it belonged (So much so that her father had taken her to task a few times). While Sansa was making herself a place in the Red Keep, getting along well with all the ladies and becoming the head seamstress of several projects, including one dress for the Queen that she was creating as a surprise gift for her, Sansa's relationship with her brother and father was not what it once was.

Neither of them saw the truth as she could so clearly. That Joffrey, despite not being what they thought of as a good match, was indeed a good match for her and would make an excellent King. He had the right attitude, the correct courtly manner, the looks, everything. Still, Sansa was looking forward to seeing her brother in the tournament. She also knew how easily he would overmatch and overwhelm any one person, so seeing him in the melee would probably be a better show than in the jousting.

On the other side of the raised seats for the King and Queen sat Ned, Renly, Ser Loras, Lancel Lannister, and Lord Jason Mallister from the Riverlands fortress of Seagard. Petyr, Varys, and the rest of the council as well as a few other highborn gentlemen and ladies from around the Crownlands sat behind them. A few maids and servants sat or stood around the edges of the box.

Ned had greeted Lord Mallister warmly. His domain, Seagard, was both a town and castle; it was built to defend the coast from raiders coming from the Iron Islands and was the site of many of the battles against the Iron Born during their rebellion. House Mallister itself was one of the most powerful Houses of the Riverlands.

Jason Mallister was an honorable man around Eddard's age with a chiseled face, brown hair, and eyes as sharp as the eagle on his family's crest. He and Ned had met before and respected one another deeply. Since the man's arrival a few days ago, the two of them had been sequestered, in the Hand's Tower. Ned shared with the man everything but his worry about the true parentage of the three royal children. Jason was sickened by the amount of graft Eddard was discovering but vowed to share his observations with Lord Tully when he could.

The new Hand still hadn't decided if Petyr was loyal but not willing to rock the boat, or working for himself. But that observation, as well as everything else Eddard wouldn't share even with a trustworthy friend like Jason, was a little much to send himself in a message back to Winterfell. And the ship from Lord Manderly, which had arrived two weeks ago, was an escape route, not a messenger service. The ravens, after all, could be sent anywhere the maester sent them and Ned didn't trust any of the Red Keep's maesters, most particularly Pycelle.

Oberyn was not among the occupants of the Royal Box. He sat among the crowd, looking around with interest as he tried to see if he could spot his errant ladies. They had done a very good job of disappearing into the city but he hoped to spot them here. He had begun to think maybe he was wrong about them being able to handle themselves and wanted to make certain they were still alive. The things his older brother would do to him if Arianne were killed here hardly bore thinking about. At last, he saw them among the peasants sitting in the merchants section of the seating and he sighed deeply in relief.

After that, Oberyn looked back at the melee competitors, easily spotting Ranma Stark and his own squire. As a relative unknown, Daemon Sand was able to disappear among the hundreds of other competitors, which would keep him safe. Relatively, anyway.

Robert stood up and after a short speech ended grandly, "This tourney is in honor of Ned Stark taking over as my Hand! For the honor of your families, for the money involved, and for the honor you'll show your King, fight well!"

With that, the horns blasted from all around and the groups moved off to their own tents at the far end of the two fields that would be used for the melee and the jousting, Ranma sharing a tent with his fellows from the North. They quickly pulled on their helmets on, adjusted their armor, and got their shields. Ranma looked at the other three before putting his own helmet on. "I probably don't have to tell you this," he said, his voice once more tinged with an icy rage, which sent all three of the other men backing away slightly, "but stay away from me out there. I'll try not to hurt any of you three if I can, but don't get between me and the Mountain that Rides."

All three men's eyes widened at that declaration and began to wildly speculate what it meant. Ser Jory was the first to put two and two together. "Justice long overdue, my Lord," he said reaching forward to clap Ranma on the shoulder. "I hope you get your chance."

Ranma nodded, reaching out and gripping the older man's shoulder then turned at the sound of the second booming bellow of the horns indicating the men needed to reassemble for the melee.

The melee occurred in a wide circular area, with every man set up along the edge of the circle. Unfortunately, Ranma found himself almost directly across from his target. As soon as the horns boomed again, every man (mounted or otherwise) would run forward twenty paces into the center of the circle, where they would start to attack one another.

Strategies for the melee varied. Many, such as Oberyn's squire Daemon, would move forward slowly, staying to the outer edge to pick off one or two opponents, staying away from the main battle and letting his opponent's tire themselves out.

Others, like Gregor Clegane would simply wade into it, using their strength and reach to smash their enemies. Gregor was truly a giant, nearly eight feet tall with massive shoulders and arms, weighing over thirty stone, nearly all of it muscle. He used a six-foot long, two-handed greatsword with just one hand, even on horseback.

Ranma didn't care about that, he merely cared that his target was in sight. As soon as the horns blared again, he leaped forward, faster than anyone there had ever seen a man in half plate move. Suddenly, he was in the direct center, his sword lashing out to smash aside a blow from a horsed knight from the Stormlands, his return blow bashing the man off his horse. He fell awkwardly, smashing his head into the ground, out cold. With that, the tourney began in earnest and the melee erupted around him.

Ranma whirled, faster than any man there could move, blocking a blow from another man who had entered the melee on horseback. Ranma had chosen not to do this, despite the height advantage it would give you, since controlling a horse would've taken away from his concentration.

The man was so astonished at his speed that he hadn't even set himself in the saddle correctly to block a return blow and Ranma's strength almost lifted him off out of his saddle. Ranma gut-checked the horse, throwing it back and causing it to whinny. The man barely kicked out of the saddle before the horse landed on him.

Ranma had already turned away, taking on two more men, one with a mace and one with a claymore, bashing both hastily raised weapons to the side, his fist flashing out to smash into their heads one after another with lightning speed, sending them down to the turf. He raced on, dodging the clumps of combat he could, heading straight for his

target.

By the time he got close, however, Gregor Clegane had already been disqualified, retreating with ill grace out of the melee area. Ser Thoros of Myr had been closer to Gregor than Ranma and, like he often did, the man made straight for him. The priest of R'hllor wasn't, as Ranma had noticed a time or two seeing him with the King, very priestly, enjoying many pleasures of the flesh. But he had never forgotten or forgiven Gregor's savagery during the sack of Kings Landing. So he made for the man, blazing sword held high, cutting down four others, whose horses weren't trained as his own to ignore his sword.

Unfortunately, the Mountain's massive horse was as spooked as the man himself by the Thoros's flaming sword. He rode out of the tournament angry and raging but unwilling to face the priest with his blazing sword. The jeers and catcalls of the crowd followed him, causing the man to grit his teeth angrily and mark the faces of the loudest hecklers for later retribution.

Just as he crossed the threshold of the area, Ranma came up behind the priest, cursing angrily. "Damn it, I wanted him!"

Thoros twisted in the saddle and blocked Ranma's blow to his legs quicker than he looked to be able to move. There was also quite a bit of muscle underneath that fat, reminding Ranma of the time he had sparred with Lord Manderly's son Wyman. The flaming sword, however, didn't matter to him at all so he didn't retreat when their blades locked. He pushed the priest hard, forcing him and his horse backwards, before elbowing the horse so hard it collapsed backwards. Thoros barely threw himself from the saddle before the horse landed.

Despite this, Thoros simply guffawed, his blade slicing forward to lock with Ranma's once more. "You'll have to get in line if you want a piece of the Mountain, lad. I can name over a dozen men here who would love to end his life. And you're too young to waste your life in the attempt."

With that, Thoros broke their lock, thrusting quickly. Ranma dodged to the side allowing the lunge to go past before trapping his sword arm underneath his own. With a twist of his body, he broke the fat man's arm while, at the same time, smashing an elbow into the man's face sending him senseless to the dirt. "Young I may be but I'll do what you don't seem to be able to."

He left the red priest lying senseless on the ground, moving back through the tournament, smashing everyone aside. If he couldn't face Gregor in the joust, where the contestants were randomly chosen, he would have to fall back on plan B. For that, it would be best to have won the notoriety and the money from both the melee and the joust.

The battle continued. Due to the chaotic nature of the battle, no one in the melee realized how badly Ranma was simply overpowering them all. The spectators could see, of course, and Robert's guffawing bellow rang out every time he saw Ranma almost negligently smash another grown man to the ground before moving on.

Jaime was due to join the jousting along with several others of the Kingsguard but he was standing guard on the King's box for the first day of the tournament, which had been devoted to the melee. Now, he watched on as the Stark heir ripped through his opponents like a direwolf among sheep and frowned heavily. *The lad was holding back! How good is he really? He can't be as good as I am, not in terms of skill at least, can he?*

Ser Loras watched with worried eyes as his young acquaintance/almost friend cut a swathe through the melee. "Something is eating Ranma; I have never seen him be so serious. This should be fun and games to him, I know for a fact he holds back often in our duels."

Renly looked at him in surprise and Loras shrugged. "Ser Barristan joined us for spar once and, afterward, called him out on it. I overheard them talking. Ranma has depths of strength and power as well as skill that he has not yet shown. But **this** is something else."

Next to them, Ned merely smiled grimly, knowing what his son had in mind while Jason Mallister smashed one hand against the railing in front of him with every man Ranma smashed to the earth.

The three girls cheered, each in their own way, while Joffrey and his younger brother clapped. Joffrey was doing it only to be seen to do it, while Tommy was excited and awestruck. Inside Joffrey was smirking. He had his own plan for Ranma Stark and the tourney was the perfect time to put it into action. It wouldn't kill him by itself but it would humiliate and dishonor him so badly he might well be exiled, killed, or sent to the Wall as a Night's Watchman. Any of the three outcomes would please him greatly.

Among those locked in combat, Sandor Clegane was the first to realize what was happening and also the first to bow



out because of it. He backed away, pulling off his somewhat battered helm as token of his withdrawal, revealing his heavily burned, scarred face twisted in anger. He had no wish to cross blades with the Stark boy and wasn't so egotistical as to keep in the battle just for the sake of it. Others followed, their eyes wide in awe, including Daemon Sand, whose sword Ranma had shattered, with a kick of all things, as Daemon tried to attack him from the side.

Twenty minutes after that, the second to last of Ranma's opponents collapsed senseless to the ground as Ranma simply smashed his shield against the man's own throwing him backwards before knocking him to the earth with an open palm blow to the chest. That left only Ser Jory.

As good as Jory was, they both knew who would win that particular battle. The other men from Winterfell had fallen before Ranma had proven his superiority but had acquitted themselves well, taking out five men in the case of Mattimeo, while Ser Thomas unhorsed seven and downed six before he fell. Now Ser Jory pulled off his helm, bowing to Ranma in token of surrender.

At that signal, the cheers of the crowd redoubled, shouting "Stark, Stark, Stark!" Though where the shout started from, Ranma didn't know.

He bowed slightly to the crowd then turned with Ser Jory following over to grab their fellows up from the mass of unconscious, wounded, moaning, and groaning contestants. Servants and healers came forward, as well. Unlike in tournaments past, Ranma's sheer dominance had actually kept many people from dying save for one man who had fallen off his horse to land awkwardly on his head and another whose head had been struck from his body by Gregor Clegane before he was forced to withdraw by Thoros. Despite being blunted, the Mountain's massive sword was still deadly.

Ranma pulled off his helmet and strode forward towards the King's Royal box. At a nod from one of the melee officials, he stopped at the correct distance, bowing formally.

Robert bellowed another laugh, staring down at the Stark who was so strange in so many ways, yet a consummate warrior, better than any he had seen, better than even most of the old Kingsguard. The present Kingsguard were staring down at him with approval in some eyes but with consternation and fear in others. "Damn lad, that was glorious! Well done, the most dominant victory I've seen in a melee since the first time Thoros used that blasted flaming sword trick!"

He tossed down a token, which was proof that Ranma was the winner. The prizes would all be given out on the last day of the tournament, right after the jousting was finished.

Ranma bowed, once again to the two Royals and once to the ladies before another one for his father, then moved off to help Ser Jory pull along Ser Thomas, who had a nasty gash on one shoulder from a sword that hadn't been quite as blunted as it should've been. Mattimeo had broken his arm, yet was holding his fellows' weapons under his other arm looking remarkably cheerful for all of that. The quartet made their way back to their tent as the crowd cheered for a few moments before dispersing to other amusements for the rest of that day.

During this time, Oberyn Martell met up with his squire, who apologized for his bad showing. His Prince waved this off. His mind on other matters, such as what about how Ranma moved through the melee was bothering him. He didn't figure it out, however, and he and his squire moved on to see if they could somehow surprise the three girls in their own mischief.

OOOOOO

"You'll do it tomorrow evening. He doesn't have a servant assigned to his tent so put it in the food that is every contestant is given for their tents. Make sure you're not seen doing it." Joffrey glared at his ever so helpful servant. "Don't get caught."

The servant bowed and Joffrey turned to enter his room. He, his mother, and sister had come back to the Red Keep with many others, including Eddard Stark and a goodly portion of his men. They felt the time spent traveling in the morning was well spent in return for having stone walls to keep off the heat and actual beds. Robert hadn't come back since this gave him even more freedom to be with his doxies, forcing the Kingsguard to split.

Joffrey sat down on a window seat for a moment, staring up into the night sky as he thought. This was but one attack he had planned, there were others he could try but even he had realized that facing Ranma in battle would cost him far more in terms of men that he could pay without it being linked back to him. He still had retained a few men that Ser Janos had recommended from the Gold Cloaks for their skill with arrows but even that was too open for him to risk right now. Maybe if this attack didn't work he might try it, but not until then.

*And it's not like this first tonic is the only one I've picked up from the alchemists. Such helpful fellows they were, if slow. Still, I have more than enough other concoctions if this doesn't work. And the Starks have made enough enemies here in the city for it to not be linked back to me. In fact, it would probably go back to Pycelle, that irritating old man. Mother's complained about him butting heads with the older Stark often enough and he would know how to do it too, wouldn't he? Or perhaps Petyr, the penny-pincher. I might wish to plant some evidence in those directions if the need for a scapegoat arises. But one way or the other, Ranma Stark will eventually be out of the way, no longer stealing the attention that should be mine! Though I still might have to deal with certain others...*

OOOOOO

The next week was given over to small events, while those who were going to participate in the jousting recovered from the melee. The archery competition would begin the next day and cover two days from midmorning to evening, while the rest of the time would be taken by smaller competitions. Ranma didn't join any of the smaller contests though he could easily have dominated them as well, though the archery probably wouldn't have been as easy. He had left that to Theon rather deliberately as they grew up.

Instead, he spent time showing Tommen, Myrcella, and Margaery around. With Ser Oakheart and Ranma guarding them, the King and the Queen knew that no harm would come to their youngest pair and Cersei knew that Myrcella really needed to get her crush out of her system. Seeing Ranma in the tournament yesterday hadn't done much to dissuade that crush, unfortunately. The Queen had hoped it would, given her daughter's gentle nature, but it appeared as if nothing had changed. She hoped that Ranma's treating Myrcella as a sister throughout the day would help end her crush as Ranma, with every kindness and brotherly act, drove home their respective ages and the way he saw her. Otherwise, the Queen would never have allowed her children to wander around the faire at all, let alone with so few followers.

"Well now, isn't that odd?" Arianne Martell said thoughtfully, looking up from where she Tyene had been perusing some admittedly excellent jewelry pieces.

Tyene cocked an eyebrow, then turned her head to look in the direction Arianne was looking. "Is that the younger Baratheon children? My, they really don't look like stags at all, do they?"

"Hmm, that is true though not what I was commenting on, still, I wonder..." Arianne frowned, then shook it off. "The rather attractive young man with them must be Ranma Stark. My word, he is a handsome fellow, if rather barbaric in dress."

"Should we follow them?" Obara asked. She fingered her short sword where it hung inside her cloak, feeling under-armed without her spear.

"Yes, I think we should. It will give us a good idea of how close Stark is to the children and to his prospective bride. While his being allowed to wander around with the Baratheon brats is telling, so is the fact Margaery is keeping her distance, not using her body as she could to flirt with him. If there is a distance between them, perhaps we can widen it and halt that marriage entirely." With a last look between them, the trio of women began to follow the royal party through the faire.

Margaery and Myrcella spent the rest of the day sniping at one another cordially over Ranma's head, while he made every effort to ignore it. Tommen won himself a few prizes with his hand eye coordination, winning a large and expensive bottle of perfume for his mother who took it with a warm smile that evening and a kiss on his cheek.

They sometimes came upon Joffrey, Sansa, their chaperones, and their large guard detail. At these moments, their trio of unnoticed minders faded further, yet keenly watched all involved from the privacy of the crowd.

At these meetings, Sansa always stared hard at Ranma, wordlessly urging him to apologize once more while not realizing that she was the one that had to make that overture first. In response, Ranma would simply glance away, shaking his head internally at how at home Sansa was here, how unlike a Stark she sometimes appeared these days.

Sansa was no longer a girl on the cusp of womanhood, she was a young woman, as much as Margaery despite being younger, but there wasn't a hint of her northern upbringing in her looks. Gone was the clothing she wore in the North, her hair was different, her gait was different, her jewelry was different, and she didn't even have Lady at her side as she walked around the faire.

Like Fenris, Lady had been confined to her room for much of their time here, though in her case she was quite happy to remain inside and be pampered. Sansa still spent a lot of time with her, she made a point of it, in fact, but Lady was losing the wildness that a direwolf should have. She also seemed to have stopped growing and was merely as large

as two normal wolves combined now.

Fenris **wasn't** pleased with being stuck inside so Ranma had taken every opportunity he could during his work on organizing the tourney to let Fenris get away from the city for a time. The massive direwolf, now as large as a pony, frightened a lot of people at first but he was well behaved, so hadn't eaten anyone yet. He had raced off every night into the Kingswood to hunt and seemed to have picked up a craving for bear and boar in particular.

That evening, Myrcella begged her mother to stay with Ranma and Margaery a little later so she could join with them and the battered Mattimeo in a few rounds of chess. Cersei eventually allowed it after Ser Barristan volunteered to stay with them, though her initial thought was to have Lancel stay with them. But the antipathy he and Ranma had for one another made that a bad idea.. Still, with the septa Nysterica, Margaery, Selmy, Oakheart, and Mattimeo there, she felt it was safe enough to let her daughter stay..

Nysterica and Oakheart lost quickly against Margaery and Selmy. Ranma and Mattimeo were evenly matched at first because the guardsman took a purely defensive posture, wanting to whittle down his opponent as much as he could before trying to go on the offensive. This didn't work for long, but it made their match take twice as long as the others, which allowed Ser Barristan and Margaery to battle it out, with Myrcella taking on Ser Jory before he left for the evening. Jory had found a lady from a Crownlands minor House to step out with, a young widow who was here to see her younger brother in the archery competition. Myrcella won her round just as Ranma finished off Mattimeo and broke off to have something to eat allowing Myrcella and Margaery to face off.

That battle was vicious from the get go but Ranma was more interested in his food. Every participant's tent was supplied with food on the King's tab, though this time Eddard had pushed that expense over to the merchants' guild, since they were making money throughout the tournament. The food consisted of simple fair that would keep for a time, fruit, breads, oil, and cold cuts.

Ranma hummed for a moment as he ate some of the cold cuts. "Hmm, some kind of odd sauce on this. Very spicy though."

Mattimeo paused in heading off himself to visit a lady, not one, alas, that he actually was attempting to woo. In his case, she was the type you had to pay. "Really, I didn't notice anything earlier today. Maybe they changed the glaze or something for the evening."

"Maybe, still good though." Ranma shrugged and kept eating. Unlike the kids, he hadn't eaten as they went around, since neither Royal had thought to actually bring money, forcing Ranma to pay their way along with Margaery's. Oakheart had simply laughed and shaken his head when asked to pitch in.

Soon, Ranma was left alone with the southerners. The match between the two girls continued on, while the trio of men and Nysterica talked quietly. The Septa was an older woman, a few years older than Ranma's mother and, while not pretty, was very intelligent. She and Oakheart spoke of growing up in the Reach, while Selmy looked on as the two girls slaughtered one another's forces.

Ranma finished his meal and came back, watching the two girls. For a moment he paused, shaking his head as a wave of vertigo hit him. Margaery looked up at him as he stumbled. "Are you alright Ranma?"

"I, I'm feeling a little hot for some reason." Ranma passed a hand over his brow, feeling it come away with some sweat, as if he had been exercising hard for hours. "I'm alright, I think." A moment later he realized that thought was rather ironic as he felt response down below. *Fuck, what the hell! I've got a hell of a lot more control than to let that happen out of the blue like this, what the hell is going on?* Ranma hunched over, trying to hide his visible reaction to whatever the hell was messing with his hormones.

All the other people in the tent were now looking at him and the two girls were moving toward him. "Ranma, you look as if you've got a fever, come and lie down."

"Not a fever, something else..." By this time, Myrcella and Margaery were right in front of him, the Princess on his right, with Margaery directly in front of him. Her bodice was straining slightly as she leaned over to put her hand on Ranma's forehead. She smelled of rose and honeysuckle, and Ranma could see a faint sheen of sweat on her neck rolling down into her bodice...

He couldn't help himself; he leaned forward, pulling Margaery toward him. "Ranma, what..." That was as far as Margaery could get before Ranma had pulled her head down, leaning up himself to kiss her hard on the lips. For a moment, Margaery didn't respond, her hands smacking ineffectually for a second against his chest, but after a second she found herself responding, the sheer passion in the kiss making her react ardently, opening her mouth to

Ranma's questing tongue.

Nysterica however and Barristan pulled them apart. "What the hell do you think you're doing lad! I know you two might become engaged but there are limits to what you can do!"

Ranma growled, he actually **growled** a little, and before Oakheart could pull Myrcella away from him, he was smacked aside by a single open palm blow to his chest plate. He 'oofed' as the air left his lungs, then landed on his ass at the far end of the tent. Ranma however had already turned away, his arms going around the shocked Baratheon Princess.

Myrcella was wearing one of her normal dresses, though her body had grown out a bit more since they had met in Winterfell, filling it out slightly so her budding chest was pressing outward, where before she had been flat. Her hips were also somewhat more pronounced. She smelled of vanilla and a hint of lavender, the kind of perfume a young girl would wear.

The princess squeaked as Ranma nuzzled into her neck. She could feel his arousal nudging against her stomach, then she squeaked again as she found his lips capturing hers. Unlike Margaery, the younger girl didn't have enough control to resist and she gave into the kiss, reveling in her crush kissing her, reveling in the sensations going up and down her spine, traveling to areas she had never felt anything like this from before. Her mouth opened in a moan and Ranma's kiss became even fiercer as their tongues twirled together.

The feel of her small chest against his, however, was just enough to give Ranma's rational mind enough of a kick to pull away. The younger girl fell to the ground, a wide, happy, and very out of it smile on her face. Ranma moved back, his arms around his body as his teeth bared, yet he sent a single command to Fenris. The direwolf, finally realizing something was going on rather than the human equivalent of a mating hunt leaped over the downed Oakheart to smash into Ranma, bearing him to the ground.

Fenris sat on him, allowing Ranma to gain some more control. He looked past his direwolf at Ser Barristan, who was standing staring at Ranma his old eyes shrewdly moving between him and the food. "Get them out of here, Ser Barristan! There, there was something in the food, I, I don't know what it was, but I can't..."

"Aye lad, I know, I have no idea what it was, but this isn't you." Ser Selmy picked up the still swooning Myrcella and followed the wincing Oakheart out of the tent, followed quickly by Nysterica and Margaery.

Margaery had enough presence of mind to grab up the plate of meat cutlets before heading out. She looked behind them for a moment, seeing Ranma on the ground, his eyes closed now as he tried to breathe deeply but it was obviously hard for him. His face was still flushed and Fenris was now having to fight to keep him there.

"Well now, it would appear our idea to watch them has paid off already. How intriguing, I wonder what has occurred." Arianne's voice was a mixture of interested, amused, and contemplative as she spoke, looking through the dark lit by the numerous fires and torches to the Stark tent. "Tyene, what do you think?"

Tyene had somewhat better night eyes than the other two and also a very quick mind. "Hmm, it would seem as if something has indeed happened. The young Baratheon girl is out of it at present, while the others all look worried and confused."

Obara grunted irritably at the two other girls simply talking about it, leaving it up to her to actually take action and find out what was going on. She moved forward with her cloak covering her features as she went by the Stark tent. A moment later, she had circled back and was back with the other two quickly. "The Tyrell girl is worried. She fears that the young Stark has been poisoned somehow, but whatever it did, made the 'chaperone' very angry." She said the word with some distaste, since betrothals were much more interesting affairs in Dorne with none of these silly minders, "I could tell the Tyrell girl had been kissed hard as well, and going by the torchlight, she seemed flushed. She was also carrying a tray with a few sweet meats on it."

"Hmm, Tyene, is there anything in your repertoire that would have an amorous effect on someone before starting its deadly work?"

"No, though I know many aphrodisiacs that could be placed in food. Many of them do have harmful effects." Tyene frowned in professional curiosity. "I wonder what will happen now? Many of them will stay in your system until you release."

Arianne frowned, but she was thinking well beyond the now. A moment later, there was a ripping sound that carried to them two tents over and then the sound of running feet heading out into the darkness away from the tourney and its

surrounding tents at amazing speeds. "Tell me, do you think you could create an antidote for whatever it is?"

Tyene looked at her in surprise and Arianne smiled. "The Stark heir seems to have flown the coop, as it were, and I bet that whoever tried to poison him desired more of a reaction than what has occurred. But we can still use this, to give us an in with the Starks here, possibly even place you in their household."

"Devious, but I doubt the Tyrell girl will believe in the serendipity of me simply showing up out of the blue right as my skills could be useful." Tyene replied skeptically.

"Perhaps, but I bet the offer of aid will offset that. Obara, you go with her. Make no mention of my being here. You are simply two of the Sand Snakes having followed your father without his knowledge to see what Kings Landing is like. If pressed, admit to being here to see if you can make trouble for the Lannisters."

The two sisters exchanged a glance in the light of a torch but willingly moved forward. By the time they arrived, the group around the tent was becoming frantic or, at least, the two girls were. Oakheart and septa Nyseria were still trying to get their minds around what had happened.

At this point, Myrcella had recovered from her initial swoon at having been kissed like that by her longtime crush, taking the memory and storing it in her mind as a treasured possession to be viewed at a later date. Now however she had to concentrate, in order to help said crush. "We have to get after him! We can't just let him run around out there wild while whatever is doing this to him goes through his system! Who knows what it might do."

"Judging by how fast he raced off, I doubt any of us could catch him." Sir Oakheart said, shaking his head sadly. One of his hands was kneading his armored chest, that palm shot had been painful in the extreme. While it hadn't cracked his armor like that of Greenfield's body back in Winterfell, it still stung like the blazes. He also thought that staying here would keep his charge away from the amorous Ranma, which was a very good idea in his opinion.

Ser Barristan said nothing, staring out into the darkness wondering who had done this, and why. Actually he had a very good idea of why and he glanced at Margaery who had just peered into the tents to see Fenris still there. The large direwolf was pacing around, unable to understand what was going on with his bonded master, but understanding he couldn't help him in whatever was bothering him. *Yes, I have a very good idea of what they wanted* he thought grimly. *It was only luck and Myrcella insisting she wanted to take part in their chess games. With her being here, my presence and that of Oakheart stopped the worst from happening.*

"By the time we get back to the city and find an alchemist or maester to help us figure out what is in his system, Ranma could be days away." Margaery muttered to herself. She hadn't honestly believed the stories of how fast he could move until she saw him rip out of the back of the tent and race away faster than her eyes could track. If Ranma could keep up to speed for any length of time, then they had no chance of catching him. It wasn't like any of them could track him in the dark of the forest, either. "Besides I wouldn't trust either of those groups not to have been at least the source of whatever is doing this in the first place. No I'm afraid..."

"Perhaps we could be of assistance." said a soft melodious voice behind them. All five people gathered around the Stark tent turned to see two young women standing there. One of them was garbed in a heavy cloak but it could do little to mask the heavy shoulders and the warlike stance she took. Both White Cloaks tensed, hands going towards their ever present blades as their expert eyes spotted the short sword hidden under that cloak, as well as a hump of what could be a shield on her back.

The other woman wasn't nearly as threatening, shorter of stature with an innocent and open expression on her face that was centered around wide expressive blue eyes framed by black hair. Judging from their complexion and accent, both of these women came from Dorne, which made both White Cloaks even more wary of them.

Margaery however concentrated on what they said rather than what they were, she would think about that later. "What do you mean you can help us?"

"I have been trained as a septa, though I have not taken the vows, and I specialize in healing and dealing with the poisons that are all too frequent in my country. If you have a sample of the food and can tell me the symptoms, I can try to concoct an antidote."

"Your names?" Ser Barristan asked grimly. He had a feeling that he knew these two or, at least, the older one. "Your features seem vaguely familiar to me, ladies."

"We are two of the sand snakes, I am Tyene, this is Obara."

"And why should we trust you?" Myrcella said, now having her own worries about these two. Relations between Lannister and Martell were deadly at best, and their relationship to House Baratheon was not exactly warm.

"I think we can wait to ask that question, if they can help Ranma, then let them do so now." Margaery said, commanding all three of them. At that moment, all her normal airs fell away, revealing the steel of the trained leader within, the one who had learned at her grandmother's knee, and none of these three had the immunity that Loras had developed to her powers of persuasion. "The symptoms were thus, one moment he was fine, the next he was sweating somewhat, flushed face and woozy of body. Immediately after that he seemed to lose control of his, base desires, shall we say?"

"Base desires?" Tyene shook her head. "I had thought the Reach the most liberal of the rest of the country, but.." she shook her head, finding amusement in that line even now.

"He came all over amorous, couldn't seem to control himself, and almost attacked myself and Princess Baratheon," Margaery said bluntly. "Are you happy now? Here." She thrust forward the plate she was still holding, which had two slices of spiced cold cuts on it, as well as a bit of sauce. "See what you can make of that."

All seven of them moved back inside the tent which was far better lit with a brazier in each of the corners. Tyene moved immediately over to the small stand that had held the food previously, setting the plates down. "Orange colored." she murmured then dipped a small spoon she took out of a small inner pocket of her cloak twirling it around on the plate. "Very viscous and thick, far too orange in color." She took a very small dollop of it, and placed it on her tongue tasting it for a moment before wiping it away quickly. "Concentrated bist root, mixed with a few other ingredients. Concentrated!"

She repeated the word 'concentrated' for a moment shaking her head. "It's a wonder he didn't jump your bones immediately with this in his system, a testament to his self-control." she said almost admiringly. "If all of these slices..." She counted for a moment thinking of how many slices of meat had been on that plate before and shook her head. "That's incredible."

"What is it?" Myrcella asked looking under her arm at the plates. Tyene smirked at her a little, internally fighting down the urge to reach out and slap the Baratheon girl. The fact that she looked so much like a lion did her no credit in Tyene's eyes. While she personally had never known her aunt, she was, despite her out of wedlock birth, a Martell. You do not wrong the Martells without paying the price, even if you did so via omission rather than act.

Still, she answered readily for now. "In a diluted form it would be called the Lover's Reinforcement. The viscous nature of this sauce however tells me it wasn't diluted, making what is a normal aphrodisiac into a super-powerful one that can affect the mind, possibly permanently if not countered. I say again, it is a wonder he didn't simply assault you regardless of who was around."

Inside she was indeed impressed, though not for the Stark boy's willpower. *This was a very bold stroke indeed. It would have discredited the Starks as a whole and Ranma in particular, and make them enemies of both the Royal family and the Tyrells. No chance anyone in the city would take the Stark's side if it came to light that he had been under the influence, in any case. Pyrcelle controls the maesters here and he's a Lannister creature.*

"Can you aid him?" Margaery asked, staring at the girl intently. For all her skills however, she couldn't to detect any falsehood, any pleasure from a plan working correctly. This wasn't at an attempt to get on their good side in other words, though she was still very worried about the Sand Snakes and wondering what, by the Maiden, they were doing here.

"I can, though it will take time and several ingredients." She listed them off quickly to Obara who recited them back to her. "Fetch me those from our pouches and I'll need another one that I don't ordinarily carry with me, dried ox tongue. It doesn't keep well, though it doesn't have to be dried for this." She shook her head. "Concentrated." She shook her head again. "A wonder indeed."

"I'll go with you." said Ser Oakheart, standing up quickly.

Outside the tent, Arianne had taken a position along one side of it, so that she could listen in on the conversations. She had to lie down on the ground so that her shadow couldn't be seen through the tent sides but it was worth it. *So the game is afoot* she thought sardonically, *though it remains to be seen how it will play out.*

Obara and Ser Oakheart returned ten minutes later with all the ingredients that Tyene had requested. She pulled out from a small pouch an equally small mortar and pestle set, and began to grind up the ingredients while ordering Obara to cut the ox tongue, which was fresh rather than dried, as finely as she could. Slicing and grinding a number

of roots and herbs into a fine paste, she added several different powders into the mortar. Tyene then placed the shredded ox tongue in the mixture and stirred it using the pestle. The final ingredient was a liquid from a vial that she pulled out from one of her pouches.

"Tell me," Margaery said casually, "do you always carry these ingredients on you like this? It must be rather irritating, after all."

"Back home to be sure, the smell sometimes bothers me in the heat, I must admit." Tyene answered in seeming honesty. "Here though, the heat is not so oppressive and the need to carry them far more prevalent. Most of these are very expensive, or hard to get, or both and in this city I have no wish to deal with the alchemists or the maester guild to refill my supply. This task is actually very expensive."

"I can understand that," Margaery said quietly, "and if this works I will reimburse you personally."

"Oh?" Tyene said, archly looking up with one eyebrow raised from her work for a moment before looking back down. "You actually have a coin purse somewhere in that dress?"

"Of course not, that's betrothed are for, but I can send my chaperone for it."

Said chaperone huffed indignantly but didn't say anything in response, a little rattled by the events of the evening. "Who did this?" she muttered to herself, shaking her head. "As much as I hate to admit it, lady," she said, looking up at her charge, "you're right about Ranma's personality. He's been keeping you at arms-length so well this was entirely out of character for him. Not to mention his assault on the Princess."

"Which we will not be speaking of further." Margaery said firmly. Luckily, Myrcella hadn't been kissed by Ranma as hard as Margaery. Margaery's lips were actually slightly bruised but Myrcella only had a faint blush suffusing her features still, at the memory perhaps, with no other visible sign of what had occurred. "If word gets out of what occurred here, no matter what was behind it, Ranma and his family will face severe repercussions. Even as little as what occurred could set the Queen in particular against him. This would do no-one here any good."

"That's true." Myrcella said. "My mother is rather respectful of Ranma but I think she dislikes the Starks for some reason."

Myrcella knew the reason, she had heard her mother scream and yell about it at her father when she was younger and had never forgotten that. It was harsh, knowing your father loved a dead woman rather than your mother and that was the reason why he wasn't close to you or your siblings, above and beyond not looking as he could have hoped.

*Still, that seems to be changing in Tommen's case so maybe it will change eventually for me as well. Joffrey, she thought, should be taken by the Father for judgment and I have no doubt he will be found wanting.*

"So none of us will say anything about this. If anything comes out, I will simply say what occurred, that Ranma tried to attack **me** but then regained control of himself. No mention of Myrcella will be made, am I clear?" Margaery cocked an eyebrow at them all. If Ranma had been there, he would have shivered a little at how much like Nabiki in full ice queen persona she looked like at that moment.

Everyone else in the tent nodded rapidly, then shifted uneasily until she looked away from them.

Five minutes later, Tyene finished her work, pouring the concoction into a large tankard with a lid on it that she had ordered Obara to get after she finished shredding the ox tongue. As a final step, Tyene threw in a lit match, closing the lid quickly. There was a brief burst of purple flame that appeared around the edge of the lid, then Tyene shook it vigorously once more.

She opened it to test its color, finding it a light greenish color with striations of red just as she wanted it to have. "Good, it's a bit thicker than normal but that's because of using the fresh ox tongue rather than the ground version. It will work to counteract the concentrated bisti root potion."

"That only leaves how we get this to him." Ser Oakheart mused.

Sir Barristan would've spoken up as well but he was too busy thinking of who could have been behind this. He did not like the conclusions he was forming. Still, despite his like for them, the Starks were not his charges and if he accused anyone the full story might well come out. That would damage both them and the Royal family, as well as their relation to one another, so he decided to keep his silence for now.

"That's easy." Myrcella said promptly pointing over at Fenris who was still pacing around one of the edges, snarling at

anyone who came close. "We give it to Fenris to carry to him."

"I could rig up some kind of carrier with some straps." Obara offered, though her tone was skeptical. "Do you honestly think, though, that the wolf is smart enough to know what we're talking about? I'll tell you plain, I'm not approaching him. Look at him and how he's acting now."

"Fenris is a lot smarter than you think." Myrcella replied and moved over towards the wolf. She moved slowly, her hands outstretched in front of her, in token of peace. Fenris turned and snarled at her but subsided just as quickly. He rumbled a little as she moved forward but let the girl touch his neck and ears.

Obara went to work on creating a carrier for the tankard while Tyene melted a bit of wax around the edge of the tankard to keep it closed and the liquid inside.

While the two sand snakes were working, Myrcella began to talk soothingly to the wolf. "Fenris, we need you to take something to Ranma, something that will help him. You know he is in distress, you can tell, you sat on him before, remember? Can you do this for us, Fenris?"

Fenris huffed a little at being talked to like he was some kind of dog but licked her face in response and sat on his haunches waiting. Margaery came over, carrying the tankard and, beyond a little rumble and a look in her direction, Fenris was still. Margaery and Myrcella tied it in place, thinking that it would not be a good idea for anyone else to come close.

A few minutes later, they were done and Margaery rubbed Fenris's ears just the way he liked it. "Take this to Ranma now, quickly."

Fenris stood up, then pounced lightly on Margaery, being careful to keep most of his weight on his hind legs as his front paws rested on her shoulders, before licking her face. He then turned and raced through the flap that Ranma had created at the back of the tent in his desperate exit, quickly moving faster and faster.

Margaery growled a little, wiping the dog drool from her face as Myrcella giggled. She looked around and said warningly, "Not a word."

OOOOOOO

About forty leagues away from the tournament, ten leagues or so into the Kingswood, Ranma sat in the lotus position on an oak that had fallen. He was using the Soul of Ice to try to counteract whatever the hell was happening to him. Frost was forming all around him in response, an oddity in this area of the world. Distressingly, he was slowly losing ground. The Soul of Ice was more of an emotional control; the physical aspect was secondary and, while it gave him certain immunities to exterior sources of heat and cold, this wasn't heat exactly, it was a hormonal imbalance inside him.

It was working for now by causing major shrinkage, to put it bluntly, but Ranma had no idea how long it would continue to do so. He only hoped it would outlast whatever was in his system, though the constant thoughts of the beautiful women in his life that tried to break through, from Margaery to Dacey to Alayaya and even more unsuitable yet still pretty women such as the Queen and Merry, were draining him slowly.

About an hour after he arrived, he sensed Fenris coming near. Ranma groaned internally, wondering why the direwolf was seeking him out after Ranma had ordered him to stay in the tent, fearing whatever was messing with him could cross over their link.

Soon enough, Fenris was in sight, coming through the words like a shadow out of the darkness, his eyes glowing golden in the dim light afforded by moonlight shining through the dense canopy of the trees. He halted right in front of his master, looking up at him only slightly as he leaned forward to press his nose against Ranma's chest.

Ranma noticed that he had a tankard around his neck like some kind of emergency response dog from Switzerland, whatever they were called. He had seen them in a few cartoons when he had been going through his first childhood back in his old reality. He had stolen into houses to watch said cartoons but he couldn't remember what their names had been.

"What's this boy?" he asked, reaching forward and taking the tankard. It was bound up in wax around the edge of the lid but that was easy enough to break once he knew what this was.

He opened a sliver of their connection, not wanting whatever was going on his system to carry over their bond. In this manner, Fenris supplied him some memories. *Two new females coming in, talking to the little one and the potential*



*mate, creating some man-thing after much man-speaks, the little one and the potential mate asking Fenris to deliver it.*

Ranma looked inside the cup and found himself rather grateful for the very dim light. It bubbled a little and he wondered who the hell Margaery had found to make this for him but if she felt it was a good idea, he was going to trust her judgment. Well, hers, Ser Barristan, and Fenris', anyway. "Bottoms up."

Ranma grimaced as he downed it, gagging a little at the taste. "By the old gods, that is foul." he muttered, but he kept on drinking the entire tankard. Then, with Fenris there beside him, he sat still, listening to the night around him.

Soon, Ranma felt it working, the feeling continuing until he felt his erection **finally** dying down. *Fucking thing didn't even die down when I was in Soul of Ice and tryin' to fuckin' freeze my own balls off!* He slowly released his control of the Soul of Ice and was rather amused to note that there was at least an inch of ice on the wood of the tree stump, as well as on the ground all around them. Fenris seem to have enjoyed the experience, if his huffing and amusement through their link was anything to go by.

About another hour passed until, finally, Ranma felt well enough to completely release the Soul of Ice and he stood up, cracking his back and shoulders explosively. "That was not a pleasant experience." he muttered his fingers digging into Fenris' neck affectionately. Now you, I think, deserve a treat. Since we're here in the woods anyway, let's go hunting."

Fenris shot to his feet eagerly, bounding off into the woods, with Ranma following quickly.

OOOOOOO

The next morning, Ranma was back at the tourney. He immediately sought out Margaery at the tent she shared with her family and their servants, a rather more elaborate tent than his own, but that was neither here nor there. He waited outside as Margaery came out, and smiled rather wanly at her, beginning formally. "Lady Margaery, I have to..."

She shook her head quickly. "Don't. It was amazing that you didn't react stronger to that Seven damned concoction or, at least, so one of the Sand Snakes, Tyene, says."

"A Sand Snake? I've heard that name mentioned with in context with Prince Oberyn's daughters."

"Exactly, though they profess to have been here without his consent. Consent I might agree with, knowledge, I very much doubt."

"Do you think..."

"No," Margaery replied firmly before Ranma could finish his sentence, "I could detect no hint that either woman was involved in the actual attack, moreover it wouldn't be their style. Though this particular snake could be indirect, the majority of them much prefer open combat or conflict, at the very least. Oberyn would stab his enemies in a second if he could get away with it but he wouldn't poison you. As I said, Tyene is different, much more subtle, but also too young to remember her aunt and be part of Oberyn's consuming hatred of all things Lannister. There is no doubt in my mind she might cheerfully poison any Lannister of Lannister supporter but you are neither; it would simply be too risky. I think she simply grabbed onto this opportunity to ingratiate herself to you and your family."

Ranma nodded. "Is she here with you or do you know how to contact her?"

"She remained behind in your tents, along with Ser Oakheart. Ser Barristan took Princess Myrcella back to the city and her mother a few minutes after Fenris left. He got a stern talking to but not about what actually happened. We contrived a story that she fell asleep during the chess competition and the rest of us were so intent on our games that we didn't notice. It's flimsy, but it will work."

"I'll have to apologize to her, too." Ranma said feeling very guilty about the entire thing, despite what Margaery said.

Margaery hummed in agreement, though inside she was laughing hysterically. *That little girl loved every second of it and it hasn't done her crush on Ranma any good at all.*

Later, Ranma interviewed the two Sand Snakes himself, though his first comment wasn't actually about the crisis the evening before. Instead, he said, "A whip, really? Is that a sexual thing or do you actually use that in combat?"

Obara spat to one side while her younger sister laughed, hearing someone else make the same comment she has

made several times in their lifetimes. "I use it in combat, though I do use it on too-smart men, sometimes."

Ranma snorted and from there the conversation turned to what had occurred. After it was over Ranma looked keenly at Tyene. "While I'm thankful for your help, I'm not blind enough to think that this was merely a good septa act on your part. You want something. What?"

The poisoner/healer shrugged. "Our original purpose in coming to Kings Landing was to make as much trouble for the Lannisters as we could. Backing you does that since from the moment we arrived we've been hearing about how you're curtailing their influence. It also has a rather efficacious upside of leaving you their target for any retaliation instead of me and my family."

Fingers tapping on his thigh, Ranma thought for a moment, then nodded. "All right, would you be willing to take a job, a long-term one? This attack has made me realize that poison is one area of attack that none of us from the North would see coming. Poisoning food like that is anathema to us; there's so little food in the first place, after all."

What was left unsaid was this would let Tyene and Obara into the Red Keep and during their free time they would be able to ferret out any secrets they could. Ranma acknowledged this fact with what he said next. "As long as what you do on your own time does not impugn or otherwise cause trouble for the Royal family or my own, I doubt my father or I would care what you are up to."

Tyene paused for a moment, thinking, wondering if this was what Arianne had hoped would occur. "I will think about it. I'm not certain I would be safe that close to the seat of power, some other arrangement might need to be made, but I would be willing to perform such a duty for your family."

Ranma nodded, then stood up and stretched. "Good, now if you'll excuse me, I have a little girl I need to apologize to."

"She's not so little as all that," Tyene murmured, as if to herself, as she and her sister left the tent. Ranma pretended not to hear, though he had, and wondered what to make of that comment.

Margaery raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "I suppose that having them both where you can keep an eye on them is a good idea and if you're poisoned again, at least we'll know who to blame this time." Ranma rolled his eyes at her but did not gainsay that, and followed the Tyrell girl out of the tent.

Later Ranma did indeed apologize to Myrcella. Luckily, Tommy knew nothing what had occurred and was eager to continue their exploration of the faire. Jaime was assigned to them this morning, as well as Oakheart, and both men followed their Royal charges with faint but warm smiles on their faces, though Ser Oakheart was watching Ranma closely all the same.

The empty spot left by Greenfield was still vacant, with both the King and the Queen having several different candidates but not able to agree on any one. Cersei was simply waiting for an opportune moment to slip another supporter into the Kingsguard, but with Eddard there to back him up, Robert was making it much more difficult than usual. "I'm sorry I did that, Princess," Ranma said quietly, as he held the girl's hand while Tommy ran ahead to a stall that had a small archery competition going on. There were several children already there participating, though Tommen would probably prove to be their better. His hand eye coordination was very good, and his strength was growing every week.

Patting his hand with her free hand, Myrcella blushed at the fact they were actually holding hands and at the memory. That memory would be one of her treasured possessions for years to come. *I know you see me as a little sister*, she thought to herself looking up at him with adoring eyes, *but little sisters grow up and we're not truly related. Maybe if you don't marry Margaery, maybe...* She shook her head and said aloud, "It, it wasn't you Ranma. Let's just forget about it and have some more fun. Do you think we can find that stall that was selling small pinwheels?"

OOOOOO

A few days later, Ranma waited calmly in his tent alone, since the other three men hadn't entered the jousting. Ser Thomas had participated in the archery competition, losing in the semi-finals. Ser Jory had taken part of the wrestling tournament, losing to Prince Oberyn who went on to win the competition, as well as the spear throwing. Mattimeo, with his busted arm, hadn't participated in anything. He stood with the other men from Winterfell and more than half the men from Riverrun, looking on as the final competition began.

Ranma looked over at Fenris, who lay placidly alongside one wall, grateful to have spent so much time away from the stink of the city and with Ranma. He would never understand why his pack leader had to stay in such a place and

enjoyed being out in the fresh air, despite the cold rage that now emanated down their link. Fenris knew whatever it was, like the sudden spike in the mating urge he felt a few sunrises ago, his bond mate would handle it.

"I wish I could ride you out there today." Ranma said, allowing his cold purpose to dissipate once more as he ruffled Fenris' ears. Fenris huffed in pleasure, pushing his large head against Ranma's side.

They had actually practiced a few times in the Kingswood, in the past few evenings, but Fenris wasn't quite large enough yet to carry Ranma for very long, let alone into battle. He still didn't like the idea of Ranma riding his back, though he could see the point to it, and the idea of armor Ranma had shared once had a certain appeal. For anyone else, the idea was simply terrifying, as the reality would eventually become.

Ranma sat there for a moment, simply scratching his direwolf's head, letting the silence calm him as much as it could before his name was called. He joined the others for another benediction from the King and the High Septon, then moved back to his tent until his name was called. His opponent for that first contest was Ser Horas Redwyne, a knight from the Reach which had come with Margaery as one of her escorts.

He was a young man in his twenties who had hoped to win the competition in order to gain recognition so that he might start courting Margaery Tyrell, who was among the most beautiful women of all of the Reach. Horas didn't care that House Redwyne was already connected to House Tyrell, all he saw was Margaery's beauty and the size of her dowry. He had been incensed since he arrived at the way the Stark wildling and Lady Margaery seemed to go from flirting to coldly cordial and then to earnest dialogue. The northern lout didn't seem to realize what an honor had been placed upon him be considered worthy of Margaery's hand. He was angry and eager to put the Stark brat in his place, certain that the reason Ranma had entered the melee without a horse was that he couldn't fight from horseback.

In the first pass, Ranma disabused him of this notion. As the two horses charged toward one another on opposite sides of the tilt, at the last moment Ranma moved the balled point of his jousting saber as easily as if it was a rapier. Now it was aimed slightly up and to the side so that it would hit the upper right edge of his opponents shield at an angle. He did this so quickly that the man had no chance of moving his shield to block the new position and, while his own blow struck Ranma's shield square, Horas was flung from his horse with a cry of pain as the strength of Ranma's blow coupled with the angle threw him to the side.

He landed in the dust and Ranma quickly dismounted, then moved to aid him, winning a cheer from the crowd as he escorted the battered knight back to the tents. "Stark, Stark, Stark!"

Horas, despite seemingly taking his loss with good grace, felt his dislike of the Stark heir solidify into hatred. *Damn you, Stark. I will have my revenge for this! I will win the Lady Margaery's affections from you, I swear it!*

The object of his hatred sneezed as he sat in his tent at this time. Fenris stuck his large head out, looking at him quizzically. "Oh, just someone swearing vengeance on me, nothing big." Fenris huffed in amusement, then closed his eyes as Ranma began to scratch his neck. From there, the two of them watched the remainder of the jousting, Fenris huffing in amusement at the humans, their silly sticks, and their need to use four legged beasts to carry themselves.

The jousting was broken into several different rounds. Ranma had to go out once more before the day's rounds were completed and the winners went on to the next round, which was the following day. The next day, the tournament began at noon. He again handily won both his matches for the day and then had to watch in consternation as Ser Loras and Gregor Clegane tilted against one another.

Like Ranma, Ser Loras had won every match up to this point, handing out a white rose with every victory to pretty girls in the crowd. He had also handed a red one to Sansa, which had made Ranma sit up and take notice. The thought had entered his mind that maybe Loras would make a better husband for Sansa if/when he and his father were able to call her marriage to Joffrey off. Right now, Ranma had no time to think of such things.

The Mountain didn't use any special techniques or tricks; he simply was a Mountain That Rode. He would take all the punishment his opponent could dish out on his massively heavy armor, while hammering back with far more strength than most could handle. Normally this tactic worked but against Ser Loras, who was a master of the joust, the technique failed because he was able to move his shield and his position in the saddle in such a way as to deflect most of the force of Gregor's blows.

Loras groaned at the repeated blows, however, knowing he was going to be black and blue from them tomorrow. Still, he persevered because he had a secret weapon. He had chosen to ride a mare into this contest today and she was in heat, which would rile up Clegane's stallion. He wasn't certain why it hadn't worked, yet, but it would, if he could just hold on.

In actuality, the wind was against him, bringing the stallion the smell of Fenris, which overrode the smell of the mare, danger trumping hormones. This changed when Fenris went back into Ranma's tent to nap, tired of watching the humans at their silly play. Loras lasted another exchange, then, at last, the smell of his mare did its work.

"What, down you stupid AHHH!" the Mountain bellowed as suddenly, just as they were about to hit one another for what he was certain would be the last pass the pretty boy could take, his stallion reared. That threw off his weight so much that he couldn't even get his shield up between him and Loras's blow.

The tip of the Knight of Flower's lance took him high up in his chest, throwing him out of the saddle to land on the turf with a resounding clangor. Loras rode on, forcing his mare away from the stallion, then turned his horse around at the end of the tilt raising his lance in victory. He pulled off his helmet, waving at the cheering crowd with a smile.

Gregor, on the other hand raged to his feet, grabbing his lance from the ground. His temper, only very loosely controlled at the best of times, came to the fore now. He charged down the lane and around the tilt toward the victorious Loras. "RAHHH! You cheated somehow, you ass licker!"

Before he could get to Loras, he was brought up short by his brother and Ranma, who had both jumped into the jousting area to interpose themselves. His brother had his sword in his hand and the Hound was smiling eagerly. Ranma, too, was there, though he held only a broken shaft of a lance as a weapon, taken from a pile of them as he dashed forward. His eyes were dark pools while his smile was cold, yet as eager as the Hound's.

"You lost, Clegane!" Robert bellowed sternly, standing up from his seat in the Royal box. "Leave off!"

The Mountain glared down at his brother and Ranma contemptuously, then around at several dozen men who had also grabbed up weapons. His own men were well away, part of the crowd of smallfolk, and would have to hack through it to get to him. With no other option, he sneered and turned away, his anger festering within him.

As the crowd, which had stopped cheering as the Mountain charged, began to cheer once more, Ranma moved back to stand beside where Loras had just dismounted. "A good victory my friend but you have forced my hand."

Loras looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Really? And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see after the tourney ends, unfortunately." Ranma said shaking his head. "I wanted to do this the easy way but I guess, like everything else in my life, the hard way it is."

That made Loras's other eyebrow rise to join its twin, but he didn't press, and the two young men turned to watch the rest of the day's matches. At the end of the day, there were only four men left. Sandor Clegane had defeated Renly Baratheon in a surprise upset. Jaime of the Kingsguard had defeated Ser Barristan after a series of bruising exchanges, causing a rousing cheer from the crowd. These two joined Ser Loras and Ranma the next day, the last day of the tourney, and the semi-finals and finals of the jousting competition.

First to go were Sandor and Ser Loras. Once more, Loras won through after a series of passes. But, surprisingly, he declared himself too battered to continue, after this match and the match with the other Clegane. Still, he helped his downed opponent from the field, winning even more adulation from the crowd for this show of chivalry despite visibly favoring his jousting arm. Indeed, his prediction from the other day had born out. Loras was black and blue from mid-chest up and his jousting arm was badly sprained so it was no prevarication.

With that declaration, Jaime and Ranma's semi-final bout became the finals. The two men stared at one another from opposite ends of the field.

Jaime was determined to do all he could to unseat the brat from Winterfell, to demonstrate that he truly was better than Ranma. If Ranma had held back in that match all those months ago and the spars they had since, well, he just wouldn't stand for it. *How dare the brat think that he has to hold back against me?* Jaime was arrogant, but he also knew himself to be one of the best blades in the kingdom so his arrogance was well-founded. Jaime hated the very idea that someone was so much better than him as to hold back.

Ranma, however, wasn't taking him seriously. Jaime was too arrogant, he had a few tells and little motions that gave his attacks away, unlike Ser Selmy in the few spars Ranma had with the older knight. What was more important, at present, was that Jaime wasn't anywhere near strong enough to match Ranma in a joust.

So rather than ending with another series of momentous exchanges between two tried and true champions, the match ended almost before it began. The two men on their horses charged forward at the signal. Jaime's lance was aimed true as always, slamming into Ranma's shield over his chest with as much power as his momentum and arm

strength could deliver.

Ranma flinched only slightly, wincing at the force of that blow, but his return blow caught Jaime straight in his interposed shield as well. Ranma hadn't held back much, just enough to make certain he didn't permanently injure the Kingslayer.

Jaime simply could not stand that kind of blow. He felt himself lifted and torn from his stirrups to be thrown through the air. Seconds of flight later, he landed painfully on his back some twenty feet behind his horse.

For a moment, there was no sound except Jaime's ragged breathing as the crowd looked on, both highborn and smallfolk astonished at what they had just seen. Sir Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer, possibly the best blade in the kingdom as well as being one of the best jousts, unhorsed in a single pass.

Then the raucous cheering began as Ranma circled the tilt, getting off of his horse to go to his fallen enemy's aid.

Jaime smacked his hand away, pulling off his helmet and glaring at him. "How much have you held back, Stark!?" he spat angrily, nearly actually spitting, while one hand reached for a blade that wasn't there.

"A little bit I suppose." Ranma responded easily, pulling Jaime to his feet despite his protests that he didn't need the aid. "Sorry, but you're sort of in the way of what I really want here."

"What you really want?" Jaime said, his anger for the moment driven back by his bafflement at that comment.

"Oh yes. At this point I am on plan B. I don't want the money, I want a witness."

"That sounds truly ominous." Jaime muttered, his anger gone for the moment as he was helped into the tent set aside for healers. Two servants were already hurrying forward to help him out of his armor and Jaime realized he really needed it. Yesterday's match against Ser Selmy had taken it out of him and his little introduction to the mud and dust of the field just now had added to his accumulated aches.

"Really? I suppose that fits." Ranma replied as he helped Jaime into a seat. "You'll probably hear it from here. You should see it, however, especially considering your family has much to do with what I'm about to do."

Jaime stared at the boy, his green eyed gaze serious and angry, searching. But he couldn't match the cold fury in Ranma's eyes as he stared back and it was the Kingslayer who looked away. "As long as it has nothing to do with me or my sister, I don't care." He said finally.

"Good, I wouldn't like to have to kill you today too." Ranma said simply and then left the tent.

As he was helped out of his armor, Jaime determined that, yes; he probably did have to watch this and left the tent despite the protests of the servants who were trying to get him out of his battered armor. It turned out that the shield and his armored arm had actually been mangled enough that he had broken a bone there but he didn't even notice the pain for now, wondering what was about to happen.

Deep within him however, anger began to grow. An anger against Ranma Stark, and his easy assurance of superiority, an anger that would grow.

OOOOOOO

Five minutes later, Ranma stood in front of the King along with the champion of the archery competition (a yeoman from the Dornish Marches), Prince Oberyn, and the other winners of the smaller competitions. Each of them took their money with thanks, though Oberyn's was certainly said in as sarcastic a tone as he could manage when he thanked 'Robert' for his contribution to his nights of debauchery.

The tone and use of his first name caused Robert's teeth to clench but he didn't say anything, merely moving on. He knew the root of that attitude and there was nothing to be done about it. When Robert came to Ranma his good humor came back. With a grin he bellowed, "And now the winner of both the melee and jousting competitions, the overall winner of this tournament, Ranma Stark!"

He waited for the cheering to subside before reaching back to a servant who was nearly trembling with the effort of holding the money stack.

However, before he could do anything, Ranma held up a hand. "You may keep your money, Your Majesty." he said in a loud voice that carried everywhere, to the smallfolk surrounding the tournament's edge and the Royal box. "Instead,

I ask a boon."

Robert turned back to him, his eyes suddenly serious, one eyebrow raised. "A boon?" He laughed. "Hahaha, and what would you have of us?"

Ranma looked up at the royal box. "Your Grace, could I ask that you send Myrcella, Tommen, Jeyne, and my sister away? They do not have to witness this."

The Queen frowned, wondering what the young Stark had in mind. She was unable to figure it out, though she had known from her spies' reports that something had happened to change his attitude sometime when he went into the city with the Tyrell girl. She also knew Ranma was a frighteningly direct individual and a shiver of mixed tension and fear went up her spine.

She nodded at two of her maids, who hurried the children away despite their protests but Sansa remained sitting stiffly, unmoving. "I am not a little girl to be hastened aside when serious matters are discussed. I am betrothed to the Prince! If he stays so do I!" she said stoutly.

Cersei raised an eyebrow in some approval of that, then nodded and turned back. Ranma frowned a little but shrugged. "The boon I ask, Your Majesty, is to witness what I'm about to do."

With that, Ranma turned away from the King and stared over at the crowd to where the majority of the day's contestants had gathered, including his target, surrounded by some of his own men. When he spoke it was in an ultra-formal way, that was utterly unlike his normal laid back manner, accenting his words even more, which given their content wasn't really needed. "Ser Gregor Clegane, I call you **coward**! I call you **rapist**! I call you **murderer**! I call you unfit to be a knight, unfit to be a lord, unfit to be a **man**! I call you to the field of honor and, if you do not face me now, I will hunt you down like the dog you are and kill you where you stand!"

Robert's eyes had grown wider with every word and a fierce light burned in them. He didn't know why Ranma had a bone to pick with the Mountain but Gregor was such a man that Robert would be well rid of him despite the fact that he had done Robert a favor during the sack of Kings Landing. "Are you sure you know what you're doing boy? You can't take those words back."

"I know what I'm doing." Ranma said coldly his voice now as low pitched as the King's as the crowd began to murmur exclamations of shock and surprise. Gregor roared aloud in anger, making to run forward, pushing aside his men and all those around him. "I also know what you refused to punish Clegane and Amory Lorch for, **Your Majesty**." Instead of being simply an address to Robert's rank, those words came out as an epithet. Robert actually flinched a little at the look of condemnation in Ranma's eyes. "This is justice long overdue."

Robert flared back, and was about to declaim angrily about why should he care about murderous, fucking crazy dragon bloods, when Clegane broke through the crowd, roaring. "I'll gut the little bastard! No man calls me coward!" The rest of it he didn't care about, since it was all true and he enjoyed every moment of it, but the coward part, that he cared about.

"Hold!" Robert bellowed, turning swiftly to face the charging Mountain. "This will be done in a proper manner! Go get your armor the pair of you, and return here within the hour!"

In her box, Cersei had leaned back, pursing her lips thoughtfully. Jaime, limping now from a bad bruise on the back of his thigh and his arm in a sling, came up into the Royal box. He sprawled down in a chair next to her, smirking evilly. "Care to place a wager on the outcome, my sister?"

"No." she answered coldly. Cersei knew that Ranma would win; it remained to be seen how, though. She knew he was faster than nearly anyone she had ever seen and speed against the Mountain would prove deadly to the beast. No, her mind was on what would happen after. "I wonder what our father will think of this when he hears of it."

"Will you shed any tears for that man?"

"Don't be disgusting." she responded sharply. "He's a tool of the family, a blunt, horribly effective weapon of terror, that is all. I'll shed no tears for him, though our father may see it differently. Gregor Clegane has ever been in his service, after all"

While the twins were conferring, other conversations abounded throughout the Royal box and the onlookers. Although they had all seen Ranma dominate in enemies, the legend of the Mountain that Rides was such that most were thinking that they were going to witness the young fool die and some were looking at Lord Stark where he sat,

stoic and silent, with sad eyes. He simply sat, however, as if carved from stone, waiting.

Jason Mallister sat next to him, equally grim. He had lost to the Kingslayer in the second day of the jousting and had never gone up against the Mountain that Rides before. Yet he had heard of the man's skill and massive strength. He turned to his friend, his face creased with concern. "I hope your son knows what he's doing, Ned."

"My son has strength he has not yet shown, Jason. Have no fear." Jason looked at Eddard's almost serene expression and shook his head faintly, leaning back in his seat as he turned to watch the field of combat.

Not sharing her father's confidence Sansa was extremely worried, wondering if her headstrong brother had bitten off more than even a direwolf could chew. She now regretted never apologizing about that dratted pet of his and prayed to the old gods and the Seven that Ranma would live so they would have time to mend their fences.

Beside her, Joffrey simply waited in silence, his heart suddenly brimming with a wild, vindictive pleasure. His attack on the Stark heir had failed miserably but this would work even better and be even bloodier too. That would leave him with more resources to use against his other targets. Joffrey was using all his limited self-control to keep a wide, vindictive smile off his face. Ranma's ability to weather the effects of the potion that he had his servant place in Ranma's food had angered him greatly and made him very worried about how else he could strike against Ranma.

Ranma was still glowing too bright, taking too much attention that should rightly be Joffrey's as Crown Prince. Added to this, Ranma's continued support of Tommen was an ever growing irritant given how Tommen and Robert were becoming closer, something Joffrey couldn't stomach. *But now the Mountain will deal with the Stark heir and I won't have to lift a finger!*

Nearby, his guard dog had a very different opinion. He had dreamed of the day he could kill his older brother, ever since the monster had thrust his head into a brazier when they were children. But this, this was beyond his wildest hopes. A faint, but hopeful smile appeared on his face as he stared at the field, urging the battle to begin.

Prince Oberyn was there and he wondered truly how this would go. On the one hand, he wanted to be the one to kill the bastard but, on the other, this was going to be public and possibly humiliating. He had watched both the melee and the joust with watchful eyes and had made his own assumptions about Ranma skill. *If he is strong enough to match Gregor, he might have a chance to win if he does it right.*

Elsewhere in the crowd, Princess Arianne and her companions looked on as well, her eyes wide and mouth agape him at the suddenness of this. It was unheard of to not take the King's money like that, unheard of to use him as simply a witness to something like this. The boy was breaking all the rules and she loved it! *I have to get closer to him, oh my god, what an asset he would be even if he was a Stark and all that implied. Father was wrong, so wrong! There is much we could gain from an alliance with his family and with him.*"

Back in the Royal box, Renly was looking on in shock. "You don't think he really has a chance against the Mountain do you? Not one-on-one and on the ground? The Mountain isn't nearly as dangerous in the saddle as he is on the ground and his strength is superlative. No matter how good he is, Ranma is still a young man, after all."

Ser Loras winced slightly as he shifted in his seat. Facing Sandor and Gregor one after another had really done a number on him; he was lucky he hadn't broken any bones. "I think that Gregor will never land a blow, Ranma's far too fast, and unlike, well myself, if I'm honest, he isn't flamboyant. I think this is going to be very quick and that the Mountain is going to find he can't weather a winter's gale." Renly raised an eyebrow at his secret lover's certainty, then turned back to the field.

Behind the Royals, Varys, Petyr, and others had formed their own opinions and were leaned forward eagerly, wondering how this would go. Varys was strangely neutral, uncaring if the Stark boy should die while, at the same time, uncaring of the Mountain's fate.

Petyr was hopeful. After all, one less Stark would suit him just fine, not even taking into consideration how it would throw Ned off his game. While the man didn't have a devious bone in his body, his dogged persistence had already helped the Crown's monetary position far more than Petyr had planned for.

Sansa was an exception to his hatred of all things Stark, he had plans there, but he needed the pot boiling nicely before even hinting at such a move. Margaery Tyrell's lukewarm flirtations had fit in well with his own plans and he was now waiting for the right moment to point Eddard in the right direction of his 'proof'. *The day after his firstborn dies due to his own arrogance should do.*

Petyr could almost be excused for not realizing how skilled Ranma was. He disdained soldiers and fighters in general,

seeing the majority as useful tools but too one-dimensional to be truly dangerous. Added to this, was his disdain for all things Stark and his opinion they were too honorable for their own good. Plus, he had personally been countering Brynden's moves in the city to set up his spy network and Eddard's moves on the small council as much as he could without his self-interest becoming obvious so he hadn't noticed much about Ranma.

Yet, even Loras, even Ser Barristan Selmy, who was watching with a grim smile on his craggy face, didn't realize how much Ranma held back normally.

Soon enough, Gregor strode out of the crowd, his heavy plate clanking. He was an eight foot tall tower of gray steel and muscle, his family's colors, black dogs on a yellow background, visible on his tabard. He already had his helmet on, making him seem even more inhuman. In one hand, he held his massive six feet long blade while he wore a shield on his other arm.

Ranma came forward, the sword he had made for him out and resting along his thigh on one side, standing there in his regular chain mail without even a helm on. His blue eyes were as dark as the ocean as he stared at the dead man before him, his entire body relaxed, calm now that the moment had come.

The King stood between them and stared hard at Ranma's negligence. He shook his head sadly after moment and raised his hands. "This is about honor; words have been said that must be answered in blood. This can only end in death, there are thus no rules save for this: two men fight, one man leaves, and let might decide the right!" With that statement, he moved back to press himself against the outer wall of the raised Royal platform, staring at the fight.

"I'm going to gut you, brat!" Gregor roared, charging forward as fast as he could move, his massive sword raised.

Ranma stood there, waiting. "The King's wrong." he said simply staring at the Mountain as he closed. "This isn't a battle, this is an execution."

The sword came down on his position but Ranma stepped back two paces so quickly that it seemed to the onlookers as if he had moved using magic. His arms flashed forward, sword hand now empty of his blade, which he had dropped to stick out of the ground by his side. His fists caught Gregor's sword blade on the flat side at two points, smashing with all the strength he could put into the blows.

There was a shriek of tortured metal and, to the astonishment of everyone there, the blade shattered, bits and pieces flying off in every direction and leaving Gregor holding onto a sword with only a few inches of blade still sticking out of the hilt.

Gregor was undaunted, gripped in one of his berserker rages. He charged forward, trying to stab the edge of the blade into his opponent. "Die!"

But Ranma simply grabbed his sword arm right behind Gregor's gauntlet, not even moving as he took the impetus of the attempted blow. He held it there, as if his arm was a steel vice. Gregor bellowed again and tried to punch him but again found his arm stopped like it had hit a wall before the blow could land.

With his enemy's arms now in his grip (surprisingly difficult given how thick the man's wrists were covered further by armor), Ranma slowly stretched his arms out, pulling the Mountain's arms out as well.

"Stranger take you RAGH!" Gregor tried to kick out, not understanding at all what was going on. He had never fought someone with enough strength to match him, let alone overpower him like this.

That blow was blocked by one of Ranma's legs before he returned a lightning fast kick directly to the crotch. He had held back somewhat to that blow, just enough so that Gregor wouldn't be lifted out of Ranma's grip, but he still was lifted into the air a good few inches.

His opponent's bellowing roars turned into a scream of agony as his crotch was simply obliterated. His balls burst under the blow and his pelvic bone was not so much broken as pulverized. No amount of healing, medicine, or even the magic that was sometimes practiced in a few of the city states of Essos would ever give him back what he had just lost. "YAAAAaaaaahhhhh!"

"That was for Elia Martell and all your other rape victims," Ranma said coldly, still gripping the Mountain's arms outstretched easily, despite his frantic attempts to break out of Ranma's grip to cup his demolished privates.

In the crowd, the Prince and Princess of Dorne both laughed aloud at the sheer fitting nature of that blow and looked on with the rest of the crowd, now understanding something that had only hitherto been apparent to a few of those from Winterfell. In terms of physical contests, Ranma had no equal; no one here even came close.



Sandor Clegane also watched, his eyes wide, and a large, happy grin, something no one had ever seen before on him, spread across his scarred face.

The Stark heir proved this further by lifting one foot to languidly press against Gregor's chest where he had collapsed to his knees, trying to bring his arms together to do something to his tormentor, trying to get to the pain that dominated his existence now, drowning even his almost constant fury.

Instead, Ranma pulled Gregor's arms taut. "And this is for young Aegon, Rhaenys, and every other child you've killed or tortured!" There was a trick to this, which he had learned from Genma once when the old man was particularly drunk and had picked a fight with a grizzly. You had to get the right angle and the correct balance of force, which Ranma did.

With a wrench and a roar, Ranma flung his arms back, ripping Gregor's arms out of their sockets. Blood spurted and Gregor's screams became even shriller while many a person in the crowd winced and there were cries and gasps of shock.

Many, especially Petyr and others who had dismissed Ranma's abilities as merely that of skill and talent, wondered how it could have happened at all, given the heavy plate armor that Gregor wore, yet even that had ripped and shredded at the shoulder. After this, the rumors of Ranma's strength would spread far and wide but, for now, the entire crowd, nobles, smallfolk, schemers, and Royals alike watched on, wondering how the Mountain would be put out of his misery. Even his own men, that band of like-minded individuals Gregor had taken into his service, watched on in horror at what was happening to their lord.

Now armless Gregor fell forward, only kept upright by Ranma grabbing him by the front of his helmet. Ranma then ripped off the helmet, throwing it aside. With one hand still keeping Gregor somewhat upright, Ranma's free hand reached down, grabbing up his blade. "I told you this was an execution, Clegane."

His sword flashed out, there was a 'shlick' sound, and then Ranma was lifting the head of Ser Gregor Clegane, the Mountain that Rides, one of the most feared men in Westeros, by the hair as his now headless corpse splattered into the wide puddle of bloody mud that had already formed around it. The head had been severed cleanly, like a man cutting off a small tree branch, blood spurting and flowing out of the gaping hole where his head had once been.

Ranma stood there, holding the bloody head out to one side. He stared out over the crowd seeing where Oberyn sat with the other former tourney participants. Locking eyes with him he silently told the man this hadn't been done for him or to curry favor; that it was about justice, nothing more.

He stared at the Lannisters, clustered in the Royal box, his eyes cold as the coming of winter and only the Queen could meet his gaze for more than a second before looking away. He stared, his eyes piercing the now silent Robert, then moving on to his father, who merely gave small, grim nod of satisfaction. Then his eyes once more swept the crowd, stopping at the clump of the Mountain's men, who all flinched backwards in fear, before tossing the head away and turning to go back to his tent, while behind him, the smallfolk began to cheer.

End chapter

I apologize to those who felt a little icky reading the part with Ranma kissing Myrcella. However I have decided to, outside of Daenerys, leaving the girls who will join Ranma and her up in the air for the moment, so while it will take a lot of time, maybe the little sister really will grow up. Hope everyone liked how I did Margaery, not certain I hit her personality right, but I'm happy with it.

I confess my speech to writing software seems to have degraded this time around, losing some of its notes on my inflection. Even with Jessolt's aid, I don't doubt there are more mistakes in terms of word choice than the other chapters, and I apologize. However, I want to send out an extra loud shout out to Jessolt for his aid on this chapter, it took us a while, but it is still awesome.

Will there be repercussions from Gregor's death, oh yes, but that is what happens with Ranma - he sometimes makes enemies where there need be none - yet he will respond and his terrifying skills and strength will force his enemies to tread carefully. Of course, that is only true of physical confrontations, as this chapter showed. Joffrey took a shot and nearly won the battle; it was only Myrcella, Oakheart, and Selmy being there that stopped Ranma in time for him to gain control of himself. And even if he can trust Tyene (a bit, for now, as he thought) he is still vulnerable in other ways, and even he physically can only be in one place at a time. And, how will Tywin react to the loss of a tool like the Mountain? This also means that castle Clegane falls to Sandor, who Tywin doesn't have nearly as much control over as Gregor...

I say again, that physically, Ranma has no equal, no one is even close at this point save Jon, and to a much lesser extent the wolfsworn. That will change in the future, the Others and others will find ways to challenge him physically, but it will not be easy.

I have some portions of the story of the Wall already written but when I tried to figure out travel times (I know, I know) they didn't add up. The larger the army, the slower it can move. So those portions will show up in the next chapter, after Tyrion and the others have been on the move for a little over two-thirds of a year. Can you tell I didn't want to bother with travel scenes again?

Theon too will have his adventures and there will be a few scenes back in Winterfell that will have been occurring concurrently with the majority of events in this chapter.

Can anyone tell me a few things, though:

Ravens are the method of long range communication but how often are they used? Am I correct in saying that Eddard and his distant family could exchange news once a month? Obviously, nothing Eddard didn't mind other people seeing but if I'm wrong about that, I'll delete that mention from this chapter.

I read a review that mentioned that Arya had become the avatar of the Many-faced god, but I haven't found anything about that in the original. Is it true?

A picture of the katana I based Ranma's blade off is at

[newuniquejapan dot com slash a signed 1549 nagayauki dash katana dot com](http://newuniquejapan.com/slash-a-signed-1549-nagayauki-dash-katana.com) equals swords.

Anyway, thank you for reading and as always please review

In other news, I had an amusing thought for a Ranma/Bleach crossover sort of like this one. Ranma dies (old age, maybe, or Akane's cooking or whatever) and is sent into the resurrection circle, only something happens and he retains his memories. Now with his memories of a past life, Ichigo will strive even harder to live up to his name. – Saves his mother, has adventures well before canon, lots of other changes. No Zangetsu, replaced by a certain redhead and an embarrassing yet all too familiar unleashed mode and a power that has interesting repercussions. No hollow side, though maybe a certain neko will come out to play, and his zanpakto's released form would be a blast from the past. Pairing would be one Espada (Tia), possibly one human, one Shinigami, or two Shinigami. If someone wants to try to write this, I would be happy to help, though if not, I might, emphasis might, add it to my growing list of one shot concepts.

## \*Chapter 6\*: Chapter 6

I don't own A Song of Ice and Fire, I like to actually have my main characters survive thank you, nor do I own Ranma, since I don't like violent tomboys or insane obsessively possessive women.

Thanks go to my favorite harlequin, MilandaAnza, for help with the catfight scene, and Jessolt for beta-ing. I also would like to thank Narsil and Byakugan789 for listening to my ideas.

Sorry this took so long. I got it back from Jessolt a few weeks back, but work swamped me so much I lacked the energy to go over the changes he made and do a final read through myself until this past weekend, and then football happened, and ugh... no motivation...

Some people have mentioned the fact that a Ranma fic without the curse isn't a Ranma fic. I disagree, it was his character, mental and physical development with all those interesting mental issues and strange blank spots in his development that made Ranma, Ranma. The curse part of that yes, but nowhere near the whole, as I think I've proven in Horse of the Dead. Moreover, in this one in particular, the curse would be counter productive. If I put it in, then it would become a major plot point in a lot of negative ways and it would take away from the existing plots, and just be more trouble than its worth. So I am afraid it is just not happening.

In this chapter, we see some differences between canon start to occur, and the game begins to move into its more serious phase.

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### Chapter 6 War Can Come In Many Forms

From the moment Ranma had asked the King for a boon, Margaery had known it was going to be bad. When he challenged Gregor Clegane in front of everyone, she knew she would have to figure out a new term for how bad this was going to be. On the one hand, as the 'battle' continued she could see the benefits long-term. For one thing, Margaery wasn't blind to the fact that the Mountain's death would make the world a better and safer place for all. For another, it certainly showcased Ranma's martial strength to a wide audience, which would further disseminate it. Rumor was the only thing faster than raven-wings, after all, and she had no doubts that stories about this execution would spread even to the Reach before her own report on it could reach her grandmother.

That last thought was sort of tied into why this had been a very bad idea indeed, the rule of unintended consequences. Margaery brought this up in no uncertain terms when she marched into the Winterfell contestant's tent. "You are an absolute idiot, Ranma Stark! A little boy surrounded by wild animals!" She then flushed a little, noticing that Ranma had been in the process of peeling off his armor as well as his under shirt. But her anger at this whole honor-bound masculine idiocy easily burned through her appreciation of the show.

Ranma finished pulling off his undershirt of chainmail having already divested himself of his chest plate. He was looking forward to getting word that the lizard lion armor was ready, since he knew it would be more much more flexible than this plate armor crap. That hadn't changed from one world to the other; Ranma still thought that speed and maneuverability was much more important than durability. In the case of the lizard lion armor, he would have the best of both worlds.

He glanced down at his hands for a moment as he moved to throw his padded undershirt to the ground. Ranma had wondered if he would feel different after executing a man, His father had always said it was different than killing in the heat of battle. But after ending Gregor, all Ranma felt was a sense of deep satisfaction at a job well done.

Introspection done for the moment, Ranma smirked at Margaery. "Nice to know you care my lady, I'm fine thanks for asking. And if we're talkin' field of animals, exactly what kind of snake represents your family?"

The Rose of High Garden shook her head. "While my family is certainly playing the game for all we are worth that does not mean that I personally am your enemy. I would've thought that was obvious over the past few months. But you, you have just made yourself a very powerful enemy indeed. Lord Tywin Lannister will **not** take this lying down. Whatever else Gregor Clegane was, he was also a tool of the Lannister family and personally of Lord Tywin. He is an arrogant man and he will take this as an affront on him personally. Whatever your stated reasons, and I have no doubt you believed them to be justified, Tywin **will** act against you. His pride will require no less."

"Believe it or not, I actually thought about that before, and ignored it." Ranma smiled faintly, moving over to one of the seats motioning Margaery to join him at the small camp table there.

Behind her, Septa Nysterica came in huffing and puffing. The elderly woman had raced after her young charge when she stormed off from the Royal box, her glare clearing a way through the raucous crowd surrounding the tournament field. Seeing the two of them sitting with a table between them was a good thing, in Nysterica's opinion, and she took up a position by the doorway, where she would be able to observe yet not obviously overhear.

She wondered why her charge was so angry and also wondered if maybe Margaery had forgotten her grandmother's injunctions on keeping her distance emotionally from the young Stark while also making a play for Joffrey. She was supposed to play for the Prince more than Ranma if she could but of late that seemed to have slipped her mind.

As Margaery opened her mouth to start in on him again, Ranma held up a hand before ticking off points on his fingers. "One, from everything I've been told, both from my father and uncle, Lord Lannister does not act in haste. To keep using your illustration Margaery, he's a cold calculating sort of lion. It will take him a while to figure out how to respond to this. Two, whatever he does, Lord Tywin is in the Westerlands; it will take three weeks to get a raven to him and back. The time and the distance will work against any fiery response."

Margaery's temper cooled a little at Ranma's analysis of Lord Lannister and she felt a flash of approval working its way through her. Yet at the same time, she was still worried. "So you're assuming his calculating and ruthless aspect will override his pride? I wish I could say that will be the case with any certainty. Unfortunately, I've never met the man personally. I'm afraid that he will respond arrogantly, and that response will come in a way that we cannot expect. Remember Ranma, **gold** talks here in the South far more than you're used to up north, much more than honor or law, and it is Lord Lannister who has the most gold. Even my father would have to admit that, however reluctantly."

Ranma shrugged. It was arrogant of him and he knew it would eventually bite him in the ass in some fashion. Yet he hadn't met a single person in all of Westeros who could match him physically, so assassins didn't bother him and he doubted Tyrion would force open warfare against the Starks to avenge Gregor's death. *As for poisons, even if it gets through our new acquaintances, Fenris can protect me against anything lethal.*

*I must remember to inform father about those two when we move back to the city,* Ranma thought as Fenris padded over to them, approval radiating down their link at the violence a moment ago. Fenris didn't understand most of the reasons why the Mountain had to die but the brutal manner in which his master had gone about putting the large mind-mad two legs down had pleased him.

Across from him, Margaery frowned at the direwolf for a moment. That beast was much more intelligent than any animal should be and Ranma's ability to direct him was astonishing. Fenris's intelligence was even more terrifying considering his sheer size, though thankfully he seemed to be in control of himself. *Now if only he would warm to me more than the Baratheon girl...*

Margaery shook that familiar thought off and asked sharply, "Have you thought about the reactions from those closer to home?"

Ranma blinked, nonplussed and Margaery sighed loudly. She tapped her chin for a moment then nodded. "I think we can discount the Queen, she won't act against you for this. Her Majesty has never had anything to do with the Mountain so his death won't matter to her." Margaery had also noticed that the woman seemed to be taking a soft approach with Ranma. Although Margaery could have wished that she could say it wasn't working. Ranma was certainly more respectful of her than he was of the King, though whether that came from the fact that she was a woman and her wiles or his opinion of the King, she couldn't say.

"The Grand Maester won't act against me either." Ranma said, seeing what she was doing and smiling impishly, glad to see their friendship mattered to her so much.

Nearby, Nysterica frowned, wondering why Margaery was going out of her way to help the Stark heir like this. It was well beyond what her orders from Olenna outlined. *I might have to send word of this to my lady. If Margaery can no longer play the game as House Tyrell wants, then steps must be taken.*

Ranma didn't know the septa's thoughts however and went on. "I doubt he has any physical forces to threaten me and mine with and, even if he did, they wouldn't work. Poisons, of course, are a factor but we now have the Sand Snakes to help us there and they both know that we'll be looking to them if anything happens to me." *And of course,* he thought to himself, *I'm not going to tell even you that I can use Fenris to detect anything lethal.*

That aspect of his bond with the direwolf was something that constantly surprised him: the nuance of smells that Fenris could detect was **unbelievable**. Ranma hadn't had much to do with dogs of any kind in his past life, though he'd had to run from wolves a time or two when training with Genma, and it always surprised him how much information Fenris could tell Ranma through their link. Not nearly as much as the direwolf took in, of course, but it was

getting slowly better. And Fenris didn't have to explain why Ranma shouldn't eat something, only stop him eating it.

"One reaction you might not suspect is the King's." Margaery warned. "You backed him into a corner Ranma and you acted without any kind of respect for his rank. That will grate on a man like Robert Baratheon and it will affect his interactions with you. I doubt that it will force the King to act against you, given his friendship with your father, but you should be wary of angering him further."

From there the conversation continued while Ranma got ready to head back to the city. The two of them moved through the movers and shakers in the city one after another, trying to figure out how they would all react to Ranma's display, both in the court and in the wider world. They were not alone in this. While the smallfolk and the majority of nobles laughed and caroused at the death of the hated Mountain That Rode, the powers in the realm were considering how this changed things. In particular, the person whose reaction neither of the teens could figure out was the most deeply troubled by this act.

OOOOOO

Margaery was correct in her assessment of Cersei. The Queen simply took this as a further sign that Ranma was too dangerous to provoke into a physical confrontation. There had to be other ways of controlling him. She saw his growing relationship with Margaery as one such way, if need be, as well as possibly his sister.

Her youngest son's near apprenticeship to Ranma was another way, which at the very least would make him think fondly of her family if they didn't act precipitously against him and his. Cersei had also used the time during the tournament to remove the book that had turned the former Hands attention towards her children. Without it, and a lot more evidence backing any investigation in that direction, she hoped to weather that particular storm.

She had even taken it further. Cersei ordered her father's main creature in King's Landing, Pycelle, to not send him anything just yet, to wait until the furor of this died down before doing so, adding in everything else that had occurred since the King returned to the city. And when Pycelle did, she would be sending her own messages to him with the same raven.

Like his sister, Jaime hadn't cared one way or the other about Gregor or his death. Strong Gregor had been but in terms of skill, he hadn't even come close to Jaime's own talent. No, what the Kingslayer cared about was that Ranma had been hiding his abilities. He realized that Cersei had been right all along about Ranma and that he had been blinded by his own arrogance. Jaime was angry, extremely angry, about it and the fact that Ranma was so far beyond him in physical ability. The fact that Ranma had hidden it so well made it worse.

Still, Jaime wasn't so furious as to believe he could overcome that disparity simply by wishing it to be so. Once he returned to the city, Jaime would begin to watch Ranma's training, as well as the lessons he taught Tommen, gleaning from them what he could. He would also up his own training tremendously. This would, to Jaime's irritation, make the time he could spend with his sister disappear but he felt it would be worth it in the end.

Cersei however didn't really notice this absence, being too busy with the game, keeping a hold of the reins of power in the court as well as mitigating the loss of Lannister influence on the small council without seeming to be against Ned's anti-corruption campaign. And honestly, Jamie's visits hadn't been as... fulfilling for her of late.

Joffrey was also worried, though he hid it well thanks to the practice he had been getting lately in hiding his emotions from everyone, even his mother. He was angry at that still but he understood her reasoning better now after seeing Ranma tear apart the Mountain like that. Still, it made Joffrey even more certain he needed to get rid of Ranma somehow. The only question was how. He turned, his mask firmly in place, to congratulate Sansa on her brother's victory, while his thoughts continued to rail behind this facade at this northern wolf's presumption to burn brighter than the Prince himself.

Two others were considering, or rather reconsidering their opinions on Ranma.

Petyr was very worried. There was a difference between a normal fighting man and a monster. Gregor had been considered such but Ranma's sheer domination of the Mountain proved that he was a larger one. Petyr had been planning for the conflict of position and influence to segue into open confrontation between the Lannisters and the Starks ever since Robert had announced he would be going north to bring back Eddard as his Hand.

Even with the men from Riverrun added into the equation, the Starks were still badly outnumbered by the Lannister supporters in the capital so he felt confident in the outcome there, even if he couldn't work his way into Eddard Stark's confidence to undermine him later. It wouldn't even have been hard to create an initial spark to that conflict. The Starks had made enough enemies in their inroads into the cities corruption for him to use any number of go-betweens

and Pycelle was primed to jump on the wagon.

Now however, he was reevaluating everything he had heard about Ranma Stark's abilities. *I need to remove him before I can move any of my plans forward.* He thought to himself, trying to think of a way to get Ranma out of the city. *Poison might be out of the question as well. Given the fact that the book didn't seem to work on either of them, they might have someone in their employ that can spot poisons. That isn't even considering whatever Joffrey has tried, though one wonders which of the items his agent got from the alchemists he tried. Even my own contact with the guild couldn't tell me all of the additives he obtained.*

The book had been planted by Petyr to see what would happen and to point the Starks in the right direction at the earliest opportunity. The poison on it hadn't been the one that had killed the former Hand lord Arryn. That poison had been digested rather than via touch, though like with the book, Petyr did indeed have something to do with that.

*Something to get Ranma out of the city or, perhaps, something to distract the Starks entirely? Would that serve my overall plans though? I need the Starks strong enough to weaken the Lannisters, and be a viable threat to the lions so they do not notice my own machinations. The last thing I want is for **Tywin** to turn his attention on the court and Kings Landing. At the same time, is there something brewing elsewhere of that nature? Or some weakness I could exploit?*

For some reason his thoughts turned to the conversation he'd had when Ranma first sat down next to him at the feast the evening of the King's return, how he spoke about his brother Jon and how the Lady Catelyn, **his** Cat, had seemingly warmed to the boy. Something about that struck him as odd but the next moment he saw Sansa and Joffrey passing by with Cersei, two of the Kingsguard before them, ready to clear a path through the rowdy crowd.

As they removed themselves from the celebration that was continuing in the crowd and in the Royal box, his eyes flicked over to Joffrey once more. *I wonder if perhaps I should ally with one lion to bring down both the pride and the pack? Certainly, he would be an useful tool, even if I intend to break his betrothal with Sansa. So much like Cat, she is...*

When the Master of Coin followed the royal party, his eyes licking occasionally over Joffrey and Sansa, Petyr in turn was watched by Varys, who was wondering about the sudden tension in the man. *It would appear as if Petyr has more irons in the fire than I thought, if he is so angry at seeing the young Stark's abilities. If he is so angry at that, I wonder if he is after more than simply weakening the Lannister's position. And if so, should I remain allied to him? Yet, who else could I ally with that wouldn't interfere with my own plans? Something to think about, as are the young Stark's abilities. I may need to remove him; Ranma is too dangerous as a symbol and as a person. I do not want to weaken the lions to simply let the wolves take their place. Hmm...*

None of the people in the Royal box noticed a lone man pushing his way through the crowd and out into the cleared space where the execution had occurred. Oberyn Martell picked up the giant head of the Mountain that Rides and smiled broadly.

OOOOOOO

About an hour later, Ranma, Margaery, and their minder joined the Royals and Eddard to head back to the city. The two younger Baratheons looked at Ranma with more awe than they had before, having heard of what had happened from the servants. Both of them were relieved when Ranma acted as if nothing had occurred, lifting Tommen up onto his horse with a smile for the youngster before giving a smile and a wave to Myrcella as she entered the carriage with her mother.

Ned smiled slightly, reaching down from his horse to grasp his son's hand firmly. Ranma nodded up at him then moved off with Fenris padding behind him. He then noticed Robert's ambivalent stare as he passed the King moving back down the column toward where Tommy sat on his horse. *Looks like Margaery was right, he does seem to resent me 'cause I put him on the spot like that. Still, nothing I can do about it, and it's his fault Gregor was free for so long despite his numerous crimes. Right and wrong don't change even if you have a Ser in front of your name or a powerful backer.*

Ranma was amused to note however that Joffrey was not even looking in his direction. *Good, maybe this will have scared him enough to stop him from messing with me and mine again like he did on the trip down here.*

The Queen on the other hand, merely nodded in his direction, her eyes appraising as always. A moment later, the party set off back to the city, while around them, the celebrations continued for a time among the smallfolk, while the other nobles began their own preparations to leave.

The news of Gregor Clegane's death had traveled before the groups heading back to Kings Landing, getting there far

faster than the Royal party, which entered the city near sundown of the same day. It caused celebration in the city, so hated and feared the Mountain had been by the smallfolk. It turned into a riot when a few of the Mountain's Men were stupid enough to enter the city to grab their belongings before fleeing.

Without their fearful patron, none of these men, mostly landless knights in Gregor's service because they had similar tastes, had any protection from their past crimes. Robert, in a rare moment of forethought had, immediately upon the death of the Mountain, ordered that any that could be found were to be detained, to either be executed or sent north to the Wall. Most had gotten away in the tumult of the tournament's crowds, however.

Some of them had stupidly returned to the city however, making such an edict unnecessary. When they were recognized, the crowd of smallfolk became a riot, which ripped them apart. The others had fled straight from the tournament before they could be caught. However the next day, Thoros of Myr went after them with a small band of other like-minded individuals, hunting them down within a few weeks before returning victorious to the city. The fire priest might not have been the one to finally lay the Mountain low but he could at least clean up after his death. Not a one of them survived.

When the King's party entered the city, they found that the riot had ended, having run out of steam rather than from the actions of the Gold Cloaks who should have tried at least to keep order. Instead, they had cowered in their barracks and in a few other strong points throughout the city.

Despite the recent bout of violence and the lack of Gold Cloaks, there was much cheering and joyfulness in the air. The smallfolk had never forgotten how the Lannister's men had burned and raped their way through the city. Gregor Clegane had become a symbol of that.

While King moved through the city slowly, with a dozen men-at-arms clearing the way, the crowd subsided, but the shouts for "Young Wolf" and "Stark" reverberated everywhere, interspersed with that for the King. Most of the small folk had come to the conclusion that Robert had somehow set up so that Gregor would at last die without it being linked back to him officially. Where that idea came from no one really knew, but it was there. This served to mollify the King somewhat from the way Ranma had used him to call out Gregor in such a manner.

Soon enough the party wound its way up to the Red Keep, where it broke up into its separate parts. The Royal family and their entourage made for Maegor's Holdfast while Ranma moved toward the Tower of the Hand. He nodded at servants, who bowed deeply to him, cheerful men-at-arms who nodded gravely, amused at how the news had traveled so quickly.

In the family sitting room, he found Blackfish, a mug of something in one hand, his sword belt hanging of the armrest of the comfortable chair he lounged in. Brynden looked up as Ranma trooped in, followed as always by that great hulking brute of a direwolf the lad called his pet (actually Ranma never called Fenris a pet). "You do know how to stir things up don't you, nephew?" Brynden asked amusingly. "That being said, by the gods old and new, I wish I could have seen it!" He stood up, slapping his young charge on the shoulder before motioning Ranma into a seat close by.

Ranma sat down, smiling faintly at the older man. Fenris immediately sat down next to him, leaning his head over the side of the chair onto Ranma's lap. "What can I say, uncle, it's a gift."

Moments later Ned joined them, coming up the steps with a heavy tread. He nodded at Brynden, then looked over at his son. "That was well done my son, justice long overdue." The death of Gregor had been something that should have happened years ago, indeed Eddard had pushed for it after the war was over and he was proud to have finally seen it. He could have wished that it hadn't been Ranma who had to do the deed but, under the circumstances, Ned understood why it had to happen this way.

"Will this make trouble with the King, father?" Ranma asked, wanting to hear his father's opinion on that matter to see if he agreed with Margaery and him.

"Oh, he'll be stroppy about it for a few days." Ned smiled faintly, pulling up another chair to sit with the other two. "After that, though, he'll get over it quickly enough. Robert tends not to take small things like this to heart, lad, and come what may he knows that Gregor Clegane wasn't the sort he should mourn. He might be short with you as you were, apparently, rather rude to him." Here Ned looked at his son with more censure than before. But he'll get over it.

"For now however, let that lie. Can you explain why exactly there were two Dornish women with us? They slipped in as part of Margaery's retinue, but then they split off, and seem to be talking to the cooks in the Tower."

Ranma frowned as he had not been looking forward to this conversation. Still, he came clean about most of it, about the aphrodisiac in his food, about nearly losing control, and then how the Tyene had helped him. He only left out the

part where he had also assaulted the Princess. Ranma still didn't understand that the Princess herself didn't see it as that much of an imposition but he knew it would be bad for it to ever reach the ears of anyone else.

Throughout the tale both older men sat and listened, not asking any questions simply because poisons and aphrodisiacs were things neither of them knew about. Afterwards however they both questioned Ranma closely on anything he had found out about the aphrodisiac itself, as well as the Sand Snakes and their possible intentions. Ned was not happy to learn that Ranma had basically brought them in to defend against similar poisons being used against himself and his family, but understood the necessity. What he really didn't like however was the fact that they would probably be making trouble, small trouble at least, for the Royal family and other Lannister supporters, if they could.

He said so, but Brynden shook his head. "If you want my advice Ned, I wouldn't worry about it. Remember both of these ladies are Oberyn's bastard born daughters. None of the court will take them seriously because of that and their Dornish ways will keep them from making friends with the staff, in the main. They'll have only their own resources, which will limit them. Moreover, if we allow word to leak that we are afraid of being poisoned and that is why we have brought them in, if anything does happen to us, fingers will be pointed directly at them."

Ned frowned, but nodded eventually agreement, and stood up. "If that is the case, I wish to question this Tyene girl closely, see if she can give us any more information on the aphrodisiac they used, see if we can find who was behind that." With a final nod, Ned left, leaving Brynden and Ranma to their talk.

"Do you actually trust either of these two girls?" Brynden asked casually.

"Not a bit." Ranma answered simply, grabbing up his uncle's carafe. He smiled, seeing it was honey mead, and downed half of it before passing it back with a smirk.

"That my lad." Brynden smirked back and, with no news to share this night from his various contacts, stood up to fetch a deck of cards. About half an hour later, they were interrupted from their game when Sansa came up the stairs, accompanied as always by her handmaiden, Jeyne.

Sansa took one look at Ranma and flung herself into his arms, sobbing brokenly. As Ranma rather bemusedly put his arms around her, he and Brynden could only make out a few words among the sobs. Apparently, Sansa had been so worried about Ranma's life facing a monster like the Mountain that Rides, that it had broken Sansa out of her anger at how Ranma couldn't see her point of view about Joffrey.

Now she was apologizing for letting the rift between them fester for so long, apologizing for not sticking up with him about Fenris months ago, as well as avoiding him when she could. Ranma smiled, hugging Sansa to him harder.

Brynden looked on, happy that the two had reconciled, though part of him was also hoping this would drive a wedge between Sansa and Joffrey in the future. Anything that would make them able to pull out of that engagement easier was all to the good, in his opinion.

OOOOOO

The next day Ranma looked up from his morning jog as a few horses were pulled out of the castle's stables and made ready to go. One of them he recognized as that of the Hound and he wondered where Joffrey-the-ever-irritating was going this morning.

A moment later, Sandor trooped out of Maegor's Holdfast followed by an angry looking Joffrey, who reached out to grab his arm, and a Kingsguard, Ser Blount. "You go, Hound, and you will never have as good a position ever again. What good is a castle to you anyway, especially one that has been run up to this point by your brother!"

"Better by far than to keep following you around, you puling whelp!" Sandor growled, shaking free of the hand and glaring at the bald Blount who had been reaching for his sword. "Don't even think it." he warned.

"What's all this?" Ranma said that jogging up. Joffrey scowled seeing his nemesis.

Sandor smirked, an unusually friendly appearance on him. "I'm heading home to castle Clegane." he said simply. "With my older brother dead, I am now its Lord."

"I trust you'll be a better one than the last." Ranma said with a nod, half amusingly and half seriously.

"Wouldn't take much!" The hound barked, then spat to one side. "My brother was about as good a lord as he was at keeping his knightly vows. It's only because of 'largesse' from Lord Lannister that our land isn't heavily in debt or



simply empty of people."

Joffrey continued to stare at the man, unwilling to accept that the idea of being a lord somewhere else had more pull on the man than remaining in Joffrey's service. Despite his relatively new skill in dissembling, Joffrey was still too arrogant to see that anyone else's lives or prospects were more important to them than his needs and wants.

Still, he wasn't willing to make a point about it in public, not when he had already lost the argument in private. Joffrey was continuing to learn more and more about hiding his true thoughts, which if anyone had it a real hint about the depths of his depravity would have terrified many. So instead, he simply shrugged theatrically. "Well, Hound, if you wish to pursue this idea of yours, I can't stop you obviously. It just seems odd to me to remove yourself from the seat of power. Still, if that is what you really want, I won't say anymore about it." This fooled none of his listeners but it wasn't supposed to. It really was only supposed to give him what seemed to be a civil exit.

Sandor and Ranma remained silent as the other two men went back inside the Red Keep. Then Sandor turned to the younger man. "Watch that shit stain closely." he said seriously. "Since we've gotten back, he's had plans within plans and hasn't shared any of it with me. I don't have to tell you that he tried to make trouble for you on the trip down."

Ranma shrugged. "Little dogs bark the loudest." he replied, smirking little. "While I'm concerned about what he can say to others, Joffrey himself seems a little too cowardly to move against me in person."

In fact, Ranma, his father, and Brynden were of the opinion it might have been Pycelle who had been the one to try to 'poison' him during the tournament. It was subtle, was in an area a Grand Maester would know about, and had all the feelings of something politically motivated.

The Young Wolf did not understand the depth of loathing that Joffrey had developed for him, unable to see the antipathy growing there under Joffrey's mask. Ranma didn't have any experience in such. All of his enemies in his past life had been blunt objects, simply coming at him physically and he had never developed the talent in this one to the extent needed to see beneath what was obvious.

He knew Joffrey hated him but enough to actually try and poison him? That seemed too much. And as outsiders, none of the men from Winterfell had heard the story of the pregnant cat, or how vicious Joffrey had been in the past.

The older man grunted then looked at him the young Stark seriously. He touched his face with a finger, rubbing at the burn marks. "My older brother did this to me when we were children. I've loathed Gregor ever since, for this and for... other things." Sandor would never share his suspicions about what happened to their sister and the part Gregor might have played in her death, not with anyone. "Many a night I've dreamt of sticking my sword in him. You killed him and in a way that I could never have matched. We might've gotten off on the wrong foot, Stark, and our personalities are too different to let us ever be friends but I'm be grateful for that. You've got an ally in me, remember that."

Ranma looked at the older man for a moment and then nodded his head. Sandor nodded back and turned to mount his horse. Without another word, Sandor trotted off, leaving the castle and city that had been his home for several years without a backward glance. Ranma stared after him thoughtfully for several minutes then turned to renew his interrupted run.

He never noticed the pair of servants who had been close enough to overhear the conversation.

OOOOOO

Sandor was not the only one intending to leave Kings Landing that day. Oberyne was ready to leave as well and was searching more and more frantically for his wayward niece and daughters. He stopped, however, as he saw his two daughters enter (or rather reenter, though he didn't know that) the Red Keep with two men wearing Stark colors guarding them. However, they didn't seem in duress and he moved through the crowd of the city up the hill in their direction, stopping only when Tyene looked behind them, saw him, and smirked before turning away.

"Ah so..." he murmured to himself smirking before fading back into the crowd of the city. "Well played, how they finagled access to the keep I have no idea, but well played nonetheless." Oberyne looked around again. *Now if I were Arianne, where would I be?*

At his side, the head of Gregor Clegane clanked gently in its specially made glass and metal case where it hung from his belt. He had gone to the alchemists as soon as he could to get it preserved. He nearly killed two horses getting it back to Kings Landing quickly before too much time could pass and the alchemists had done him proud. They had even captured Gregor's dying face in the amber concoction they used, his face a rictus of pain and fear.

It would make a fantastic gift to his brother and might even stop Doran from being too angry with Oberyn for letting his daughter come with Oberyn on this little trip.

"There she is." He murmured to himself moving up behind where Arianne was peering around the corner of a building up the hill to where his two daughters were making their way into the Red Keep. "Tell me," he said in a pleasant tone into her ear, ignoring Arianne's jump of fright, "how exactly did you manage that?"

After getting her breathing under control once more, Arianne turned and glared at her uncle. "That wasn't kind, uncle. As for 'that' as you put it, we were merely in the right place at the right time to start to do precisely what we decided to come on this trip for in the first place."

"I see. And did it occur to you that you are now without guard?"

Arianne waved her hand expansively. "Obara's only dropping off Tyene. She'll stay there for an hour and come back out to meet me here."

"You sound as if you think I'm going to let you stay here." Oberyn said wonderingly. "Pray do explain that idea, my niece, since the last time I checked I'm still **sane** and on relatively good terms with my brother, your father, **our Prince**. Unless I want that state of affairs to change drastically, I will need to return with you, since Doran has no doubt figured out where you are and how you escaped from Sunspear in the first place."

"And leave your two daughters on their own? Tyene, perhaps, could make her own way, but without me here, who knows what trouble the two could get up to?"

It was weak and she knew it. Her uncle's face showed he thought that as well, but Arianne went on doggedly. "You know I'm more politically minded than either of those two, Obara is a blunt instrument who might lash out without someone there to keep a firm hand, and as for Tyene, while she won't lash out, she might act... precipitously."

That accurate appraisal of his daughters caused Oberyn to smile faintly. Arianne continued, knowing it wouldn't be enough. "Besides," she said gesturing down at herself. "We did get that little message from House Stark. If I remain here, I might be able to work out a way to meet Ranma, and seduce him away from Margaery. Scuttlebutt says that they are friendly towards one another but there does not seem to be any great affection or love growing between them."

"Margaery is apparently trying to play for Joffrey's hand as well, though rumor in the city seems to think her heart isn't in it. Still, that is a wedge I can use to get closer to him and you know after the tournament what a force he could be, uncle. A force we could turn to House Martell's benefit."

Arianne wasn't as confident about that as she normally would be. Tyene had told her about the aphrodisiac Ranma had ingested and Arianne had a good idea of how much self-control not succumbing to such a thing would have taken. Still it would be interesting if she could bring it about and certainly profitable, if they could forge an alliance with the Starks.

Inside, she was also considering the match as more than just a tool for her family but as an actual strong match for her. Her father had never truly searched for a proper suitor for her; something she had realized after the seventh elderly lord was presented for her hand. She had no idea why that was, though part of her was still worried about being passed over in line of succession for her younger brother Quentyn. Doran had informed her he had a plan when she confronted him about it but still had never explained said plan to her satisfaction.

Her uncle knew nothing about her inner thoughts and he leaned back slightly, thinking hard. He wasn't looking forward to going home even with the errant Arianne in hand. Returning without her would not be a pleasant experience. In fact, Doran might well throw him in jail for a few fortnights.

*But she's right, Seven damn it, he thought to himself musingly. Alone Obara and Tyene would not be willing to work together. They both have my temper, and would egg one another on to act precipitously, possibly in such a way as to bring more Royal disfavor down on Dorne without her here to rein them in. And it's true that Stark could be an ally, though I doubt she'll have much luck in wooing young Ranma to her way of thinking.* He said so aloud and added. "That young man is a man of honor. So long as the betrothal between him and Margaery is still sound, he won't have anything to do with you."

Arianne shrugged, not showing her own misgivings in that area. "It's simply a challenge, uncle, one I am eager to try my hand at, though I'll admit I'm still floundering about how to meet him in the first place."

Oberyn frowned, then sighed expansively. "Very well, but you will stay with me and Daemon until Obara returns. And I'm leaving Daemon here to add an extra sword at your back." That would be a wrench in many ways but Daemon was one of the best blades in Dorne and would be much more aid to the girls here than with him on the sea or back in Dorne.

Arianne nodded, smiling slightly. Daemon had been her first lover when they were young, a short, clumsy yet sweet encounter for both. He was also one of the better blades she knew and that was an aid she wasn't going to turn down. "That is fine, but remember I need to be back here within the hour."

Her uncle shook his head again but turned to lead the way through the crowd. He smiled slightly at the continual clink of the casket against his side every time he took a step. It was an ever so pleasant sound on his ears.

OOOOOO

"Tyrion, my lad, you are a long way from home." Tyrion Lannister had long gotten out of the habit of speaking to himself. Such was folly when every ear could be turned against you in court, even if you were the Imp and the least important of the Lannisters. Yet the sight in front of him really deserved something, if only under his breath. Ahead and above them, not a day's march away, was the Wall and it was possibly the single most fantastic sight Tyrion had ever seen. Not even his normal jongleur's mask could stop his awe from showing.

The march up to the Wall had been somewhat more arduous than he had expected. The roads here in the North left much to be desired and his own ideas of what it meant to be on the march had not included the reality of months of hard travel and even harsher conditions. Still, Tyrion had made it and, beside a few complaints based around his height, without complaint.

The journey had taken them seven months, and even that was an astonishingly good time. Ser Kyle and Daryn Hornwood had led a **very** well organized march, more so than Tyrion had expected, more than even his father, he suspected, would have been able to. Lord Stark had begun to organize his own men to a high degree after Robert's Rebellion and it had only continued after Ranma came of an age to join in, sharing, though none knew it, what he had gleaned of ancient armies from his past dimension. This had soon spread to the rest of the North, though Tyrion was the first Southerner to see it.

Every man had enough food to go on with. Foraging parties added to the evening meal every night but did not slow the army down. Every man had a bedroll and nearly all of them were able to fit in large tents, twenty men per tent. Daryn had even brought little portable braziers with his men, of which there were only five hundred. All of them were archers, a welcome addition considering the nature of the Wall. In the night, however, Tyrion was happier about the braziers than about the archers.

To further aid the effort to keep warm, the local lords had prepared stacks of wood and even coal in places for the army along the Kingsroad, showing how much effort all of the North were putting into this whelming. A rather humbling thought, since he doubted the rest of Westeros would bother with sending troops for quite some time, if at all, to combat so distant a threat.

"Even seeing it a second time does little to take away from its impact." The somewhat young voice of Daryn Hornwood sounded from next to Tyrion and he looked over at him from his horse. Only the commanders had horses at all and that was only because they were now free from their duties as pack animals. "This place, this view, shows you that there is still magic in the world, as well as showing you what heights man can reach if we dream big enough."

"I can agree with that, just think of what it looks like from where I'm standing!" the imp replied, chuckling. He got on well with Daryn and Ser Kyle, though at first there had been some suspicion in their eyes when they looked at him. Still, they had come around, as had their men, watching the Imp, who had to take twice as many steps as any of them, keeping up on the march.

Ser Kyle was courteous, commanding, and experienced in every sense of the word. Although it had taken him a while to warm up to Tyrion, the two had become somewhat friendly. Many a night the two had sat awake on their rolls as they regaled one another with tales of debauchery. The Cerwyn knight was also more well-traveled than most northerners and had seen many of the places Tyrion had been to further south.

Daryn was a likable sort, yet a very dangerous man. Tyrion had seen him at arms practice every morning before they set out, fighting two or even three on one, and he had never lost. Tyrion had at first thought Daryn's opponents were throwing the matches as would be the case in some places down south. He soon realized they were trying their damndest, yet still were no match for the warrior who was only twenty and three.

He was friendly, self-effacing, and open save for anything that touched on the Young Wolf and the wolfsworn. Seeing the man's skill had convinced Tyrion there was something more going on than a group of young fools choosing a pretentious name, and he was eager to learn more. But Daryn only related what everyone knew; that they had all trained together and with Ranma Stark since they were young every chance they could get, that they were stronger, faster than normal people only because of such hard training.

He said nothing about the training, other than it was hard, and nothing about Ranma or where he had learned to be so good at fighting. He was open to a point about what they had run into on their trip up to the Wall but that was it. Tyrion had attempted to draw him out, but had failed miserably every time. Daryn was one of the cagier members of the Wolfsworn, and despite liking the Imp, didn't particularly trust him.

Ahead of them, they could make out the much smaller keep and barracks of Castle Black, while on the breeze they could hear the horns sounding at their approach. A single flame was lit on a watchtower, signaling them to come ahead, while the horn's sound changed to signal that there were friends approaching.

As they continued on their way, Tyrion said rather whimsically. "I thought there was supposed to be some sort of town a day's ride out from Castle Black. A place with many brothels and other dens of inequity to take the edge off for the good Night's watchmen."

"Sorry, the brothels are all gone. They were split up and taken to Castle Black, Eastwatch by the Sea, and Shadow Tower. Have no fear though; I expect Lord Manderly has rounded up enough willing ladies of buyable affection to send north with the first ships coming up here." Kyle answered with some amusement.

"Can't wait, by the Seven my cock hasn't been used for so long it's about to start a revolt." Kyle laughed at the quip while Daryn merely rolled his eyes.

It took them the rest of the day to reach the headquarters of the Knight's Watch, filled with Kyle and Tyrion trading barbs, while Daryn simply rode on, silent and watchful. He did not notice that Tyrion was also watching him, wondering what the young man knew to make him so edgy. Tyrion would learn exactly what in the future. But that first night, he joined a meeting of the senior commanders.

This meeting was unlike any Tyrion had ever been to down south. Instead of being waited on by servants, the men served themselves. Instead of sitting around a table, the better to show who was important, they all pulled up their hard, wooden chairs close to a massive fire which dominated one wall of the room. Instead of wine, it was mulled cider or very good dark ale, with chunks of fresh bread and hard cheese instead of richer foods. Instead of high windows letting in the days light, the only light came from the fire and a few wall sconces by the door.

Despite the lack of a table, there was no doubt who was in charge of this meeting. The commander of the Night's Watch was a massive man, somewhat bent with age, yet his piercing eyes bespoke his intelligence. He sat closest to the fire, across from Mors Umber, the only one there who was of an age with him. Mors was an equally huge man and still retained the heavy muscles and arms that his house was known for. He wore a chunk of dragonglass in place of an eye he had lost years back, and wore the full pelt of a white bear, its snout covering his head like a hood.

Like his kinsman, Smalljon was a large man, he stood even taller than Mors and was wider across the shoulders. He also wore chain mail and his beard was far more luxurious than his kinsman's. Daryn sat with his younger friend, talking quietly as they waited for the commander to speak. Across from them Benjen Stark sat, a prototypical Stark in Tyrion's opinion in looks, those his eyes were never still, watching everything even here. Next to him sat Ser Kyle on one side with Harrion Karstark on the other.

Harrion Karstark was just shy of thirty-two, too old to have become close friends to Ranma and Jon like his younger brother Edd, though that had more to do with his attitude than his age, since Dacey was actually only three years younger. He was darkly handsome, with black hair swept back that fell to his shoulders, a large trimmed beard, and a silent, considering manner that did not take away from his fierce eyes.

"We have had more sightings of wildlings in the past half year and a bit since your march began." Benjen suddenly began, startling Tyrion, who had been waiting for Jeor to speak. "I've tripled the size of my ranger patrols, yet we've still lost two of them in the past months and one before that. All of them, to a man, killed. These were a mix of my best men, rangers of many years who knew their ways in the woods, plus Norrey and Umber men."

Mors stirred slightly in his chair, his craggy face pinched with anger. "We've lost ten and six men since I arrived up here and we lost more when the youngster here brought his troop of settlers up. Something's stirred up the wildlings for sure, and this Mance Ryder the youngster's prisoner's mentioned is at the center of it."

Jeor spoke up now. "I've held back moving the men about too much until we were all gathered. But now, with your force added to ours, the men of the Wall, and the men from Norrey and First Flint mountain clans, we have over six and a half thousand men here at Castle Black. I'm going to break them into three large groups. One will move to Eastwatch by the Sea, one to Shadow Tower, and one will stay here. Each will have areas of the Wall assigned to them to defend.

"You, Tyrion, have been mentioned as an expert on siege weaponry. Get to work on that, whatever you need, we will provide. You will work out from here toward Eastwatch-by-the-Sea first; the better to make certain our supply route is secure. My men have already begun to make the two nearest forts on either side livable again to aid in the crowding here."

"Once you arrive, Kyle, Mors, I want each commander of the two castles to do the same; you'll work with them on that. Patrols of sixty men will range out along the Wall towards Castle Black with one group of a hundred from each to be sent out to range every month north beyond the Wall. Your men, Benjen, will be used to guide these groups. The wildlings might be able to ambush and slay groups of twenty; they will not yet have the stomach to ambush a hundred. You will range only a four day's march out, no exceptions."

"You're putting us out as, what, not a first reaction force, rather those little birds miners use to make sure there are no poisonous gases." Daryn murmured. "Can't say that makes me feel friendly thoughts toward you, ser. All the same, may I request to lead these canaries out? The last time I was here, I heard about some friendly wildling leader who has built a small fort a week's journey from here. Wouldn't that be a better destination for the first foray in force?"

Jeor frowned thoughtfully. He didn't like the idea of sending men so far from the wall, not when rangers had been ambushed far closer than that, but the intelligence gained could be important. "Very well, you'll head out in a week for Craster's Keep. We'll keep the troops concentrated until you get back with some intelligence."

"I have another idea," Tyrion spoke up. When all eyes were on him, he went on, ignoring the looks in some of those eyes at his Lannister colors. "You use watch towers behind the Wall here to signal that someone has been spotted approaching Castle Black. Set up towers and men to man them to do the same on the Wall itself. Lights can't be seen up there for very far, I suppose, but sound would carry so..." he shrugged.

Benjen nodded in agreement. He hadn't liked the idea of breaking up his men and liked even less the injunction to stop ranging, seeing it as a defensive move where he wanted to attack. But Jeor was right, it was necessary for now. "Good thinking. I have a former bard among my rangers. I'll get him to figuring out what sounds carry best and what signals to use first thing tomorrow."

The Lord Commander nodded. "This sounds like a good plan but for now, it is late, to bed the lot of you, and I will see you on the morrow." With that, the meeting broke up, with Tyrion and the other new arrivals eagerly searching out cots for the evening.

OOOOOOO

Brynden smiled faintly, as he moved through the city to pick up a note from one of the many drop-off points for his various ...contacts. He wasn't nearly as organized as Varys or, he was starting to realize, Petyr. But the contacts he had were all over the city, and gave him a good, if general, idea of what was going on.

It was Brynden's job to put all the tidbits together. He was doing an alright job of that, he supposed, though it really wasn't a task he had ever particularly seen himself doing. Yes, he was subtle; yes, he did notice things others missed. However, there is a great difference between that and being a budding spymaster.

*It is sort of exciting in a way, Brynden thought to himself. A very strange way to conduct a war, where secrets are the weapons and the goals as well. I'm making some headway, if only it didn't feel as if I was surrounded by lions all the time. That thought brought a lopsided smirk to Brynden's face but his smile faded after a moment. Besides the Lannister's, the Spider and Petyr' many more agents than I expected. I could wish I knew where they stood in this 'game'.*

Brynden continued down the street, surreptitiously checking to make certain that his sword was loose in its scabbard. He had noticed someone following him a few streets back. Now that they were moving away from the richer districts and into the maze of alleyways of the somewhat well to do below The Street of Flour, they had closed up.

His eyes narrowed however when he noticed that there were no Gold Cloaks about. This was still an area of the city that they should've been patrolling but as Brynden walked on he realized he hadn't seen even one of them since entering leaving the smell of the bakers behind him. It was hard to notice thanks to the normal crowds of the city but

when you looked, it became obvious. *Lovely*, Brynden thought to himself.

Stopping suddenly, Brynden turned around and moved backwards a few paces, looking around quizzically as if he was trying to figure out where he was going. He then turned around again and moved on. This was the signal for his own men, five men from Riverrun who followed him from a distance, to close in on him. *Hopefully they noticed my tail already and were watching for the signal.*

Brynden's men had indeed noticed the tail and closed in quickly. Even so, the crowd held the men from Riverrun up long enough for a band of four men to reach Brynden first. Two of them looked to be sell-swords, their swords sharp but nicked, their mail shabby in places and dented in others but still serviceable. The other two were thugs, plain and simple, with leather Jerkins, hoods to hide their faces, and long shafted clubs in their hands, the kind that would be good to intimidate other smallfolk.

Instead of them falling upon an unprepared enemy, Brynden met them with steel in his hand. He blocked the first blow from the first person who attacked him, one of the thugs whose eyes widened at the speed of the older man. From what Brynden could see underneath his hood, he looked like a callow-faced youth, but Brynden didn't care if for the boy's age, only that he was being attacked. A second later, his belt knife was in the thug's chest, piercing his thin leather jerkin with relative ease.

Brynden ducked when the other thug tried to take his head off with his club, then backed away quickly, losing his knife when he used it to block a slash from one of the sell swords. The sword in his other hand blocked the other sell-sword's blow as well, though it threw him backwards.

Screams began as the smallfolk all around him scattered at the sudden outbreak of violence. But being city folk, none of them tried to aid him, even those who were armed, simply moving back and away.

Two more men raced out of another alleyway further back the way Brynden had been walking from but ran smack dab into the five men from Riverrun, who cut them down quickly. They raced on, the crowd of smallfolk scattering further to get out of their way to fall upon the attackers around Brynden.

Brynden was surprised that the sell swords, at least, didn't immediately surrender. Such men were not known for their loyalty after all. Instead, one of the sell swords fell back into the alleyway in an effort to run away, which failed as two of the men from Riverrun raced after him. The man was fast but didn't know the streets as well as these two, who frequented a whorehouse nearby. That was why they were on the roster to guard their lord's estranged brother today.

The other sell sword might have surrendered but he was cut down too quickly to do anything of the sort. The thug, however, took to his heels and ran away like a street rat born, much too fast for any of the men at arms, who were wearing chain mail as normal, to catch up with him.

Brynden cursed, looking down at his tabard which had been sliced in one of the strikes from one of the sell swords. While that had been an amusing little get together, he had dearly hoped to take a prisoner.

He looked around, hoping to find some kind of minder still watching to see if the attack worked but failed to see anyone taking any more interest than could be considered normal. Sighing faintly at lost opportunities, Brynden quickly moved over to the dead bodies to see if we could find anything incriminating on them and, not coincidentally, taking their money pouches.

When he opened them, he cursed again, shaking his head. Whoever had paid the men had paid them quite a lot but in small coin and there was nothing on either that he could use to trace who paid them. "Still," he murmured to himself as he straightened up, only now noticing that there were Gold Cloaks cautiously making their way down the street towards him, "that plus the fact that there were no Gold Cloaks around for so long before this tells me that someone is feeling the pressure."

OOOOOO

Brynden came back to the tower in the late evening and immediately asked to talk to Eddard and Ranma. Ranma and Brynden had to wait over an hour before Eddard was finished his work for the evening. The work at digging the kingdom out of debt continued taking up Ned's nearly every waking hour as he poured over the ledgers. Ranma and Renly tried to help him, but, neither had a good enough head for numbers to really take much of the pressure off Ned's shoulders.

Ned had a decent grasp numbers himself and going a good job at it, making the bookkeeping more streamlined, more standardized and actually legible to everyone. But since he could trust no one else to help him, save his secretary,

who he had brought down from Winterfell, it was **very** slow going, a slogging process that ate up his time like a ravenous beast. Petyr kept on offering his services but Ned had decided not to rely on him with this, not until he proved himself trustworthy.

He hadn't even had much time to devote to Jon Arryn's murder or the reasons behind it. Not to mention his finding the book of lineages gone when they returned from the tourney. Still, he had found a way around that, sending a messenger to Old-town, to speak to the Maesters there via his friend Lord Mallister. Some of them would no doubt know about lineage and the various signs of a certain line. Even without that confirmation, Ned was becoming more and more concerned, fearing his thoughts along those lines might turn out to be right.

At last, Eddard joined them and Brynden immediately launched into what he wanted to share with them. "I finally found what the Queen's agents are looking for. She's sending people to keep watch on the King's bastards here in the city. I'm still not certain why." *Though I am getting a very terrible feeling*, Brynden thought to himself, being certain not to mention that fear aloud, though Eddard seemed to have reached the same conclusion by the grim set of his mouth.

"I have also found out that Petyr has several connections with a few of the thieves' gangs here in the city that are funneling him information. And as I was attacked this afternoon, I think we can take it as a given that someone is getting anxious." Brynden's voice was dust dry as he said this, before going on to describe the actual attack in detail. After that, he shrugged. "And I will say we never saw a Gold Cloak until the bodies stopped twitching."

"I am going to push to remove Slynt from command of the Gold Cloaks again this coming meeting." Eddard said grimly. "I will no longer allow Robert's fear of his replacement being worse than Slynt to stop it. We **must** clean up the Gold Cloaks from top to bottom."

"I'd recommend getting rid of anyone who has been on the force for more than a year." Ranma growled, his knuckles cracking. He hadn't seen a single Gold Cloak acting like a real peacekeeper since he arrived. They were just another gang really, larger, better organized and outfitted, but they took protection money and arrested anyone who tried to get in their way, just like any other gang. Their official remit only allowed them to get away with more.

"A most amusing dream but nothing more." Ned replied with one of his faint smiles on his face. "Still, that attack on you Brynden is a warning to all of us. I'm going to inform the men not to travel in anything but groups of ten or more from now on, and Ranma, when you and Margaery walk about the city you might want to think about take a visible guard force." He chuckled at his son's scowl. "Next time such an attack occurs though, whoever is attacked should try to take prisoners." He turned to look at Brynden. "Anything else for us this evening?"

Brynden nodded. "Our contact at the 'Flowers of All Colors' left a message at the drop point, saying she had some information to pass on. It sounded somewhat urgent. I have a meeting I need to get to down at the docks, so I was hoping that you could stop by in your 'Rock Hurler' persona and speak to her."

The older man laughed to himself quietly as Ranma flushed. Despite his self-control, with no one here he could sleep with and trust to keep their mouths shut, Brynden knew Ranma was becoming a little pent up, and the young whore in question had gotten under his skin before.

"I'll head out tonight then." Ranma said rather reluctantly. It wasn't like he minded talking to Alayaya, it was simply that she was very attractive and he knew she would have no regrets about doing whatever he wished. While Ranma now felt he could trust her discretion, he was now supposedly affianced to Margaery so it just wouldn't be right.

Late that night, Ranma moved over the rooftops of the city covered in the Umi-Sen-Ken. Occasionally he stopped to throw bricks down at any law-breaking below. These bricks interrupted a mugging, one rape (that one was thrown with extra force shattering the skull of the man attempting to do said act), and one break-in. That last wasn't done by a brick however, but by the simple expedient of kicking the would-be burglar off the roof as Ranma passed. *All-in-all a regular evening*, he thought sardonically, as he neared the House of Many Flowers.

Soon Ranma arrived, slipping down to the streets quickly, although he had to wait a few moments before a customer came out. He swiftly moved inside, once again finding himself in the glittering and bourgeois boudoir. Ranma had been here once since that first time, to pick up some information on a particularly corrupt twosome of courtiers who had been flashing Essos coinage. It turned out that they had both been taking money for quite some time to relay news to a few factors in Essos, specifically Pentos and Braavos.

When Edd had them arrested, Varys had come forward, saying he had already known of it. The Spider had been using them to funnel information to their backers, false information, or so he claimed. Still, Ned had jailed them both, pending execution or being sent to the Wall for treason.

That hadn't been the first or the last group to be quickly brought to justice like that. Ned was on a warpath against corruption the city, and it was only the fact that Robert was loathe to remove him that the head of the Gold Cloaks, Janos Slynt, still had his head at all. Robert had long been afraid that if he removed Janos, the person he replaced him would be even worse but Ranma's father had reached the point to push for it regardless.

The Lannisters and, though no one but he knew it, Petyr still had far more supporters than the Starks however. In particular the nobles in the city and the court were on their side, angry at how much of their graft was slowly being worn away. The court was becoming more and more turned against the Starks, though it was a slow process thanks to Robert's approval of Ned as well as the help that Margaery had begun to give them since the tourney.

They were also helped by the fact that the Queen wasn't taking any overt action and had actually stepped on several such. But the attack on the Blackfish earlier that day showed that the Lannisters and the others were possibly ready to strike back, regardless of Ned's influence with Robert.

When Ranma entered, there were no Gold Cloaks this time, but neither was the business of the brothel going on as normal. Everyone in the main area was watching an argument going on between Alayaya. The young black woman was resplendent in a slinky, figure hugging dress, a stark contrast to the person she was arguing with.

Ranma recognized him as the young man who won the archery tournament. He already had two girls on his arms and apparently was going for a third. "I don't care if someone else has bought your services, I can pay you more, is that not enough?!"

"On any other day my Lord, it would be, but not today. Today, as I have said, I have a previous appointment."

The young man scowled, which did nothing for his homely features. His face was a battle between the invading forces of acne and the defending freckles. He was decently built but his looks were against him, and it was obvious the money he had won in the tournament had gone to his head, allowing him to buy time with beautiful women who would not normally look at him twice. Ranma actually felt somewhat sorry for the guy but not sorry enough to put off meeting with Alayaya.

He moved forward while the young man spoke angrily. "If you have a client then where is he? I don't see him here, and if he's not here, then his place is forfeit!"

Ranma smirked, then dropped several gold dragons into a glass set by a station that the madam was standing next to.

Chataya smirked. Alayaya's mother was actually more superstitious than she let on in front of most and, despite not knowing of her daughter's business as an informant for the Hand, had decided that the patronage of a mystic spirit was enough to deal with losing her daughter's income for a few days every month. That, plus the gold that the Rock Hurler paid her was good enough for the matron. "Alayaya, your client for the evening has arrived and already gone up. I suggest you join him."

Alayaya smiled and turned to do so but the archer, whose name was Anguy, followed after. He was determined to have all three of the girls tonight. Alayaya was the only one he had never been able to book before there either, her evenings had to be booked well in advance, but he wanted all three of the most beautiful girls at once, something no other man had ever tried. "I still don't see this man, even if your mother says he has paid."

"Nor would you." Alayaya smirked.

Anguy tried to grab her arm but suddenly hissed as a small stone impacted his wrist with deadening force. He looked around wildly and didn't see anyone. Still, despite not having been in the city long, he had heard the rumors of the Rock Hurler, though up until this point he hadn't actually believed them.

Gulping he backed away slightly. "I-I'm no fool enough to argue with such as that, I know not what magics you use, Rock Hurler, but forgive me and do not hex me." The boy backed away mumbling apologies to join the two girls whose time he had already paid for. After a moment, Anguy actually brightened up slightly, since not having to pay for Alayaya would allow him two weeks' worth of pleasure at a less reputable establishment.

Alayaya smirked as the door to her room closed behind her, looking around thoughtfully. She always got a kick out of the Rock Hurler's visits, above and beyond simply liking the intrigue or the fact that she had made such a powerful patron. Her mother's stories of the jungle spirits were part of it, of course. There was a thrill to having an invisible lover (even if they weren't actually lovers) that was intoxicating. That, and the life of a whore had so little excitement to it she loved what little she could get. "Where are you, my invisible friend?"



"Over here." Ranma said, humor plain in his voice. "Sorry to interrupt." His tone however said he wasn't sorry at all.

"Don't be." Alayaya said with the smile on her face as she moved over, one hand outstretched. She shivered a little as she felt the Rock Hurler's muscled chest under her hand for a moment, smiling wider when she felt invisible fingers take her hand in turn.

Moving in slightly, her other hand quested for his shoulder before Alayaya rested her head lightly against it.

"According to the girls young Anguy's frequented, he's a rather poor lover in many ways. His face is not the only part of him that is freckled. We also had to force him to go bathe after he showed up the first time. My mother likes to run a clean house, who knows what kind of disease he could have given the others?" she murmured, her hands now trying to move around him, though being stymied by his.

Ranma gently pushed the girl off him, shuddering a little. Despite his growing friendship with Margaery, it had been a very long few months indeed since his last tryst with Dacey. Since being introduced to the pleasures of the flesh, Ranma had found he was unable to ignore his urges in that direction. The Queen's ongoing subtle teasing, Margaery's flirtations, what happened at the tournament, with all of this, his control was slowly fraying and Ranma knew it.

But whatever the Tyrells might think or even Margaery herself of thier arrangement Ranma would hold to it. That meant not having relationships with anyone else during that period, no matter how alluring, exotic, or gentle the girl in question was. Thankfully, he was also helped in the fact that her profession was abhorrent to him no matter how kind or gentle Alayaya was. "Not that I don't like spending time with you, lady, but you left a message at the drop point. It sounded urgent."

Alayaya nodded, her face now serious, despite the fact that she kept one hand on his chest gently running her fingers up and down his invisible chest. "Yes, it is urgent. This began a few days after the tournament, but I only heard about it this morning, when I went to see a sick friend. There has been a sudden influx of sell swords into the city. Not bands of them, simply ones and twos, here and there, spread out. The total number is unknown but I would guess at least two-hundred or so. Not a lot in a city this size, that's why no one else has noticed them, but whores talk and I have friends among nearly all the other high-class brothels and many in some of the lesser class ones."

What she didn't say was that those ladies were routinely ill-treated and longed for companionship from girls like her who didn't judge them. Many also sought to escape from their current place of work to one where they would be at least protected. "They're being paid very well; else they would not be able to afford the services of some of the brothels they go to, although none so far has wished to pay my mother's prices."

"Worrisome." Ranma murmured closing his eyes in thought for a moment, ignoring Alayaya's hand as it searched for his face. He opened them, gently reaching up to take her hand away from his jaw. "Is there any indication of allegiance to any of these mercenaries?"

"No." The young Summer Island woman shook her head. "The amount of money they have to throw around tells me it's someone with deep pockets, but that's it. Many of them stay in the merchant quarter, most particularly with a few noblemen's factors who are angry at the Hand's crusade against corruption in the city. But that is a majority of them, so that's not much help."

Ranma cursed a little. He had hoped to hear something that connected these mercenaries to someone that they were already investigating. Bringing in troops like that was an act they could respond to but without more evidence, they would have to turn the matter over to the Gold Cloaks. None of the powers-that-be would be happy to know that someone else was bringing in men like that, regardless of who was behind it.

"Thank you lady," he said quietly, yet with warmth. "Your news was indeed very important. Have you seen anyone come by checking on your friend's daughter?"

"No." Alayaya smiled at the concern in the Rock Hurler's voice for the baby. Most men would be unconcerned with the bastard of a whore, even if it was the King's, but it was obvious from his tone and actions that the Rock Hurler actually cared about the baby as an individual.

Last time he had stopped by, they had met once more in the baby room. She had watched, laughing, while he pushed the few baby toys around to the girl's gurgling laughter. It was one of many things that told her that the Rock Hurler, for all that he refused to drop the magic that kept him invisible, was a good man.

"I haven't seen anyone and there's been no trouble recently. I don't think anyone here knows the secret I shared with you save my mother and Baara's mother herself, for which both myself and my mother are truly thankful. She's a

good friend, and I would hate to see anything happen to her thanks to the Queen's jealousies, no matter how well founded."

"That's good." Ranma thought for a moment, then nodded. "Something seems to be going on, so we need to set up a way for you to get an emergency message to us quicker. You have all different kinds of colored cloth here, is there any way you could wrap a note in red cloth? That will tell the contact at the Honey Ale place to get it to us immediately, even if he has to break cover to do it."

Alayaya giggled, enjoying the skullduggery immensely, as well as the trust that the Rock Hurler was showing her. "I can do that easily. Though," she murmured huskily, leaning in once more, her questing hand moving from his chest up over his invisible shoulder to touch his neck. There it was stopped by one of his hands, but she leaned forward regardless. "I don't suppose I could interest you in simply stopping by every night?" She leaned in, her fingers having found his lips, and kissed him ardently.

It was all Ranma could do to keep from slipping out of the Umi-Sen-Ken. Even so, his control of it wavered so much he held up a hand to cover the black girl's eyes to block her sight while it wavered. But he could not stop himself from responding. Ranma kissed her back with fervor, one of his arms encircling her waist and pressing her tight to him.

Alayaya moaned a little, trying to draw him further in but Ranma eventually regained control of himself and pushed her back slightly, regaining control of the technique as he did so. Before Alayaya could do anything but murmur disappointment Ranma reached into a pouch then dropped another few gold dragons into her hand.

"I'm sorry," he murmured and he actually was at this point. "I have obligations lady and I cannot..." He shrugged, unseen yet felt. "I cannot do this with you, no matter how much I could wish to."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Alayaya smiled, moving back slightly after letting her hand rub down his chest once more drifting below his stomach to feel the response below his belt. A very **nice** compliment indeed." she murmured breathlessly, shaking her head and moving away. "In any event, that's all I had for you now."

Ranma nodded, murmured a farewell, and then moved over to the window opening it once more.

A moment later Alayaya was alone, smiling faintly. "I'll get you yet, my city spirit." she murmured in her mother's native tongue, laughing quietly. After that however, she decided to turn in. A quiet evening was something whores very rarely got after all, and she was going to savor this one even if it could've been so much better.

OOOOOO

A week after arriving at the Wall, Daryn led his first group of scouts out into the wild territories. A hundred strong, they moved in groups of ten through the woods beyond the Wall, each squad within sight of one another. Among these hundred were skilled mountain clan scouts as well as rangers from the Night's Watch. They were good, capable men, who knew the lay of the land easily and directed the troop towards the old man's fort. On foot for a force this size, the rangers estimated the trip would take them two weeks out then two back.

They could've taken horses but the lay of the land was against that idea. The forests beyond the Wall were extremely dense, with a lot of overhanging branches and no trails to be seen. In such ground, a horse made a lot more noise moving than a man on foot and didn't actually move any faster, most especially since there was much more snow on the ground on this side of the Wall than on the other. The ground underneath the snow was still soft but there was a crisp feel to the air that hinted of further snow and it was even colder, if anything.

Even for men on foot it was much harder and, after a fortnight's travel, Daryn pulled his senior officers together. "This is much tougher going than I expected." he confided to them, shaking his head. "There's no way we can make it to Caster's Keep in two weeks, a month might be pushing it. So, do we go on, or turn back before going over the old man's timetable?"

The chief ranger, whose name was Olar Shuent, shrugged. According to rumor among the Night's Watch, he was a Stormlander who had fallen afoul of a lord, wooing the man's daughter successfully and had been forced to flee before the lord's men-at-arms, joining up with a detail of Night's Watch recruiters.

How much of that was truth and how much was rumor, Daryn didn't know nor care, since the man was a veteran ranger who knew his stuff. "We go on. Craster's an old fucker but he could have good information for us at least about what's going on further north. We need that information; surprise is more dangerous to the Wall than mere numbers."

The other two senior men both nodded. Daryn paused a moment, looking at each in turn, then nodded. "Alright, we

go on."

The next day, the group was once more up and moving at dawn, groups of ten moving in file through the trees. Daryn strode at the head of one such, men chosen by his father to watch his back, something the men themselves were rather amused by, since Daryn was better with a blade than any four of them combined. Still, training with him during the march up to Wall had made them all better than they had been. Such was the effect Ranma could have on those he trained. The wolfsworn, as Tyrion had noticed, were very dangerous indeed.

At the moment that didn't matter, Daryn was too busy watching his surroundings to realize how even now the idea he needed protecting amused the men around him. Olar and all the other rangers had been very blunt about how good the wildings were at ambushing people on their own ground and any land beyond the wall was their own ground.

Both his and his men's caution availed them not at all two hours later. As they moved through the dense woodland, suddenly all around them appeared a massive band of wildlings, springing up seemingly out of the very ground. They came out of nowhere, straight into his force's front as it was strung out in march formation, their war cries filling the air. Their numbers couldn't be determined in the rush, and the surprise was total.

Yet for all that, Daryn responded promptly. He bulled forward, his shield smashing one wildling to the turf. Its edge caught the man in the side of the neck as he tried to force himself to his feet while Daryn's sword took another man right underneath the bone armor he was wearing, cutting into his guts.

As the man on the ground writhed wildly, his hands scrabbling at his neck, Daryn recovered quickly to smash his blade against another's shattering the flint blade of his opponent and driving on to slice into the man's throat. "Ambush!" Daryn yelled, his voice a trumpet over the growing cacophony of battle. "Odd numbers fall back and use bows! Even numbers stand with me!"

Before leaving Castle Black, Daryn had numbered his squads, giving each group leader a number so that they could respond to his commands in an emergency. He had gotten that idea from Ranma, as well as Lord Stark, who thought it an excellent one and had instituted it in the men from Winterfell, even assigning each squad a leader.

While it was impossible to make a shield wall in the dense woodland, it was possible to create small defensive positions, while the others fell back to start using their bows. At Daryn's command, the odd numbered groups fell back, while the other groups held their ground, linking up as they could to better protect themselves, which wasn't much thanks to the wildlings onslaught and the terrain. Daryn was the rock. He held his ground while around him the even squads held their ground while the odds fell back raising their bows.

The Hornwood heir blocked another thrust to his head with his shield, which was beginning to buckle under the repeated blows, despite the fact the majority of the weapons hitting it were stone or even bone in some cases. Still, Daryn pushed forward, grabbing his current attacker's arm as he tried to lift his large stone axe again, stabbing him under his armor with a knife his shield hand had pulled out of his belt while his sword smashed aside a spear user, throwing him back into his fellows as the spear splintered under the blow.

A chieftain, judging by his better weapon and accoutrements roared out a challenge in the wildling tongue and then charged towards Daryn. He had a rusty but still visibly iron sword, his armor was better, and he carried a shield.

"Come get me then, you fucking mongrel!" Daryn grimly steadied himself, taking the man's charge on his shield and not moving an inch.

The wildling chieftain grunted in shock as the youth simply absorbed his momentum, and then yelled in surprise as he felt Daryn push his shield under his own, lifting him up slightly, and throwing off his stance. He tried to bring his massive blade around but was too slow. Daryn had already pushed his shield to one side and his blade stabbed forward, smashing through the loose wooden scales covering his enemy's chest.

The man gurgled and died, and Daryn kicked his body off the blade, while two men behind him died with arrows in their chests. All around him arrows began to cut the surrounding wildlings down. "Even squads, by the numbers, fall back!"

Off to the side, a squad leader shouted "Two", followed in an even pace by the other squad leaders. Daryn's group was number ten, thus last to fall back.

By this point, he had lost six of his men but he and the three remaining were still fighting hard. The arrows from behind were now taking a deadly toll in the attackers. This allowed his men to open up some space between themselves and their ambushers, joining up and forming a semi-cohesive battle line or, at least, the best line they

could form in the heavy woodlands.

Now the wildlings faced a ready force, with the swordsman in front of the archers and the element of surprise lost. Any civilized ambush party would've retreated, especially considering the losses they had already taken. But the wildlings didn't think like that, they kept coming except for a few who were cowardly enough to run away. Even then, many of those cowards were cut down by their fellows before they could retreat.

The wildlings charged forward, their numbers greatly reduced thanks to the arrows of their 'victims', but Daryn and his men met them with a roar. "The Wall stands!"

With Daryn now holding the center of the line they couldn't break through to the archers, who continued to wreak a deadly toll. That signaled the battle turning against the attackers.

Fifteen minutes later, it was all over but the groaning. The entire wildling force had come forward; confident they could break through to the archers and had died against the shaken yet still strong shield line. Daryn estimated there had been over a hundred-and-seventy attackers, more than enough to wipe out a group of a hundred taken by surprise as they had done but the organization and Daryn's calm command had allowed them to recover.

After a moment spent cleaning his blade (and looking mournfully at the mangled bit of metal that had been his shield, a gift from his grandfather on his mother's side), Daryn noticed the men around him looking at him in awe.

He laughed, his beard bristling as he guffawed. "The Lord Stark and his maester were both excellent teachers for tactics, and for the other," he said holding up his blade with a grim smile, "that, you can lay at the Young Wolf's feet."

That won a rueful chuckle from most of his listeners, many of whom had discounted the tales of the Young Wolf's prowess in battle, though several were still looking at Daryn with awe. Daryn alone had probably accounted for at least seventeen attackers, possibly more. All of them also knew that without his quick, controlled response, none of them would've been able to get out of the ambush alive.

The young man clapped his hands hard, trying to break the spell. "Group leaders, check and see how many men you've lost and then assign some men to go around and burn the bodies where they lie. Olar, take some men and form a perimeter. It's evident the wildlings have gotten farther south in larger numbers than we realized and I don't want us to be surprised again."

The order to burn the bodies caused the men some confusion but they still obeyed readily.

The final toll was fifty-five dead, nearly two-thirds having fallen in the first few minutes of the ambush, along with another twenty injured, some severely enough to warrant giving mercy. They wouldn't have survived the trek back to the wall and killing them now was better than making them suffer through that.

As soon as the final count was tallied and the wounded were being taken care of, Daryn called in his officers together once more. "All right, we've been hurt but we still have a job to do. I want a group of twelve of the best rangers we have, you'll go forward with me. We'll go fast and quietly; it's obvious the wildlings are out here in force so we'll have to sneak by them if we can."

One of the Rangers, an older Northman named Selrig, spat to one side. "If all we want is a look at the Fort I know a place for that. There's an overhangin' hill about a half day's journey from Caster's Keep. If we come on it at night, we can head up during the night, stay there during the day, and then head back out the following evening, though it will be tough going from the get go, let alone when we reach the hill itself."

"Subterfuge is the only way forward now." Daryn said nodding. "Selrig, you know our destination, so you'll lead the way. We'll head out right now." He turned to one of the men from Hornwood. "Vander, you're in charge of the group going back to the wall. Head straight back, tell Commander Mormont and the others what we ran into, and tell them what we're up to as well."

"Milord, I don't want to have to explain to your father that we left you behind. Take at least a few of the men from Hornwood with you." Vander begged. He knew he couldn't go, having had his arm broken in the fight, but still his duty was clear.

Daryn exchanged a glance with Olar, who shook his head. "I'm sorry, but they'll only slow us down, Vander. Besides, I should have thought this fight showed I didn't need minders."

Vander frowned, but nodded and went off to reorganize the survivors. Twenty minutes later Daryn and his group left, heading on an oblique angle further north as fast and silently as they could go over the snow covered forest floor.

Behind them, the remaining troopers finished tending to their injured, and set off back to the Wall.

Daryn's group continued on, traveling as quickly as possible through the day and on into the night, not stopping, eating on the go. They avoided several patrol of wildlings who were moving through the forest as silently as animals, though what they were searching for, Daryn didn't know.

After a fortnight's forced march, the reinforced squad eventually came upon the area Selrig recommended and made their way forward even more quietly that evening, after hiding throughout the day. Selrig led the way up unerringly. As he had said, it was steep going but after much silent cursing and sweat, they came out onto a small overlook that let them look further north to see the Craster's Fort.

Even in the darkness lit only by the torches of the distant Fort, they could tell it was much larger than before, something that caused all the scouts who had seen it before to hiss in shock. Olar pointed out what they could see in the dark, that the walls had been expanded outwards and there was now what looked like a secondary wall even beyond that.

Everywhere between were barely visible tents, lit by the numerous fires that were everywhere, much more than there should have been even as cold as it was, which had been a problem for the group. Several of them were now frostbitten in places, but that couldn't be the reason behind the sheer number of fires or torches down there.

The next day, Daryn looked over the Fort and was further dismayed at what he saw. Besides the heads of Craster and what according to Olar were possibly his daughters stuck on poles outside, the area was being modified built up into an even larger Fort than had been visible the night before or, possibly, a supply point.

There were at least a thousand tents down there, with hundreds of wooden lodgings already constructed. There was also what looked like a crude dam set up on the river behind the fort and more work going on to expand it in that direction over the other side of the river, a tributary that would eventually join up with the unnamed river that went on to form the Gorge, the western most point of the Wall.

Olar grunted irritably from where he lay prone on the snow next to the young lord. "I didn't believe you youngsters when you talked of a new King-Beyond-the-Wall. Even when your Umber friend got out the name of the supposed King, I didn't really believe. Now I do. Damn Mance, I knew him when he was on the Wall."

"That's definitely a supply point they're building." Daryn muttered, looking at the fort through his spyglass, tilting the end of it so that sunlight couldn't catch the glass. That spyglass was an expensive gift from his father and he had no wish to for it to be the cause of his death. "Look at the buildup at the back, the cleared sections where they've been digging shallow basements in places, the room at the back is far too large for the troops on hand."

Selrig frowned then spat to the side, his spit freezing almost as soon as it hit the ground in the morning chill. "Do you think we could get back to the Wall and get here with a large enough force to destroy it before more wildlings arrive?"

"Doubt it," Daryn grunted. "The survivors of that group we tangled with the other day will be found by their scouts eventually, so they'll be ready for us. That fort might not look like much yet, but give it a few weeks and it'll be more formidable. Plus the inner fort would have to be taken as well."

"Look!" Olar growled, pointing. "They're even clearing out the forest to give them clear lanes of fire. Wildlings don't do that!"

"They do when they have a king commanding them." Daryn shook his head then waved his hand lightly signaling them to fall back. "We'll keep watch for the rest of the day, but as soon as it's dark out, you're going to have to lead us out again, Selrig."

"Joy," the scout muttered, shaking his head, but subsided afterward, wrapping his heavy cloak around him, shivering as he lay there in the snow and leaves.

For the rest of the day they watched, while two more groups of wildlings, each about three hundred strong, arrived, bringing with them more supplies, which went into the already prepared longhouses and shallow supply basements. After that, several shallow rafts arrived, coming down the stream at the back of the Fort, carrying more supplies and another group of wildlings.

"Where are they all coming from?" Daryn muttered. "How are they feeding themselves on the march?"

"Herds of elk or deer mostly, fishing in the rivers, there is a soup they make from bark too, though what it does to their brains you don't want to know. They'll have no problems feeding their troops on the march. It's when they stop that

they'll have problems." Olar answered.

Daryn frowned, then shrugged, though he was still wondering about a few things. Foremost was why the wildlings seemed content during the day to move in small groups around their fort and through the woods, but at night moved only in large groups beyond the light of their fires, if they left the fires at all.

*Could they already be feeling the depredations of the White Walkers? Is that what is driving the wildlings south? The way the wildlings are acting isn't really proof of that, but that might be something we need to keep at the back of our minds.*

They waited through the rest of the day and well into the night, a moonless one thankfully, since it made spotting them all the harder, even if it also made the going even worse for them. As before, Selrig led the way, each man barely able to see the one in front of them, as they moved off through the woods. Still, they avoided the large parties of torch bearing wildling scouts easily.

A time or two they saw odd flickering blue lights through the trees, which made Daryn stiffen and ready his weapons for some reason the other men couldn't fathom. Even without Daryn's knowledge of the White Walkers the trek was dark, dangerous, and very, very worrying even for men like these. So it wasn't long before they too began to feel edgy.

During the fifth day of their trek back Olar, who had been scouting ahead came back with word that the straight path back to the wall was being searched by too many wildling groups for them to make it through. The searchers were spreading out among the forest to search, presumably, for them or other survivors of the disastrous ambush.

Daryn frowned, looking at him and Selrig while the group hid in an area of the woods that was even more overgrown than most. "Can we move around them somehow, east or west?"

Olar and Selrig thought for a moment, conversing quietly while the others kept watch. At last, Olar said firmly, "East, the patrols are weaker there and the woods become much denser down that way. We'll have to circle back to Castle Black but we can do that easily enough once we get beyond this lot."

This took them a week out of their way, slowed further by the need to avoid more wildling patrols. Eventually, Daryn and his men left the last wildling patrol behind, moving on a diagonal through the woods from where they had come under the Wall through the guarded gate there. They kept going for several days before at last they came within sight of the wall many days travel east of Castle Black.

The Wall was so massive a structure it could be seen for leagues in any weather looming over the forest. Daryn stared through the branches up at it, then looked over at the two scouts. "How many days do you think it will take for us to get to Castle Black from here?"

Olar smiled faintly, looking around the woods with a smile of remembrance, though Daryn didn't have enough woodcraft to tell this section of the forest from any other. "Another week's travel or so. I know this place of old; it's near the heart tree we use to swear in Northern recruits to the Night's Watch."

At that moment Selrig, who was in the lead of their squad, which had tightened up by this point, paused holding up a clenched fist in the sign for enemies.

Everyone quickly drew their weapons, looking around. "What did you see?" Daryn whispered.

"It's what I don't **hear** that's tellin' me trouble's comin'." The older man muttered. "There ain't been any sound of bird song for the past while but a group like ours with no other groups around couldn't've scared off all the birds within 'earing distance. Can't believe it took me that long to notice! Might be getting' old for this game."

"You noticed it anyway." Daryn muttered. "I didn't notice anything." They were all tense and ready even as they continued forward, so when the wildlings did ambush them, they were prepared. Just like the previous ambush wildlings appeared as if out of the very ground, shouting and charging Daryn and his men.

When a large group of wildling raiders hadn't reported back, Mance, who had taken command of the forward outpost personally, knew something was up. He decided to err on the side of caution because he knew that information was valuable and that surprise would help them tremendously in their onslaught on the Wall. It was on his orders that wildling parties covered the route straight back from his keep with patrols. Then Mance took it one step further, sending out large parties of ambushers on all angles, with orders not to engage anyone coming out from the Wall if they could avoid it, but to ambush any group heading back toward it.

There were only sixty wildlings in this ambush but for a group of twelve that would have been more than enough. Even Daryn wasn't proof against those kinds of numbers. As he quickly surveyed the charging raiders, Daryn felt a moment of despair but he pushed it aside standing forward from the others, shield on one arm and sword in hand. "Righteous in wrath!"

The wildling group was about to slam into them when there was a hail of, "The Wall Stands!" From the southern side of the attackers a hail of arrows slammed into a dozen of the attackers bearing them to Earth. War cries abounded as a large group of Umber and Hornwood men charged forward from their own hiding places among the trees and snow, slamming in turn into the raiders from behind and the side.

Daryn laughed in relief even as his sword flashed out to cut down the first wildling to meet him, while many of the raiders turned to face their attackers. Four however came at him quickly, with a fifth trying to circle behind him. His shield blocked a spear thrust from one, smacking it to the side. A kick took another in the thigh, slowing him down just enough for Daryn to engage the third man sword to sword, throwing him backwards quickly. Turning, he took the fourth man in the throat with his sword point before he could bring his short club down on Daryn's back.

While Olar attacked the wildling wielding a sword, a flint mace slammed into Daryn's shoulder and he grunted in pain yet his armor took it. His shield snaked up, the edge slamming into the man's chin with cracking force, throwing him backwards even as the spear wielder tried to gore him through the chest. Daryn dodged the spear, which grazed his leather armor slightly, but he ignored it. His sword sliced across the spear wielder's chest, cutting through his bone armor and throwing him backwards.

The man with the flint mace backed away even as two more raiders came up. Daryn charged to meet them, cutting the mace wielder down before engaging the other two, pushing one backwards for a second. He lashed out with a kick that caught the other man in the diaphragm throwing him back gasping for air. He knelt quickly, chopping down with his shield's edge before rising up to catch the remaining man's stone flail with his blade, throwing him backwards with a burst of strength. The man was dismayed but not for long as this opened his chest up for Daryn's killing stroke. The man fell, his guts splashing out to steam in the cold snow.

Then Smalljon was there, charging through the wildlings with three Umber men at his back along with two men wearing Hornwood colors, orange with a black moose on their surcoats. Daryn recognized one as Vander and both men were hacking grimly at any wildling to come near as they forged their way to the side of their lord's heir.

Smalljon fell into place next to his friend, slapping him on the shoulder with his free hand. Smalljon preferred to use a single claymore rather than the sword and shield Daryn used. Still, he wielded like a single-handed longsword in his hand, the exercises he had done with Ranma raising his strength well beyond normal levels. He cut down four wildlings in quick succession, their bone and wood armor unable to stop his steel blade. "Evening Daryn, have an interesting time of it of late?"

"Informative at least." Daryn laughed, smacking another wildling to the floor with the pommel of his blade before ending him with an economical back hand.

Smalljon laughed. He negligently gutted a spear user who tried to gore him, who had found to his brief dismay that even his attempt to keep Smalljon away at spear point failed given the disparity in arm length and the reach of the Umber heir's sword. The man fell, his neck open from ear-to-ear.

Around them, the wildling's fought to the last man save for a few 'cowards' who raced away through the woods, but Smalljon had anticipated this, and had ordered his archers to fall back to shoot down runners after that initial salvo. Not a one of them would escape.

Daryn reached down, grabbing up a handful of wildling jerkin to clean his blade, looking up at his large friend. "How did you know which way we were coming?"

"Honestly, we didn't!" Smalljon laughed. "This group was spotted a few days ago by one of the ranger companies. They didn't do anything to draw attention to the fact they saw them and we devised this little ambush. Now, let's get you lot back to the wall. I assume you have news to share."

"Oh yes." Daryn replied grimly, looking around and sighing faintly as he noticed his squad had lost four men in that ambush despite Smalljon's intervention. "Yes, I do indeed have some information to share."

OOOOOO

While Daryn was leading his force out to scout, Tyrion conducted a survey of the siege equipment already on the

Wall. He had been impressed by the winch elevator, the enclosed platform that could be taken from Castle Black up onto the top of the Wall. It was well cared for, the ropes were in excellent condition, the construction was solid, and there was no sign of wear on the massive steel wheels and winches.

That had been all Tyrion had been impressed by. Of the forty or so siege engines he surveyed in his first two weeks, just **two** were in working condition and they looked more like something out of a history text than anything that should be trusted in battle. Evidently, the advancements in siege warfare of the last hundred years or so had not reached the Wall. When asked his opinion about them, Tyrion simply mimed pushing them off the side and smacking his hands together like after a job well done, something that had irritated the few Nights watchmen with his survey team. The Northerners merely laughed and told him to get on with it.

Tyrion did so, making an in-depth survey of each of them in turn. Well he said in-depth, it really only took him about five to ten minutes each to discern if there was anything worth saving, since the answer was almost universally **no**. In the end, he decided that the two that were working could stay for now, then worked with commander Jeor to decide the spacing of the first batch of catapults they would be creating. After that, with a large team of men with knowledge of wood working, about seven hundred men all told, pulled from the various commands at Castle Black, he set out to the nearest forest behind the Wall.

It took four days to travel to the forest and Tyrion spent the rest of the time Daryn was gone there, overseeing chopping wood, forming it into the different planks and sizes they would need, as well as the creation of platforms for the catapults themselves. The siege engines wouldn't be put together until they were up on the wall but with the elevator, they would be able to get all of this up there with relative ease.

The Imp was back on the wall to witness the triumphant return of the scouting party along with the ambush group that Smalljon had led out and the band under Daryn. There was a lot of cheering going on and Tyrion joined in enthusiastically. Inside, however, he was wondering about these Wolfsworn. Already tales were passing through the men of how deadly both young lords were and he had seen proof of that in Daryn's case on the trip up to the Wall.

But it was only now that he truly saw why these young men were so dangerous. Not only were they leaders born; that would have to be said of most young lords given the training that breed were given by their parents if said parents had any sense. But they were harder, more tempered than the southern equivalent he was so used to dealing with, which had colored his own perception of them. In the south, most of those in their age group hadn't really seen combat or, at least, the Southerners these youth's ages hadn't. They were used to the posturing of a tourney; the play fighting of the melee where it was bad form to kill someone.

*In comparison, these Northmen are hard, tested. Where before I thought that hardness made them brittle, I now can see it isn't. Their organization is frankly astonishing, the connections between all the noble families, have formed them into a tight, close-knit faction, and they are far more open to change than I expected, look at the number of innovations they showed on the march up here. It makes me wonder how Ranma Stark and Lord Stark have managed it. It all begins with the Wolfsworn, they are the instrument of change for their families, and through them the rest of the North. But to what end?* He thought looking over at Daryn.

"Ho, little lion!" Smalljon boomed, looking over at him and waving him forward from where he had been standing next to a shipment of catapult parts to head up to the top of the Wall. "My friend here has news and the Lord Commander has called for a meeting of the high command."

"I wouldn't make fun of little lions, my Lord," Tyrion replied quickly, smirking up at the much taller young man. "Our bites are still enough to kill any northern dog we come across."

Smalljon boomed out a laugh, clapping him gently on the shoulder leading the way over to the keep.

This meeting was again informal in the extreme to Tyrion's southern views but the mood was even more somber than the first meeting when they arrived on the Wall. Daryn's news went down poorly with everyone there but Tyrion could see the stiffening of spines and a hard look in everyone's eyes. Despite the now certainty of war, these people were ready for it. Tyrion was proud to count himself among their number just then and when called upon to speak about his own project he spoke promptly.

He pulled out sketch he had made back in Winterfell, kept safe throughout the trip up in a beeswax covered leather tube. "This is what I plan for the first few replacements. I've surveyed the forty siege weapons within two weeks ride from Castle Black up on the Wall, and only two of them are useful. Commander Jeor and I have decided to replace the rest but spread out, filling in the gaps as we go along with each successive group so we will have some cover first then more as time goes by. I already have set up a team in the forest nearby, cutting and shaping wood for the new siege machines with another team working transportation." He didn't mention that they would also continuously bring



out food supplies to the woodworkers. Logistics and things like that were always necessarily in the back of everyone's mind, even with the wall as a defensive position.

"This is the sketch for the first few we're going to put in." he said, gesturing at the paper. On the paper was a large picture of a modern-day catapult. Anyone who had seen it next to the ones on the Wall could tell the difference, there was far less wood involved in the base, it was a little larger, and the circumference of the arm that would be used to throw its cargo was smaller, which he pointed out but hastened to add, "The winches here and here are more powerful, which will allow you to throw its cargo further. The entire thing will sit on this platform, constructed of a base and moveable section, which can be controlled by these huge gears here. These can allow you to turn the catapult in a set arc."

"The next group of weapons we'll work on are these." The next one looked like a huge crossbow. "These ballista won't be as deadly to crowds of enemies as the catapults would be but they'll be what we use against specific targets we see, such as any siege weapons they try to construct. I've heard talk about gigantic ladders? We won't have as many of these as the catapults, but they can still have a tremendous effect."

He looked over at the other seriously. "I will say that I have no idea if they'll be able to build a trebuchet powerful enough to reach the top of the wall. But they can certainly build ones that are larger on the ground than we can up on the Wall, despite how wide the causeway is up there."

The Northerners looked at the sketches for a moment, talking quietly to one another and asking questions of Tyrion about how long it would take to build each in turn, what other materials would be needed, and so on. It was decided that they would have to send a raven down to White Harbor to have some dedicated carpenters sent up, along with several tons of supplies. The Night's Watch simply didn't have the means to create them, outside the actual wood. Thankfully, by this point Castle Black's ravens had all returned, so that message would be sent off that very evening.

"What news of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and Shadow Tower?" Daryn asked.

"Kevin and great-uncle Mors left the day after you did." Smalljon replied. "Thanks to traveling along the wall, they were able to arrive there five days ago." That put over two thousand men at all three of the currently used castles of the Night's Watch. Given the natural defenses of the wall, that was a formidable number.

Tyrion shook his head. "Mors took half of the men that were available who knew anything about carpentry. I understand the necessity; we need to enlarge the docking area at Eastwatch. Still, it'll make my work much slower. I only hope that it won't take lord Manderly long to get the new groups of carpenters up to us."

He estimated that each catapult would take three days to construct and that wasn't counting the time spent to get the wood from the forest, where it was being prepared, back to the wall. Even with every horse they had at the Castle Black being roped into that duty, it would still be slow going. The horses of the North were hearty, able to survive on feed that their southern counterparts would have turned their noses up at or just died trying to eat. Nor did they eat as much as the chargers that southern knights were so happy about, even those used by northern knights.

What they were not however was very strong. In the south, this kind of job would be given to mules or some other beast of burden since they were usually much stronger and hardier than horses even if they were slower. But there wasn't a mule or oxen that could survive this far north, especially with the weather getting colder, or a yak that could work at this low an altitude. Tyrion idly wondered how long it would be before the Maesters down south officially declared autumn. He didn't think it would be very long, another half a year tops, before they felt it here. Of course, it would take longer for it to get that far south.

"We'll have to make do." Jeor commented, shrugging philosophically.

Within a day, the Wall around Castle Black was a hive of activity, with Tyrion directing his men in the placement of the first catapult a half day's trek along the Wall toward Eastwatch, and other teams putting up the signal towers, which were really only man high stations with large thieves lanterns. They could only shine in two directions, coming and going along the Wall which would hopefully allow them to remain unseen from those on the ground so far below.

However, that wasn't the only thing Tyrion was doing. With the commander's acceptance, he had written up a note for Kings Landing, detailing everything they had found out so far and asking for some... supplies to be sent to the North along with a few alchemists.

OOOOOO

*Brynden Tully is a rather handsome man, Tyene reflected, and an obviously intelligent one as well. The way his eyes*

*pierce anyone he looks at, it is obvious he saw more than most.* It certainly made for interesting meal time conversation when he was around to trade barbs with.

She and Obara had been coming into the Red Keep every day since the tournament, which was two weeks in the past now, for mealtimes, so she could check to make certain that the food wasn't poisoned. Despite this, they hadn't yet made any inroads on making as much trouble for the stags or lions as they hoped. In fact, they hadn't made any, simply because Arianne wanted to wait until the furor of the Mountain's slaying had time to die down before causing any new uproar.

Arianne had also shut down Tyene's first plan, which was to attract the King's attention and then humiliate him by publicly turning him down in the most brutal and demeaning way possible. Upon mature reflection, however, that would not have worked very well. The King was a man who flitted from bed to bed with no concern for those women who turned him away, knowing there were more where they came from. And it would have called attention to her from the queen that they could ill afford.

Still, she had time off at present. She was spending it watching with a small but amused smile on her face while Ranma tried to train Fenris to carry him along with many others.

Ranma looked up, shaking his head from the wall where Fenris had thrown him to the ground as they tried to get used to this whole riding thing "Okay," muttered Ranma groggily, pushing himself to his feet. "So this is going to take more work."

Fenris whined at him, smacking him on the head with a paw. He was not a horse! The idea of letting his bonded partner ride him was intellectually appealing but it really couldn't get through Fenris' own instincts. Nor was he large enough yet for the two of them to look less than ridiculous. He was strong enough to carry him a ways, though not for very long, but it was the look of the thing that bothered Fenris the most. Direwolves were very aware of their dignity.

On the other hand, armor was definitely something Fenris was interested in. Both he and Ranma were hoping that some of the lizard lion hide was still around by the time they got back to Winterfell.

"I must say," Tyene murmured to her sister Obara, "I didn't expect to see a floor show when I agreed to this job."

Everyone watched as Ranma once more tried to get on Fenris's back. This time it looked as if it was working. With Tommen and a few of the watchers laughingly cheering Fenris on, Ranma was carried half a circuit around the training area before he accidentally tried to spur Fenris like he was a horse.

Fenris immediately growled, throwing Ranma again, then decided to make his displeasure known in no uncertain terms. Fenris' head flicked out, his fangs grabbing Ranma's shirt and ripping it off him with a single pull. With the now ruined shirt in his mouth, the direwolf raced off, heading up to their room. That would teach his bonded not to try treating him like a stupid horse.

As the others laughed, Tyene sized Ranma's body up, murmuring to herself. "Oh my, Arianne is in for a treat if she can get her claws into this one."

Of course, to do that, Arianne would need to start actually doing something other than ordering her and her sister about but Tyene was hopeful it would happen soon. Catching a glimpse of Brynden Tully, she smirked a little, thinking. *But unlike my dear cousin, I have no need to wait to get my claws into my target...*

OOOOOOO

Theon stared at the two pirate ships making their way over the waves while a third retreated from the war galley he was currently on, the Seventh Heaven. They had been under way for a little over three weeks now, well along their way to their target. *The pirates must have some informants in White Harbor,* he thought to himself, *to know when we were going to leave port and our route.* He shook his head while watching the galley race on, now under oars in an effort to catch up to the pirates' cogs.

Eldren was one of the better ship handlers in White Harbor, as well as being extremely aggressive. Yet for all that, he had made the mistake of concentrating solely on the first ship that had appeared, ignoring the idea that there might be more just out of sight waiting to pounce below his lookouts line of sight. He was paying for it now as two other pirate cogs, more maneuverable under pure sail than the galleys, raced down on the convoy.

*Mind you,* Theon thought sardonically, *that's rather like a fox jumping out to ambush a squirrel only to find itself facing a group of badgers.* The cogs were smaller than the carracks even though they probably had larger crews of around

two hundred on each. Still, the defender always had an advantage; made stronger by the fact the carracks had higher sides than the cogs.

Still, the foxes could possibly beat one badger if they worked together. It looked as if the reavers knew it, too. They were aiming for the last ship in the convoy, the one that had been pushed most off course by last evening's storm. It was a good target since that one was out of position of the others and, as sail powered ships, the other carracks couldn't easily come back to aid it. The carracks were simply too large to be rowed, especially against the current, and lacked the sail plans for tacking into the winds enough to turn around in time to aid their fellow.

The other war galley was too out of position, at the front of the convoy. Even under oars it would take them several hours to get back to the back of the convoy, which was much more strung out than Theon was happy with.

This, unfortunately, made only the Seventh Heaven able to defend against all three ships. "Captain, turn us about and get after those other two cogs, we have to intercept at least one before they can catch their target. One of the carracks could defend against one, not two."

Eldren looked a little rebellious, as they were about to come within range of the ship they had been chasing for the ballista set at the front of the galley. Still, he gave the orders and the rowers went to work turning about until the sails caught the wind and pushed the ship towards the other two pirate vessels. "You realize they're going to try to catch us between them now, correct?"

Theon smiled evilly at Eldren's question. "They're going to try, captain." He looked over at the giant ballista on the tip of the ship, smirking a little. "You worry about the ship in front of you; I'll worry about the ship that will be closing behind."

The captain looked at the Greyjoy youth one eyebrow raised, but shrugged and moved over to the steersman. He had been against the idea of the Greyjoy heir coming along to advise his men, as if they needed to be taught how to fight like pulling brats, but Theon had proved his worth from the moment they put to sea. Theon knew instinctively more about wind and wave than any of them. He had a feeling for them that was almost prophetic, a sign of his Iron Born blood coming out.

Theon moved to the back of the Galion, pulling out his bow. He spent a moment working with it, making sure the string was taut and had no damage. Theon had heard a rumor, the only thing to fly faster than raven wings, that the blacksmith back in Winterfell was preparing him a bow made from lizard lion bone. He was eager to try it out but until then his longbow would do enough.

In another universe, the bow used in the Riverlands and the North primarily would be called the English longbow. It was normally as tall as a man, about seventy inches, made of yew, which was really the only thing that marked out an English longbow from other sorts. Theon's had a slight back curve to the ends which added to the draw weight of the bow. In the hands of an expert, the longbow was a deadly weapon.

Theon was such an expert and he intended to show his worth today. He calmly moved over to a stash of arrows he had previously prepared. Theon then waited for some time until he could see the helmsman on the boat coming up behind them clearly. A second later his bow rose, he pulled the string back and he let fly.

That first arrow took the man high in the shoulder throwing him backwards with a scream of agony. Another man tried to reach for the wheel but a second arrow took him in the side of the head. A dozen men brought out their own bows in an attempt to fire back, but they were still out of range.

Theon smirked evilly. His bow might look normal but the pull on it was well above what anyone normal could do. A normal English longbow would be somewhere between ninety pounds and a hundred twenty. Theon's drew at two-hundred twenty-five. Theon might not be the strongest of the Wolfsworn but he was far stronger than most normal people, which allowed him to shoot farther than anyone else could regardless of their weapon. And his aim was superlative to go along with this.

Two more arrows flashed out in ten seconds, catching a third man, once in the hand and once in the side of his chest when he tried to grab the ship's wheel. After that, there was a strange dearth of pirates willing to trying to grab onto the wheel, but they kept on trying to shoot back and even without someone controlling the tiller, the cog's current course would keep them closing on the ship Theon was on unless the wind changed. Eventually, they would be within bow range.

"Not if I have anything to say about it." Theon muttered to himself and moved over to a few specially prepared arrows set by a covered brazier. He stuck one into the brazier for a moment pulling it out quickly as the covered cloth at the

end of the arrow began to smoke and burn. He turned back to his target.

Theon noticed a few dawning looks of horror on the pirates' faces but he ignored them. He took aim, not for any of the pirates, but for the rigging of their cog. A second later the arrow flew, catching the cog's sail high up, where no one would be able to throw a bucket of water on it.

Five more fire arrows followed in swift succession and soon the entire rigging and sail of the pirate ship was aflame. Now the crew had something else to worry about other than getting within bow range of the galley and Theon went back to his regular arrows for a moment, shooting down any of the pirates who looked to be giving orders.

Fire is a sailing ship's worst enemy, with all the wood, dry rope, tar, and canvas. A fire on board a ship needed everyone to respond as a group, a level of organization that most pirates lacked. The Iron Born, of course, did have that organization and their longships were not as susceptible to fire damage for various reasons. Theon's assault might not have worked on a boat crewed by his people but it worked well enough now.

Soon enough the entire cog was aflame, falling further behind them as the sails and rigging went up. Given the choice between burning alive or drowning in the ice cold sea of the Bay of Seals, many of the pirates jumped overboard. Theon knew he would make the same choice in their place. Drowning or freezing, Theon wasn't certain which, but either would probably be less painful than burning alive and would send him to the Drowned God that much quicker.

Theon turned with a grim smile at a job well done to see what the Eldren had done with the other pirate ship, only to find several of the crewmen now staring at him in awe and not a little fear. It wasn't often, after all, that you saw single man destroy an entire ship. He smirked to himself thinking, *I don't think I'm going to have to pay for my own ale for a good long time.*

Eldren and his crew had also done their part. The ballista had fired two bolts straight into the pirate ships side, right at the water line while the Cog tried to come back down towards them. Now they were making for the third cog, which was within bow range of its target convoy ship.

The men onboard saw them coming and the fate of their fellows. They tried to disengage from their target but too late. The Seventh Heaven took them under fire, one bolt smashing into the aft of the cog, taking out something in its steering. With the cog now adrift and unable to make headway, the galley circled it using its own sails, staying at bow range (normal bow anyway) and riddling the ship with fire arrows.

Not an hour later, they were on their way again with the convoy under the galley's watchful gaze heading further north into the cold sea of the Bay of Seals. Theon hoped a damn good beer awaited him at the end of this voyage; the cold was worse than it had been on their trek to the Wall. *I'll wager Daryn and Smalljon haven't been nearly as productive as I have,* he thought complacently.

OOOOOO

Far north, far, far removed from even the land of the wildlings, a glacier, which had long been part of the land, found itself an ice floe adrift, heading south.

OOOOOO

While Ranma was busy down south and Daryn, Smalljon, and Theon were busy having adventures, those left in Winterfell were not idle. Arya and Bran joined in the efforts to prepare the White Knife to be a transport route, with Bran going out to lead various groups on creating systems of winches and pulleys at the many small waterfalls along the way so they could handle barge traffic. Now months later, that project had been handed over to the local lords and Bran had turned his attention to the library, researching something he hadn't yet shared with the rest of his family.

Catelyn had **not** been happy about letting her son and daughter out of her sight but, with her pregnancy progressing, no one had been willing to let her ride out with them and at times Bran had proven to be an invaluable aid on the ongoing projects. She eventually resolved to simply be happy he could take part at all after his brush with death. Bran still had the occasional twitching muscle in his hands plus one of his feet refused to obey his commands as it used to making him rather club footed. But he knew he was lucky to get away with just that.

Lady Stark and Jon had thrown themselves into the preparations as well, organizing, leading, and, above all, remaining a calm presence while Winterfell and the lands of House Stark and its minor houses poured forth their efforts into this and into preparing for the coming of winter. Autumn might not have been officially declared yet, but maester Luwin was confident that it was only another eight months or so at best before it would be and they had to

prepare for the coming winter.

Catelyn's main project over that time had been to repurpose the glass garden that was part of Winterfell's castle, warmed by the hot springs that was under the castle, into a small farming area. She enlarged it as well, an expensive and time consuming upgrade, but in the coming years, it would prove to be invaluable as a resource for Winterfell and those living there.

Lady Jonelle had helped with this project before moving back to Castle Cerwyn a month or so after Brandon had recovered when her husband returned from Widow's Watch. She had since given birth to her baby, a daughter who they named Katarina. Now it was getting to the point where Catelyn herself was nearly due, which constrained her to remain in the keep itself doing paperwork.

Jon was busy with several things. One was aiding the ongoing construction. Another was to sit for the fittings of the lizard lion armor that he, Edd, Daryn, and, of course, Ranma could wear off his fitting. Then there was his own training, the need to aid in running the castle, and a myriad other things.

The one duty that took up most of his time, however, was training the men of House Stark and its minor houses in a new way of fighting that Ranma had thought up and sold to their father. Endurance, group movement, and strength were essential, which allowed Jon to train the men in small cadres before letting them train others. So far, he had personally trained upwards of four hundred men, who had gone on to train still more.

With the number of rivals/fiancés/teachers who interrupted class, it would surprise no one that Ranma learned very little in class at Furinkan but military history was an area he had actually studied when he could since he likened strategy and tactics to martial arts. He had introduced a lot of logistics concepts to his father, who had spread it around. The braziers, the shared tents, the need to provide uniformly warm clothing for their men, and several ideas for food on the march had come from the brainstorming of the two of them, though Ned had been the one to come up with the shared tent idea.

Using his knowledge from his past life, Ranma had devised a new concept based around a mix of the Roman and the Swedish models of infantry: short swords and spears for skirmishers and pikes with large shields for the main infantry. Pikes and other polearms were not used in organized formations in Westeros or even Essos, outside the Unsullied, but Ranma knew, and had convinced Ned, that they would be extremely effective against any large force. He had other ideas, too, but there was only so much they could do in times of peace.

The training was tough, since most combat in Westeros emphasized personal ability rather than working with a group. Yet despite this, they were progressing very well, both the infantry and the archers.

Bran didn't particularly care about Jon's endeavors in this department. Despite technically being **the** Stark of Winterfell at the moment, Bran let most of the running of the castle and the lands to Jon and his mother, throwing himself into his studies of anything and everything.

In this, he found a ready ally in Luwin, as well as his mother's fierce approval of it. Catelyn had no wish to have another warrior for a son; Ranma, Jon, and Arya were enough. He found, in particular, metallurgy fascinating after hearing his brothers and Mikken worked together to create an entirely new kind of steel for Arya's sword.

Bran was looking at that topic from a different direction today. Now, he was looking at how to make a **lot** of steel quickly. Steel that could be used to make swords, pikes, or even armor. The majority of men-at-arms wore boiled leather armor but what if they could wear steel mail? That would be a major advantage in any fight.

So he was going over some of the notes he had made after talking to Mikken about the best and cheapest type of mixture to make good steel. He looked up as Summer sniffed the air for a moment before locking eyes with Bran. After a moment, Bran shook his head. "I've run from him enough, I think. If he wants to say something to me, he can say it here."

A moment later, the door to the library opened and Jojen Reed walked in. He looked around quickly, then saw Brandon sitting alone at a table.

"What can I do for you?" Bran asked without looking up from his notes again. Summer trundled from the side to join his master, leaning against his side softly. Summer and Rickon's Shaggydog were nowhere near the size of Ghost, though they did have some more growing to do.

And Unlike Lady, who was around the same size, Summer was lean and heavily muscled with several scars standing out among his fur he had received during the two attempts on Bran's life.

He was also normally friendly, unlike Shaggydog, who was moody and irritable much of the time. Only Rickon Brandon, and surprisingly their mother were immune to that moodiness. Lady Jonelle had also been immune when she was there. The wolves could tell both older women were pregnant and it affected how they were around them. Summer, Ghost, and even Nymeria obeyed Catelyn like they would a pack alpha while Shaggydog was docile around her.

Bran rubbed Summer's ears, thinking of his new sibling on the way, sad that his father wouldn't be able to get away from Kings Landing in time. The King had promised that Ned would be able to get back for his new child's first nameday but that was well in the future and was probably not worth the air the King had used to say it.

He was pulled from his thoughts by the sound of a chair being pulled up and he looked up to meet the rather disconcerting eyes of Jojen. "You know why I am here." the crannog youth said quickly, almost accusingly.

"No, I don't." Bran said sharply, looking up at him now with all his attention, slapping one hand gently down on the papers in front of him. The paper in question was actually an unfinished sketch of a farming tool that Ranma had thought up that Bran had just finished. With it, farmers would be able to dig out tree stumps more easily, which would expand the farmland of the north tremendously once they began to build them. "I'm rather busy, Jojen, perhaps you could get to the point?"

"You've been avoiding me." Jojen said simply. "You have seen. You have seen the three eyed crow. He helped you back to your body. You know what that represents."

"I think you assume what it represents." Bran replied, one hand on Summer's head the other now playing with a piece of charcoal he had been using to draw with. "I have had dreams." he went on, shaking his head. "Dreams of a three eyed crow and a voice telling me he waits for me. But I am not going to put my trust into dreams."

"You are a warg." Jojen replied sharply. "You can run with your wolf, ride his mind like a normal man might ride a horse but you will not fly until you open your mind fully."

"My brother Jon told me about that the evening I woke up, though I already knew. Apparently, Ranma discovered he could warg with Fenris on their trip up to the Wall and thought maybe all of us could do it too. But what do you mean fly?"

Jojen looked away for a moment, appearing flustered before going on. "I have had dreams all my life, of events that will occur in the future." What he did not say was that they had become more and more disjointed and hard to interpret for several years. Since Bran's fall, which he had accurately predicted, his dreams had become so fragmentary he couldn't accurately interpret much save for one thing. "You have a choice to make, a choice between the green and the builder, between seeking the aid of those of old blood against the coming forces of eternal winter, or of trying to stand alone."

When he spoke, it was with a tone of voice that was so certain it was astonishing, but Bran could still hear a faint waver in his voice, as if he wasn't as certain as he wanted to appear. He heard and wondered why that was since the boy was clearly used to being **certain** about these dreams of his. But in the end, that didn't matter.

Bran knew he was a warg, in fact he had more of a talent for it than either of his siblings, he knew magic existed. He was also bright enough to understand that the three-eyed crow probably represented something more. But that didn't change the fact he was acting as the Stark of Winterfell.

"Wrong." Bran said simply. "I've already chosen. I may become something else eventually but right now, my duty is here. I am a Stark, I will do my duty." *Right now, I have chosen the way of the builder. My other talents may grow later but now is not the time for them.*

Jojen frowned then turned quickly, gazing at the silent form of Ghost who had 'ghosted' up behind him. The white furred direwolf hadn't made any noise as it crept up, not even when he nosed open the door to the library.

Seeing his brother's wolf Bran smiled. "No trouble, Ghost, we're just talking." Ghost nodded his head, amusing Bran in showing the intelligence that all of the wolves, save Shaggydog, seemed to have picked up from their humans. Hopefully, Rickon would be able to pass on something but his youth was against him there. Ghost glided forward, moving past Jojen to rest his massive head on Bran's shoulder for a moment before moving off, disappearing through the shelves of the library not making a single sound.

"Unless you have something concrete to say to me, I believe we are done here." Bran said, looking hard at Jojen. Really, the other boy's surly, abrupt, and pushy manner was very off-putting. *Why couldn't he be more like his older*

sister?

Meera fit in here almost as well as family, and had taken on the role of chief huntsman (huntswoman) of the castle. Since Winterfell was still home to some four hundred more mouths to feed than normal, plus their budding preparations for winter, that was an important job.

"I have seen the ocean come for Winterfell, rising and falling, tearing your walls down and leaving naught but ruin. I have seen conflict consume the south and the coming of a wall of ice to put out all fires. When those dreams come true, then you will believe me, and you will gladly take the choice to aid the three-eyed crow and the old children." Jojen stood then, and left the library.

Ghost came back, still treading so silently it was almost like he wasn't there at all. He nosed at the smaller Summer's shoulder for a moment before leaving himself.

Lifting up the paper he had been reading, Bran laughed quietly, wondering why Jon had sent Ghost to him or if it had been the direwolf's own idea. Still, that was neither here nor there and he turned back to his studies with a determined air. Whatever threats circled his family, he was determined to help them have the best weapons to face it that he could.

OOOOOO

"So you've returned have you? I'm amazed you even know where Bear Island is, given how much you stay at Winterfell. You don't seem pregnant, so that can't be the reason for your return. So what have we done to be graced by your presence, daughter?"

"Hello to you too, mother." Dacey said, leaping lightly off her horse and grasping the older woman's in a fierce hug, not responding to the dig about her possibly being in a relationship with Ranma. "I stayed there to train Arya as well as I could but then Jon and I figured out something else I should be doing and he sent me here to gather some men and talk to you."

"Oh, of course it couldn't just be that you're returning to your family." Maege sniffed, but returned the hug strongly, though not as strongly as Dacey's hug had been. Dacey was actually one of the strongest among the Wolfsworn and one of the better trained as well. "Still, come inside and tell me about it."

Over spiced wine and cold cuts the two talked. Dacey shared with her mother, the head of House Mormont what had been going on in Winterfell from her perspective, as well as sharing the worry that there might be something else going on down south. "But," she hastened to add. "We're not supposed to do anything but possibly prepare our men. That can be covered by the need at the Wall. And we will be doing something in that direction as well but Jon and I feel the House's main strength should be kept at home."

Maege tapped the table with one finger thoughtfully, shaking her head. "I dislike all this political shit." she said bluntly. "The southern court is a cesspit full of pulling whelps who have never known war and oldsters who have never known the harshness of winter, and each of them have their own plans, all of which are more important than the king or the realm. I hope Ned and young Ranma have learned to swim by this point, but you're right, we'll leave that to them for now. What is this job Twinblade and you thought up?"

"Smalljon and his men were attacked in the Gift by a large band of wildlings. He took prisoners and when he got to the Wall relayed what they told him back to Winterfell via raven. One of the prisoners said that they were getting men across the Wall by way of the Frozen Shore, then using boats to get around the Wall from there."

Maege snorted. "Impossible, it's too damn cold up there for wildlings or us to live for long. That's why it's called the Frozen Shore!"

"It could've been a lie but knowing Smalljon and the lengths he would go to get the information, I doubt it." Dacey said, shrugging and not saying anything about the Others, who could survive in that weather easily. "The prisoners did say they lost a lot of men to the cold whenever they went that route. In any event, Jon has asked me to lead a force of our men up that way. We're to meet with a force of Norrey men in their territory along the Bay of Ice and move along the edge there up to the Gorge, which separates the mountains up there from the Wall, then follow it down to the sea. Ambush, kill any wildlings we find and put in a small, what he calls an observation post that the Norrey men will man from then on. I brought along six spyglasses special ordered up from White Harbor for that."

Maege's eyes widened. "That's going to be difficult." she said, understating matters entirely too much in Dacey's opinion. "The weather becomes so cold out there that any part of your body that's open to the elements will freeze

quickly. You'll be in danger of dying of the cold no matter how bundled up we can make you, that's why the Norrey clan doesn't use those mountains in the first place."

"Well, do you have a better option?" Dacey shrugged. "If they can get forces around the Wall, they can cut its supply lines, no matter what the smallfolk or the men-at-arms assigned to them can do. We have to stop that happening."

Maege tapped the table some more, thinking hard, then nodded. "Instead of moving up into the Mountains, start From the Wall and move out, assume that if there isn't any way for **you** to survive, then the wildlings won't be able to. I've no doubt the prisoner lied about the Bay of Ice bit, whatever else. The Gorge now, that I could see them scaling up and down. Figuring out how to stop that will be up to you. I'll send fifty of our men with you as well as supplies, good climbers and woodsmen."

That they all would indeed be men rather than the warrior women House Mormont were known for wasn't said. Maege would never put her people in a position where they had to defend themselves from their own allies and, whatever other men were up there now, the Night's Watch itself was still comprised of rapists and murderers.

"My initial orders from Lord Stark were not to send too much of our whelming up, a fact that, even before hearing your tale, I agreed with. We've been seeing more raiders lately, and we know that House Glover lacks the men to aid us if we run into trouble."

"Has there been much of that since I was home last?"

"A few." Maege shrugged. "The Iron Born have always been a thorn in our side and it's been going on eighteen long years since the Greyjoy Rebellion was put down. They're feeling their oats once more, as it were. The Iron Born are like weeds really." Maege said critically, one lip twisted into a sneer. "You have to keep cutting them back or they'll just keep growing underfoot. Pity we don't have the men or ships to do it ourselves. It's not a serious concern and won't be for quite some time to us here in the North. There are always nicer targets for them down south, after all. Still, it never pays to turn your back on them. Never mind that, let's concentrate on what you'll need for this endeavor of yours."

Dacey nodded, listening intently as her mother went on listing the items of apparel and gear that they would be taking with them, at least three sets of each. One just in case and one for the clansmen they would be meeting, who wouldn't be able to match the quality of the goods that even House Mormont would be able to produce. Dacey kept most of her thoughts inside, after all, it hadn't been the wildling's getting around the wall that had bothered her and Jon...

#### Flashback:

"What do you mean, you found something disturbing?" Dacey asked, looking around quizzically. While she didn't have anything against reading, it wasn't her favorite pastime and she had never been in Winterfell's library before.

Jon waved at the roll of ancient looking parchment in front of him, being very careful not to touch it. "I've been looking for information about... what we ran into up north every night I can. Not often, but I found this a few nights back."

He wished not for the first time that they could bring Luwin into their confidence but that wasn't his call to make and wasn't necessary, just yet. He felt Luwin would believe them but he wouldn't keep the true tale of what they ran into from Lady Catelyn, who wouldn't. That would be irritating to deal with, especially given her pregnancy-based mood swings. Eventually they would bring them both up to speed on the real threat but, at present, it would be more trouble than it was worth.

"This text mentions several things that are useful to know about the nature of the true enemy but one section in particular caught my eye. It turns out that the Wall has magic built into it to keep the White Walker's magic from moving past it."

That made Dacey's eyes widen in surprise. "But then, how did they set up that attack on us?" She thought for a moment then frowned. "The wildlings can get around the Wall; can the White Walkers do the same thing?"

"That's up to you to find out. You've trained Arya to the point she's good enough to help me train the men so you'll be at loose ends. I want you to head home; inform Lady Maege of what's been going on here." That caused Dacey to snort and Jon smirked a little, knowing how that old woman would react to being called a lady. He pulled out a map of the North, a very crude one admittedly since map makers had never made much headway here in the North. "I'll send a messenger up to the Norrey clan, take some men from your house, and head up there with them to see what can be seen."



### *End Flashback*

So whatever her mother said, Dacey knew they would be heading into the mountains along the Gorge and beyond. The Others had to have found a way around the Wall somehow and it would be up to Dacey to find it and, if possible, cut it off. That was why she also had six dragonglass daggers stowed away in her pack. Old tales told that the White Walkers themselves were immune to wounds caused by normal steel but not from dragonglass and it paid to be prepared.

OOOOOOO

"I mean, look at how he dresses," voice said as Ranma meandered his way into the entrance hall of the holdfast, Tommen close behind. "What's the matter, Stark, can't afford to buy any real clothing?"

Ranma turned with one eyebrow raised to see Lancel Lannister standing there with a few courtiers. He shook his head in amusement. "I can, but unlike you I'm actually busy everyday, I can't go around dressed in tights like those."

"That would explain why you're dressed as a peasant." Lancel snarked back, but Ranma merely shook his head.

These attacks on how he looked had come ever since he and his father had arrived in the city. Lancel in particular liked to bring it up, and it had gotten worse since Ranma's execution of Gregor Clegane. Lancel took that act as a personal attack on his family, even though the queen did not see it as such.

At first Lancel had tried to belittle Ranma's intelligence but that hadn't worked since Ranma was actually quite intelligent. Then he had tried to turn the men and ladies of the court against him by portraying Ranma as an outsider but, while that had worked somewhat in the main for the rest Of the Court, Ranma couldn't care less.

Ranma was an outsider and didn't care who knew it. When this was all over, Ranma would return to Winterfell, with a wife or not was still up in the air, but it wasn't like he was going to remain here the rest of his life. Margaery had tried to get him to care, but it had been an uphill battle. And honestly, so long as he had the Queen and King, if not on his side then at least neutral, none of the other courtiers' opinions really mattered.

That didn't mean he hadn't gotten better at responding to jabs like this, however. "Does her majesty know you're loose and yapping again at your betters?" Ranma replied, looking over at Lancel again.

The man growled and reached for his sword, one of the rapiers that was now somewhat in vogue among the younger courtiers. Ranma thought they looked like new knitting needles. Frankly, he had never seen the point of a rapier back in his old dimension, let alone this one. Good against weak, loose chain mail and unarmored foes but other than that they weren't worth much.

"You have never been my better, Stark." Lancel growled moving forward to stand in front of the other man. "Do not think that just because my aunt has allowed your slight against my family to slide, that I will do the same. Whatever he was, Gregor was a banner-man of my family and the way you murdered him stains my family's honor. A stain I will pay back!"

"Gregor was a mad beast, a rapist, and a murderer and I put him down as such." Ranma said leaning forward. "And I've told you before, if you think that was a slight against your family, why don't you go get a real blade then come back and do something about it!"

A new voice interrupted them before the confrontation could continue. "Enough." It was a simple word but it came out clear and cold and very, very commanding.

As one the two young men turned, bowing slightly from the waist to the Queen as she strode through watchers in the corridor. Cersei stared hard at her cousin. "Is this how my uncle has raised you? To always attack others with words and unfounded anger? Control, Lancel is everything. I would've thought you would've learned that from my father if nothing else."

The younger man mumbled something looking away, unable to meet her angry gaze. "And you." Cersei said now turning to Ranma. "There are other ways to resolve conflict than offering physical violence. I suggest you take more time to speak with that fiancée of yours, I am certain that the Rose of House Tyrell is at least passing familiar with such."

"You speak for me quite well, my Queen." said Margaery's voice from behind her moving forward to look at her fiancé sternly. She had just spent an hour with the Queen, Joffrey, and Sansa, talking about fashion of all things. It was something Sansa was passionate about and her knowledge of it always surprised Margaery.

In particular the gown she had created for the Queen was magnificent, Lannister red with actual lion fur on the sleeves. It looked as if it should be very hot in this weather but it actually wasn't, given the material and the flowing nature of the dress down by the legs. The gift of it had actually put a smile on the Queen's face, a real one, not one of the ones she used to manipulate others.

"Your pardon your grace, I will take your advice to heart." Ranma replied looking at both Margaery and Queen. "I had just finished running Tommen through some exercises and I had come to return him for his afternoon lessons."

Cersei nodded looking down at Tommen who was watching everything silently. She smiled at him and he smiled back, moving over to stand with her. Cersei leaned down slightly to place an arm around her youngest son's shoulders. "Thank you for returning my son unharmed once more from your exercises, young Stark."

"As for you, Lancel," she said turning to her Lancel once more, "The King is preparing to go out on a hunt. It speaks ill of you, and through you, our family, that as his squire you are not already with him. If you are so worried about our family's image, nephew, I suggest you take care to act in such a manner that you, personally, do not shame us."

That had been a major coup on her part a few days after the tournament. She had gotten Robert to take Lancel as his squire, putting another Lannister nearby, one that she could very easily manipulate. It was obvious the boy was besotted with her; Cersei didn't even have to do anything to encourage it. If anything, she had to step on his infatuation a little hard so that he didn't become too obvious about it.

Lancel mumbled and moved off quickly. Cersei allowed a small smile to appear on her face as he looked back, causing him to flush and move away quicker. Internally, the Lannister queen sighed. Frankly, there was no challenge in it with the boy, which took away her pleasure at knowing she had another man under her control.

She turned back to Ranma, who was a much harder nut to crack. She smirked slightly, seeing he was apparently looking at the windows above them rather than at her, since Cersei had not straightened up from putting an arm around her youngest son's shoulders, giving him a glimpse down her décolletage. She did so now, turning to look at Margaery. "I presume I can leave this one's punishment in your hands?"

"Most assuredly, Your Majesty," The young woman replied grimly, moving over and grasping Ranma's hand. "Let us be off." she murmured.

Cersei watched them go for a moment, frowning thoughtfully. Margaery was far too intelligent and that made her dangerous, above and beyond the little voice in Cersei's head that warned her of the 'younger queen' who would supplant her. Moreover, there was a groundswell of affection growing towards her from the entire court, even a few of the Cersei's own followers. Her seemingly kind manner and self-effacing nature appealed to many, though the queen could easily see the intelligence underneath. Thankfully, the Tyrells only had a few dozen supporters in the court, most of whom were tied to Renly and Loras rather than directly to Margaery.

The influence she had on Ranma had mellowed the young man somewhat, though Cersei was thankful to see he was still rough around the edges and therefore somewhat easier to manipulate. Ranma could be controlled, his friendship with her daughter (something Cersei had begun to subtly encourage despite her misgivings about her crush) and his taking Tommen almost as his squire, bound him to the interests of her children and through her children, Cersei's own. Moreover, what he had done to the Mountain told her a lot about his general character. So despite the youth's physical skills and the prophecy of the younger queen, neither young people were the target that she was most concerned with.

*No, it's his father that concerns me.* Ned had the King's ear, which had not changed since the moment he had agreed to be Hand. Luckily, his job as Hand had foregone his looking too closely at Jon Arryn's death now that he was fully engrossed with trying to pull the kingdom out of debt. And that very drive and objective had made him many enemies that she could exploit or sacrifice, as needed.

Yet for all that, Cersei knew she was becoming more and more vulnerable as time went on thanks to his wearing away her family support. *Still*, she mused to herself as she led Tommen off to his lessons, *the lion hasn't been entirely defanged. I have several more bites in my repertoire that I can pull out at need.*

She was still concerned at how badly any physical conflict between the Starks and the Lannisters could go, knowing that Ranma could well turn the tide here in the Red Keep. *Luckily, Jaime has woken up to this and is taking to training in a frenzy to try and close the gap between them.* Cersei knew her brother and was confident that given enough time he would close that gap. Hopefully enough time would pass to allow that as well as to allow Ranma to continue to get closer to her children. With that at least, they and her would be secure. Cersei was also thinking ahead to the worst

case scenario and what pawn to sacrifice to save the queen but hadn't yet come to a conclusion there.

Cersei was so busy with her own machinations that she had no time left to watch Joffrey, which would turn out to be a very bad thing in the long run. Indeed, that downward spiral would begin later that evening.

OOOOOOO

"Young Prince?" said a voice behind Joffrey. "You are out late, are you not?"

Joffrey turned quickly, glaring at Littlefinger, whose voice it was that had startled him. "Where I go or when is none of your concern, Littlefinger!"

"It is if it endangers the crown. You are after all the heir; anything that endangers you endangers the succession and therefore the crown and kingdom." Petyr smiled as Joffrey ate that bit of flattery up as Petyr knew he would. "Still, I will not ask what you are about at the moment, my Prince, only that you walk with me and listen to my own concerns for a moment. Possibly, talking with someone will allow me to work it out."

Joffrey's eyes narrowed but he could not exactly refuse. Here he was, caught coming out of a room where he had met with his servant and with no Kingsguard in sight, something he had worked hard to accomplish, yet was also suspicious. He had no choice but to go with the man or possibly bring even more attention to his own doings.

Still, while Joffrey lacked much understanding of the court, he knew Petyr was not as loyal to the crown as he was to his own position. Still, the idea the other man, who was known as very intelligent, would seek out Joffrey for aid in a problem, fed his ego too much for him to refuse. "Certainly," he said grimly, standing up right and hiding with a bit of actual skill the package he had just picked up. "If you are troubled, perhaps I can help you in some way."

"That is to be hoped." Petyr murmured, shaking his head mentally. *The moment I need this inbred cretin's aid in thinking is the moment I lose the game and, no doubt, my life rather quickly. Still, I can start ingratiating myself to the Prince now that his mother is too busy with other matters to guard his every move. And the more I can curry favor with him, the more control I will have over Joffrey's actions.* With Petyr leading the way, the two of them moved down the hallway, unseen by any.

OOOOOOO

As the oldest true-born (though that really didn't matter to those in Winterfell any longer) Stark in Winterfell at the moment, Arya had some irritating duties to see to, much like the one she was doing now. Bran should've been the one doing this particular duty, welcoming the Wull, chieftain of the Wull clan, to Winterfell but Bran was off at present with several of the guards to inspect the work being done on an area of the White Knife. This was made even worse by the fact that her impending pregnancy had made Catelyn bedridden more often than not.

So here Arya sat, in the chair that her father normally sat, a stone throne affair that looked very formal, as well as large given her petite frame. For all of her training, Arya was still a young girl, after all, and there was very little she could do about her size. Nymeria lounging at her feet added quite a bit to the impact to the guests she was here to greet, however.

"You are welcome, Lord Wull," she said formally. Despite not truly being a lord, the Starks always called the mountain clan chieftains Lord. "Welcome to Winterfell. For as long as you stay here, our meat is yours, our arms will defend you at need, and our roof will be above your head."

This was the formal way of welcoming a mountain clan leader to a meeting. Much like the rest of the North, the mountain clans kept to the old ways, revering the old gods, and following the laws as set down by the First Men.

In Northern society, once you welcomed someone into your house, neither of you could offer violence to the other. The offer of bread and meat was also in keeping with this. That they had in common with the faith of the Seven in the rest of Westeros, where once food was offered and taken no violence could occur, even between mortal enemies.

Lord Wull was a large man, almost as hairy as the men from Umber were traditionally, wearing studded leather armor, goat fur leggings, and what looked like a bear fur cloak. His eyes were deep set in a heavily bearded face and there was a spark of intelligence in them, though you would have to look closely to see it. All in all, he was a typical mountain clansman and he scoffed angrily. "I come here from our mountain hold and I am greeted by a child!"

Arya scowled, her hand twitching towards where Fang rested at her side, always on her person these days, despite her mother's baleful glances at times. Then she paused. *Wait, he's not objecting to the fact that I'm a girl, just that I'm young.*

Much like the wildlings, the women of the mountain clans were supposed to be fierce and independent. They weren't supposed to be fighters, not really, but they ran the home and hearth and it was a very foolish clan leader who did not listen to his matriarch.

That thought calmed her down. So long as she wasn't being looked down on as a girl, Arya could deal with people needing her about her age. She smirked, showing her teeth in a not exactly smile as Nymeria stood up, growling slightly on mental command. Arya might not have Jon's way with Ghost, nor did she have the connection to any of the other direwolves that Bran seemed to be able to create so effortlessly but she and Nymeria had practiced long and hard to get to the point where the direwolf could read Arya's mental commands.

The direwolf began to stalk around causing the eyes of the Wull chieftain and the two clansmen who had acted as his guards on this trip to widen. All three shifted uncomfortably, trying to keep Nymeria and Arya both in their sights. Arya's voice brought their attention fully back to her. "Young or old, I am a Stark of Winterfell, one whose Fang," she said tapping her sword, "has tasted the blood of the enemies of my house. Do not look down on me!"

She leaned back now as all three clansmen looked at her with more respect. Much like House Umber, if you met the challenge of their disrespect head on, mountain clansmen tended to respect you more and back off. Since House Stark had guaranteed the mountain clans independence there was no worry about them truly offering offense. Plus House Stark and House Glover traded heavily with the Wulls, which was one of the reasons why it had slowly become the dominant mountain clan. Norrey, First Flint, Burley, and Harclay were, technically speaking, nearly as large but none of them could match the number of armed and well equipped troops that the Wull clan could, thanks to dealing with the lowlanders as they did.

The Wull put this into words, shaking his head with a laugh. "We've known the Starks were tough as old leather for long time, good to know that it hasn't deserted them! Your father lass, The Ned, is a good man and I'm proud ta meet his daughter true!"

Now that the preliminaries were over with, the Wull got down to business. "I was told about the attack, you think you have others that're coming? Is there something more going on than what is happening out beyond the Wall?"

Just as Arya was beginning to panic, trying to think of how to describe things, some of which she barely understood, a new voice spoke up from behind the Wull men. causing all three to turn. "That has yet to be determined."

Jon strode through the doors of the Hall with Ghost padding silently behind him. There was some murmuring at the size of the direwolf, which was quite a bit larger than Nymeria.

When they stopped growing, Lady would prove to be the runt of the litter, as it were, though for reasons beyond her control. Summer and Shaggydog dog would be normal sized direwolves, because neither Rickon nor Bran would build up the ki that would impact their size as Ranma or Jon did, and Arya's Nymeria would only be a little bit larger than them. Ghost, however, when he finished growing would be almost the size of Fenris.

Jon smiled at The Wull, slapping him hard on the shoulder as he moved past them smirking at Arya and rubbing her hair affectionately. "I apologize; I was training with the men and have only just returned from a run." Behind him, Ghost padded back out of the hall, standing outside the door like a sentry as the door closed behind him.

Jon stood at Arya's side. She smiled up at him gratefully then over at their guests. "This is my brother, Jon Twinblade. Our parents have put him in charge of training the troops for whatever might be needed in the future."

All three of the Wull men nodded. The tales of Jon and Ranma had spread throughout the North, as well as the tales of the rest of the Wolfsworn. The Wull however caught the 'whatever' part of that statement. His eyes narrowed and without a word, he pulled up a chair to sit in front of the chair Arya was occupying. "'Whatever might be needed'? Is this related to the attack our men and those of Harclay let through?" All three of the mountain men looked ashamed at that.

Jon smirked and pulled up his own chair, motioning the other two men to join them. "Not directly. Those men didn't know who hired them. The one who did died during the attack, killed by an arrow." He shared a glance with Arya and the two of them began to describe the battle, not going into much detail but giving them an outline of what had occurred, as well as how lucky Winterfell had been to catch the attack away from the keep as they had.

Throughout it, the mountain clansmen muttered and looked at one another. All of them were veterans of dozens of skirmishes against other clans; they understood how tough a fight that must have been. The fact that none of the Starks or even the Mormont woman had been killed during it was astonishing.

Then Jon began to describe what had occurred with Bran, the concern that he might have seen something other than a Kingsguard having a tryst, and the feeling that there was something going on down south with the Lannisters. "We're not certain what their game is." Jon finished. "Whether they're worried about how much influence we could have on the King, whether they're moving against the King himself, or something else but there are storm clouds on the horizon down south and we're preparing for it."

The Wull leaned back. "Have you shared this with the other Lords of the lowlands?"

"We have shared it with Lord Manderly, and Lord Cerwyn. Given our proximity, it made sense to share with Lord Cerwyn and he already had his suspicions in that area. There is a visible rift between the Queen and King, what the cause of it is we don't know." *Though, given the King's attitude to his marriage vows, that is only to be expected.* "Lord Manderly is a very intelligent man with quite a lot of connections down further south, thanks to his trading fleet."

That was stretching a point, honestly. Lord Manderly had a **few** connections down south, which then had more connections. But he was also the most politically minded Lord of the North, extremely intelligent and devious. Even Jon didn't know of the escape route Lord Manderly had set up for Ned and his children down in Kings Landing.

The Wull nodded stroking his beard. He and his men had seen a few men-at-arms wearing the battle ax of Cerwyn on their tabards, so it made sense that they would be involved. Then too, the friendship between the two houses was deep. It had to be given the proximity of their seats. If it hadn't been, one or the other would've either absorbed or killed the other off long since.

He also could tell that the Starks were taking him into their confidence to show that they held no hard feelings toward his clan for allowing that attack from remnants of House Bolton and its followers to nearly get through.

He castigated himself once more on that. There should never have been any way a force that size could move through his territory without being challenged and slaughtered. To be sure, a force that size would have been troublesome to challenge right off the bat but the clansmen were experts at hit-and-run attacks and using the knowledge of their territory to their best advantage.

So instead of asking why he was being brought into their confidence like this he simply asked. "What would you have us do?"

It was Arya who answered, this she knew, having been part of the discussion. "Be ready to defend your land against any incursion. Be ready to answer our call when we ask for it."

Jon nodded. "I sent a runner to the Norrey and Flint asking them to prepare for an arriving force from Clan Mormont. We had word that the wildlings might be getting troops down around the Wall, somehow. But your land is too landlocked to make asking you for aid there necessary."

The Wull snorted. The Norrey and First Flint clans abutted one another along the mountains that wound down from the Wall towards the Bay of Ice. The Wull clans were further south than either.

Also, the idea of having to send his men through the Flint lands was simply not going to happen. There wasn't that much bad blood between the two clans these days but memories were long up in the mountains and it wasn't that long ago that the three most powerful clans up there had been having their own private war.

So he simply nodded, then changed the subject. "I'll agree to that. When winter comes, will the town here be open to us?"

"The town and more." Jon said simply. "We've already begun preparations, we might not be as high as your lands but I've been to the Wall and I felt the cold there. Our maester is a pragmatic fellow and, despite it not being official, has decided it close enough to begin preparations." Luwin was at that moment up with Hathan at his holdfast. Hathan had found something up there, some kind of ore that he wanted the Maester's opinion on.

The Wull nodded with a smile. Winter was always harder on the clans up top of their mountains than the lowlanders and, by long-standing tradition, the small town built up around Winterfell was open to them.

The conversations continued from there. The Wull left later that day fully satisfied not just with the fact that his clan still retained the trust of The Starks but that the future of that House was in very good hands indeed.

OOOOOO

Margaery frowned as she made her way through the garden around the Tower of the Hand to where the training

ground for the Hand's men-at-arms was. It wasn't the walk that was making her frown but the fact she had just left Joffrey. *This whole trying to ingratiate myself to Joffrey idea is wearing on me more and more with every passing day.* She wouldn't say that she was madly in love with Ranma but she was definitely friends with him and physically attracted to him.

The strongest emotion she felt for Joffrey was a growing unease. There was something so... oddly fake about him. He smiled at all the right times, said all the right things, carried himself for the most part like a Prince should. His arrogance was obvious but that was simply a sign of his station. His lack of intelligence grated heavily on her but, in her grandmother's words, that would make him all the more pliable, like his childishness. Yet for all that, the more time she spent around him the more she **didn't** want to be around him.

*There is something in his eyes, just under the surface,* she thought. His normal lecherous look didn't bother her. That was something Margaery was all-too-familiar with. More men than not looked at her in that manner. No, it was something else, something she couldn't put her finger on.

Her frown deepened as she noticed that Myrcella had beaten her here, no great feat of course, but the younger girl had obviously been there for some time. She was curled up on top of Fenris, rubbing his ears. The direwolf was rumbling that odd rumble that was the wolf (or dog) equivalent of a cat's purr, though obviously she would never dream of mentioning such.

Fenris held views on the dignity of wolf kind and their place at the top of the food chain. His disdain for cats had been apparent a few times when he had noticed the cats kept in the keep to kill rats. Luckily, the cats were smart enough to stay away from him.

*Well that and I suppose that the entire supply of cats in the keep would be barely half a meal for Fenris, at this point.* Margaery thought sardonically. There was a reason why he and Ranma went hunting every week after all and it wasn't all for pleasure. Luckily, like wolves in the wild, neither Fenris nor Lady had to eat everyday even if they were growing as Fenris still was.

But it wasn't Fenris who Margaery concentrated on. That was the young Princess, whose eyes were glued to Ranma who was running through one of his unarmed exercises for Tommen, who was also watching intently. The look of adoration and desire in her eyes was easy to see, as was the small towel she held pressed against the front of her dress. *It would seem as if it is time to put the little Princess in her place.*

With that in mind, she walked up, keeping in sight Fenris's sight, who had raised his head to look at her. The direwolf still hadn't become accustomed to her honeysuckle perfume, apparently, though at least she knew the reasoning behind it now. Hearing the tale of how he had been forced to run away from a bee's nest had amused her and won him some sympathy as well. "Hello, Fenris." she said simply, before looking down at the Princess. "Hello, Princess. I take it your lessons let out early? That dress is lovely, I'm sure you'll grow into it."

Margaery crossed her arms underneath her chest to accentuate her own curves giving the Tyrell girl's words an extra edge. Merry was not blind to this, and she snarled inside her head. *Oh, it's on, you High Garden bitch.* Still, she didn't let her thoughts show; knowing full well how this game was played. After all, she wasn't the only girl at court. There were several other young ladies who had traded barbs with her like this. And her mother was a past master at this type of warfare.

So she smiled pleasantly and replied in sugar-sweet tones. "Yes, Your Grace, I was let out of lessons early because I finished all the work for the day. And I like your dress as well." Myrcella went on, still smiling but much more thinly. "But I seem to have seen that style of cut before...where was it...oh yes, I think it was on one of the ladies I saw this morning leaving my father's chambers."

That blow struck home and Margaery glared at her for a moment before getting control of her face once again. The speed of that response had startled her but she reposted easily. "Yes, well, trust me when I say that when you have curves to flaunt, you will occasionally dress to do so. I hope that when you do, there will be a man as good as Ranma still out there for you."

"But that is well into the future, until then I can have fun when I have time." Merry replied laughing, pressing her momentary advantage. "Did you enjoy spending time with Joffrey, by the way? You spend so much of your time with him, is it any wonder he finds himself torn between you and Sansa? Poor Ranma, losing his fiancé to my brother. I'll have to console Sansa when my mother prevails on my father and switches the engagement between our houses to Ranma and myself."

"Oh, don't be in such a rush to leap to that conclusion. While I find Joffrey's personality fascinating, he is a little young

and unformed for my tastes." Bald faced lie, but Margaery swallowed it and moved on. "On the other hand, I find Ranma attractive on many levels and, similarly, he would obviously prefer to stay with someone who has already blossomed into a rose rather than having to wait years to taste the flowers nectar."

The two girls exchanged pained smiles, while Fenris wondered why he felt the desire to run away. There was some kind of combat going on between the two female two legs (yes he knew they called themselves humans, but those funny legs of theirs always amused Fenris). But what kind of combat was beyond his ken. He let out a brief huff of relief as he noticed Ranma and young Tommen coming over towards them.

Tommy grinned as he greeted both of the girls with a beaming smile while Ranma's smile was smaller but just as welcoming. "Hey you two," he said, ruffling Merry's hair with a gentle hand as he plucked the towel out of her fingers to toss at Tommy's head with the other.

The younger boy caught it reflexively, smiling as he began to wipe his forehead and face of sweat. Under Ranma's tutelage, Tommen had become a small sparkplug of muscle, the baby fat almost entirely disappearing over the last few months. His hands were developing the calluses of long practices with a practice sword.

Ranma smiled at the two ladies, then frowned slightly as he felt the tension in the air between them. "Is... is something wrong?"

"Nothing at all." they both replied.

Margaery move forward quickly, grabbing Ranma's arm and pressing it deliberately against her chest, causing him to blush a little before moving away slightly to take his hand in hers. She shot Myrcella a look before smiling up at Ranma. "I was just wondering if you were free to go down into the city with me."

"Oh!" Myrcella said pouting and emphasizing her cute looks with ease. "I was hoping that you and Tommy would like to play a few sports games with me. I, too, would like to get some exercise in, after all."

Ranma looked between the two girls, wondering where the heck this was coming from and if the tension between them was what he feared. Both of them were trying to do the puppy dog eyes attack on him, with varying degrees of success. He was about to try to come up with some compromise when a voice hailed him from the entrance to the training area.

"Ranma!" said Ser Jory as he walked towards them. "Your father would like a word with you. He needs some help with the books and his secretary has already been sent off on an errand."

Ranma nodded, not letting any of his relief show. "I'll be right there." He looked apologetically at Margaery and Myrcella. "Sorry you two, duty calls and all that." He looked over at Jaime, who had been leaning against the wall next to Ser Oakheart observing the training going on between his charge of the day and Ranma.

The Kingslayer smirked at Ranma, thinking the northern bumpkin had no idea what was going on between the two girls but having himself heard every word of it. When he later related the episode to his sister, Cersei had simply laughed, waving it off as inconsequential while seeing her daughter's affections for him as another way she could control Ranma or influence his actions.

Still, when Ranma asked if the two of them could return Tommen and Myrcella to the holdfast for him, he smirked. "We'll undertake this arduous journey of course, wouldn't want to keep you from the even more arduous journey into the land of numbers and rigged books after all."

Ranma smirked at him, shaking his head. The Kingslayer was an enigma to him in many ways but, in some other ways, they were remarkably alike. Jaime held his martial prowess as the center point of his self-image, much like Ranma. And Ranma knew that Jaime had been challenged by Ranma's easy physical dominance. The other man tried to hide it but he was obviously using Ranma's training methods to train himself and Ranma was interested to see how good he could become. *That isn't to say that the training will help him all that much in closing the gap,* Ranma thought complacently to himself.

With a final pat on the head for Tommy and a smile for Merry and Margaery, Ranma moved off leaving the two girls to stare at one another. Margaery huffed, then turned away followed by septa Nysterica, who had been watching from nearby throughout the entire exchange. Myrcella also turned with a huff, with Sir Oakheart moving to catch up with her as she walked briskly away.

Tommen looked up at his uncle, head cocked to one side. "Did I miss something there?"

OOOOOO

*There's some kind of tension in the air these days* Ranma reflected while he moved down the streets with Margaery beside him, a few days after that incident. *And I'm not just thinking about the tension between Margaery and Merry.*

That wasn't the most worrisome tension, though it was one Ranma didn't really know how to deal with. Yes, he was technically engaged to Margaery but they had an understanding there and neither of them were going to push things forward until she got the go ahead and Ranma knew he could trust her. He trusted her **opinion** now and, generally speaking, felt firm in their friendship but she had never tried to hide the fact that she was still playing the game and still under orders from her grandmother. To fully trust her, Ranma would have to trust her grandmother and that just was not going to happen.

On the other hand, his feelings for Myrcella were that of a little sister. Oh, she was growing up to be quite cute but she was still much younger than he was and he had seen her as a little girl since the moment they met. Despite the incident during the tournaments, that hadn't changed. This was added to the fact that in his previous life he had been in a world where a relationship with a girl her age would be seen as unlawful and immoral.

So Ranma had decided to simply stay out of it as much as he could, not seeing any way he could step in without taking sides or, at least, seeming to take sides and thereby cause hurt feelings.

"What are you thinking about so hard?" Margaery asked now, smirking slightly. "I can almost see the smoke coming from your ears."

"Tension." Ranma said placidly, "All sorts. By the way, if we're keeping score, Merry's little victory yesterday puts her ahead of you by one." Merry had scored a hit in comparing Margaery to a flower, the man eating sort, which had caused everyone who heard it to chuckle until Margaery's glare found them.

"I'm not going to even comment on that." Margaery said huffily. Her next words, however, came out much more seriously and she leaned in slightly so that she could talk more quietly, the hubbub of city life going on all around them masking their words further. "But you're right; there is tension in the air, and not just between you and Joffrey. Would I be correct in thinking that your father is continuing to make headway on the small counsel?"

"Yep." Ranma nodded. "Though I wonder if that's all that is behind the tension I'm feeling."

Given his propensity towards acting swiftly, and his friendship with the two younger Baratheons, neither Eddard nor Brynden had shared with Ranma their concerns about the children's parentage. They didn't have definitive proof, just yet, but even without the book, Ned was leaning towards his worries there being fact in at least Joffrey's case.

The only problem was, he couldn't figure out if the other two children weren't Robert's as well. Tommen had begun to act like Robert in many ways but whether that was because his natural Baratheon side was coming out or because of Ranma's influence, Ned couldn't tell. And what of Myrcella? She certainly looked more like her mother but her nature was certainly nowhere near Cersei's. She had even begun to show interest in riding and other pursuits, much like, Ned supposed, a Baratheon daughter would.

That problem was compounded by two other factors, who the father could be and the reasoning behind the affair, if it was one, as well as whether or not it was in any way connected to Jon Arryn's death. They had supposition, they supposed that it might have been the Grand Maester who poisoned Jon but the how of it eluded them, since none of the servants who had served in the castle before they arrived had been able to tell them anything.

Ranma knew nothing of this, yet. "But I don't know if that's all of it. The other bit that could be making the Lannister's angry is still my execution of Gregor. Certainly that little shit Lancel hasn't hidden the fact that he didn't like it."

*That was true enough*, Margaery reflected. Despite being sat on by Cersei more than once like last week, Lancel was still showing his hatred for Ranma at every opportunity and insisting that, while Gregor was not an individual he particularly cared for, he was still a banner man of the Lannister's and should have been treated as such. Letting the wild Stark boy cut him down as he had in public was a sign of contempt for the family. He hadn't yet gone beyond spouting off however.

"How is your uncle, by the way?" Margaery asked solicitously, changing the subject.

"Blackfish is fine, he's as tough as old nails." Ranma said laughing quietly. "On the other hand, it's to be hoped that they will eventually stop pussyfooting about and come out into the open."

Brynden had once again been ambushed by a group of 'cut purses' the previous night, but this time it was more



serious. They lost two men and Brynden had taken a knife thrust to the chest thankfully he had been wearing chainmail under his leather jerkin. Ranma, too, had been nearby watching him and struck down several of the attackers with thrown bricks. Despite this, Brynden hadn't been able to discover who was employing the sell-swords in the city. But now that they had the Gold Cloaks nominally on their side, with Janos in jail for corruption, they didn't have the numbers to bother the Stark faction.

Margaery smiled at Ranma, knowing that Ranma was simply telling the truth as he saw it. Despite her best efforts, Ranma still was a dragon in a hayloft. He could play the political game but disdained it. She worried that Ranma and Ned were stepping on far too many toes but she lacked the control necessary to stop them or the reasoning to do so. And there was the fact that Ned was removing corruption from the city at nearly every level, including actually making the Gold Cloaks somewhat respectable for the first time in centuries.

"There you are, dear sister," said a gay voice behind them as they walked along the Street of Flour. They turned to see Loras walking towards them. Both cocked their heads as one, wondering why he was searching for Margaery. "Ranma, might I bespeak my sister alone for a moment?" the Rose Knight asked, as he walked up to them.

Ranma shrugged and nodded, moving over to look at a display of pastries, wondering which to get Sansa. The two of them were much closer than they had been before Gregor's assassination, and Ranma was always finding excuses to keep his little sister away from Joffrey as much as possible.

Behind him, Loras turned back to his sister his face strangely serious. "There was a raven this morning from High Garden. There is a family emergency and you and I have been called to return."

Margaery frowned angrily, reading between the lines. That was an excuse, of course, one that might pass muster with Ranma and his father, and maybe the rest of the court but what was the real reason? "I presume she said something more?" Margaery didn't need to say who she was, there was no need.

Her older brother shrugged. "She didn't say much but when we return to the keep you can read it yourself. She wrote this odd, sort of sing-song line. 'The brighter the flame, the faster the candle burns.'" Margaery winced, understanding the metaphor and Loras smirked thinly. "Reading between the lines I think that our dear grandmother is afraid that Ranma and his father are going to come under attack shortly and she's removing you from the area."

"There has to be something more to it. Was there any formal notice of a break of the engagement? I know that Lord Stark has been pushing for a timeframe." Ned had actually been hinting that perhaps a wedding for her and Ranma, paid by the Starks and Tyrells, should happen before the marriage of Joffrey to Sansa since the country was still in debt. Neither Ranma nor Margaery had encouraged or discouraged that thought.

"No, though this could just be a move to gain us more time in that area." Loras frowned slightly, looking over at Ranma. "Although, second hand news of the Mountain's demise probably has something to do with it. Grandmother would obviously not risk you near someone who would act so precipitously."

"Tactful as always, brother dear. Secondhand it probably sounds like Ranma's insane! Hmm...I wonder who else is reporting to her."

"Well your chaperone for one." That caused Margaery to look at him, then nod in understanding. Margaery had known the woman was sending messages but the depth of said messages was up in the air. "Perhaps others. But sister dear, there is no doubt about the fact that grandmother wants us home soonest. In fact, we are to leave tomorrow."

"That quickly?" Margaery asked, dismayed. Leaving that quickly meant Olenna really was removing her from Ranma's presence. *Could she be worried about how much influence he is having on me rather than the opposite?* With a start Margaery realized she hadn't flirted or made time to interact with the Prince at all, ever since her low key war with Myrcella began. *Maybe he is influencing me more than I should be allowing but, damn it, between the two there is just no comparison!*

Loras nodded morosely himself. Loras knew for a fact they hadn't even kissed yet (he had no idea what had happened during the tournament but that truly was all that had happened between Margaery and Ranma). So while Margaery was leaving only her possible future husband, Loras was leaving his lover behind and probably wouldn't be able to see him again for at least half a year. "Indeed, though why she wants me to return with you is another question entirely."

It didn't occur to either of them that Olenna was angry at both of them for the same reason: that they had publicly chosen sides in the fight between the Lannisters and Starks. Loras, while nowhere as close to Ranma as he was to

Renly, did spend a lot of time with him, after all, which had implications for those who wanted to see them.

Margaery looked over to where Ranma was exchanging a joke with the elderly woman who ran the pastry stall he was currently looking at, sighing faintly. *Now why can't my grandmother be like that, all smiles and niceness and incidentally, staying out of my business?! Still, I suppose from her perspective I am not performing as well as I should in the task she assigned me. But I dare her to meet the two in person and then tell me Joffrey's the better prize!*

Still, such thoughts were immaterial for now and she sighed again, moving over to tell Ranma the bad news. Ranma took it with aplomb. While he was certainly attracted to Margaery, he wasn't madly in love with her, so had no problems with Olenna calling Margaery home, whatever the reason. "Still," he said as they made their way back up to the keep, "I will miss your advice, you've been an amazing help here with the court and politics. And our chess games. I'm still sorry for teaching you how to play cards, though."

Margaery laughed, shaking her head, but wondered why the fact that Ranma acknowledged her advice and council made her smile more than many a flowery word of praise for her beauty had done before.

The very next day, as the sun was rising, Loras, Margaery, and twenty knights of High Garden, along with several other nobles who had stayed after the tournament, left Kings Landing. Ranma watched them go, wondering why he felt this was the start of even more momentous events in the future, whether he liked it or not. A week later, another message arrived, stating that the marriage between him and Margaery was put on hold until the 'family crisis' was resolved.

OOOOOO

Lord Tywin Lannister was the definitive Lord of Westerlands, one of the most populous and certainly the richest thanks to its gold mines, all of which his family controlled entirely. Tywin barely made gesture of being under the Iron Throne's purview. After all, Robert would not, possibly, be sitting on that throne without Lannister aid, and that didn't even consider the two million gold dragon debt the Iron Throne had fallen into to his family since Robert took control of that monstrosity.

He was a spare man, tall, slender, with somewhat broad shoulders. His head was shaved bald, a sharp contrast to his bushy golden side whiskers. His eyes, green eyes as all Lannister's had, were flecked with bits of gold, a sign, some said, of the main source of his family's power. Of course, they also said other, more derogatory things, but never to his face or where anyone loyal to him could hear. Tywin was not a man to allow such slanders against his person or that of his family.

He had been Hand of the King under Aerys, only to resign in anger when the King allowed Jaime to join the Kingsguard thus removing him from the line of succession. He was a cold, calculating man, who always remembered slights against his person or that of his family and repaid them double. This is what he was contemplating now, after having read a note from Grand Maester Pycelle.

His hand crumpled it in a show of anger he would only rarely allow anyone else to see. Turning from his desk, he stared out over Casterly Rock. This was the seat of Lannister power, the almost unassailable keep that his family had ruled from ever since the Age of Heroes. It was a massive castle carved out of a massive stone hill, made even more formidable by tall stone walls and a keep up on the top of it. Tywin's study was set into one of the towers of that keep, letting him look over Lannisport, a sprawling port city, one of the largest cities in Westeros.

Tywin's thoughts were not on what he was seeing but what the message from his agent said. *This cannot go unanswered*, he thought coldly. *Regardless of this wolf whelp's reasoning, Gregor was my tool and any attack on his person in such a manner is an attack on me. What is worse, it means that I have lost control of the Castle Clegane. It isn't the most strategically important but I have invested time and effort into it and the number of men-at-arms there. It is always a good idea to have tools to act in matters that you would not want to get back to you and yet be believable in such a way.*

*Its war chest was also very large for that same reason and I dislike throwing money into endeavors that will not pay back such investment later on. I will have to send someone to collect it before the new Lord can be invested. Sandor might think he hid his thoughts about me in the past but he has never been as good at that as he thinks. His disdain for me is clear even if he might feel some loyalty towards my grandson the prince. And I doubt his loyalties there, either to my daughter or to her first born, are anything more than skin deep.*

*But just because he is the last male in a direct line does not mean he is the only one who can inherit. One of the more distant cousins will do much better in my opinion, and, of course, his loyalty will not be in question.* Tywin turned back to his desk for a moment, writing out nine, nearly identical notes, orders for a few brigands down in Lannisport to ride

out and intercept Sandor.

With that minor task accomplished, Tywin turned his attention back to Gregor's death and what it might be a sign of. The Grand Maester's letter had been very detailed, several pages of tight, concise handwriting, as Tywin expected from one of the men who had served him for so long. Pycelle had been his ally while he was the old King's Hand and that had never faded. The notes detailed the way Eddard Stark had been able to cut into the amount of support the Lannisters had in the capital.

It wasn't a personal attack by the new Hand, Tywin was almost certain of that. Eddard Stark wasn't one to attack another family in such a manner without reason and the little disturbance with that fool Greenfield nearly killing his son wouldn't be enough of one to set Stark against Tywin. Not when such would set Westeros at war again. Eddard was an honest and upright individual, one who would simply see getting rid of corruption in the government as part of his duty as the Hand.

*But the reasons don't matter, only the outcomes. He is curtailing my family's power and that must be stopped. This death of Gregor, public as it was, was meant to instill fear. There can be no other reason whatever my daughter might think.*

He gently tapped the note that had been below Pycelle's, snorting softly. He wouldn't believe a word of it, except that the Grand Maester had detailed the way, Gregor had simply been taken apart by the young wolf. *This boy might indeed be a throwback to though age of legends but we are not living in battle age anymore, my daughter. Your attempts to control the boy seem to have failed, though I will commend you for the subtlety of the game you have so far played with him to attempt to do so.*

Of course, Cersei hadn't actually come right out and said that she had been attempting to flirt with Ranma and use her body to control them but she had hinted at it as well as the idea that it had disgusted her at the time but wasn't a task she was willing to give to anyone else. There was no hint of the fact that Cersei had enjoyed it, and in fact still generally enjoyed it whenever she had the opportunity to see his reactions to her little tricks. Such a thing wasn't anything she wanted to share with her father or anyone else, for that matter.

Tywin was also mildly impressed that his daughter had kept her cool at the very idea of the older Joffrey being passed over for Tommen. She was candid about it, sharing with her father everything she knew about that, though she didn't hint at the reason why Robert was thinking about it other than he seemed to get along with his younger son. *A younger son who has been trained by Ranma Stark.*

*No, it is clear that Ranma Stark is his father's creature and this was clearly a starting gambit in a game against our family. He wants to clean up everything in Kings Landing and remove all of our influence with the King. Such cannot be allowed, and it comes down to two points. One: Ned's ongoing crusade in the small counsel and in the city as a whole. Two: his influence over the King. I am limited in what I can do there, though I will send messages to the Grand Maester to take any and all **deniable** action to curtail it or to attack him in turn. This cold war between our faction's spies is going to heat up quickly, something I doubt Eddard Stark, or even Blackfish Tully, will be prepared for.*

*But my daughter is correct. Any physical confrontation in the city, where he could use his strength and fighting skills in point assault or defense, will require Ranma to be removed beforehand. I will send a few specialists to deal with that. They might not be Faceless Men but they are very good at their jobs. And if they do not succeed, I will employ a sorrowful man, almost as good and only half as expensive. However, that would take at least a year to set up, whereas I could get my own agents there in four months' time. Though, even that will be quick work. I'll have to use one of my prepared horse relays, irritating, but necessary.*

*And if the first fails, the second will switch to attempting to assassinate Brynden Tully. That man is too intelligent to let lose where he can aid Eddard Stark.*

He frowned thoughtfully. Cersei and the Grand Maester had different opinions about two areas. One was the importance of the small counsel and influence on that rather than influence with the King but Tywin understood that was simply their different areas of experience. But the other area they didn't agree on was where precisely despite Varys and Petyr were in this ongoing conflict.

Cersei thought that both of them were largely neutral but that Littlefinger was worried about his own pie and might be willing to work with them but shouldn't be trusted. The Spider, however, she said was firmly on their side, with the opinion that she had some dirt on him and vice-versa. Tywin was uncertain of that. He did not know the young Littlefinger as well as he could wish.

Pycelle was of the opinion however that both of them were only looking out for themselves, and that no attempt at

alliance there would profit. 'Littlefinger hides it well', he wrote, 'but he thinks he is the most intelligent person in the room and, at times, I am afraid I might agree with him. Baelish is playing his own game, a long game. He certainly is not the type to follow another's lead without profit, both in the long and short term.'

*Still, neither of them will be able to affect my plans for the Stark boy, unless they find out and warn him of my assassins. Yet, if they are able to do that, then the assassins would not prove worth the money I would pay the men in that event. Remove the Starks and they will either fall back in line or be removed with ease.*

He frowned thoughtfully, tapping one finger against his temple as he did so. *Things are changing. Our power is being eroded in Kings Landing and in such a way that it must be addressed. I would not be against the idea of the younger Tommen taking the throne over Joffrey as he is part lion as well but the influence Ranma and, through him, his father has over the lad makes that untenable. Plus the fact that they might be close to forging an alliance with the Reach.*

(The message he had received had been sent weeks before Margaery and Loras had been recalled to High Garden.)

*No, I must take firm and above all well-thought-out action to halt this. The assassins and such will be one arrow in my quiver but I will need more shots. I am afraid the Riverlands are about to have an outbreak of brigandage. Luckily, Gregor was not my only tool for this sort of action.*

He turned back to his desk, writing out two notes. One would be sent to House Lorch, the other to a mercenary company that called themselves the Brave Companions, though everyone else called them the Mummer's. They were even now in Lannisport. He always kept such men around, just in case.

*They can field three hundred men and are just the sort for this operation, plus their leader Hoat is more cunning than he appears. They will move into the Riverlands disguised as bandits raiding the area along our shared borders. I will naturally respond but my men, under Lorch, will not be able to pin the 'bandits' in place.*

*Because they will be raiding on both sides of our borders, 'getting through the mountain passes somehow,' the Riverlanders will call to the King for aid. To keep the conflict from spreading, he will have to respond. And who should he send on such but the young man who has proven himself such a warrior? And when he does, my men will pounce on him and whatever force he leads along with the mercenaries, overwhelming them with numbers and surprise.*

*One-on-one, this Ranma Stark is obviously formidable or even in a melee but from ambush at arrow range? Or the open field? He will find that his brute force powers will not save him.*

The letter to Lorch only took him a few minutes to write out. Once word, and rumor was the one thing that traveled faster than raven's wings, reached him that his old compatriot in blood and rapine was executed Amory would jump at the chance to kill the man who did it.

The one to Hoat took longer, since he needed to tell the man how far into the Riverlands he could raid, as well as what he couldn't do and what would happen to him personally if his company of mercenaries disobeyed. With men like that, it was necessary to make certain they knew where they stood.

After that Tywin sealed both messages with wax, but did not stamp either with his personal seal. They would each be sent by a tried and tested manner, such a way that neither man would have any doubt it came from him, but it would not be officially seen as such. Then he created another message, this one to the Reach, and Olenna Redwyne, which he did affix his personal seal to.

Finishing that last message, Tywin then rang a small bell, a manservant appeared, and began to send his arrows into the air. However, other archers were in this game.

OOOOOO

"Why in the world would your brother ask for that much alchemist's fire, your grace?" asked Petyr, looking over at the Queen where she sat next to the King at the head of the council table after Lord Stark had just read aloud two messages from the Wall, detailing what was happening there.

Normally Robert wouldn't bother showing up for these meetings but he was here today at the behest of Varys, who had remained silent since the messages from the Wall had grabbed everyone's attention. Petyr had a good idea of what the Spider wanted to share and, while it was interesting and he would have to make allowances in his plans going forward, he had his mind on other things. The need to remove Ranma from the city was centermost in his thoughts, and he hoped the news from the Wall would be enough to force Eddard to send his son to the Wall to take command of the defense.

Before Cersei could answer, Ranma, who was part of the small counsel today because his father wanted his input on the missive from the Wall, shrugged. "I'm betting the little man has planned something big with his siege weapons. A little disturbing really, imagining what alchemist's fire could do to an invading army, but effective." Ranma mentally likened alchemists' fire to Greek fire, the weapon that made the Greek fleets so frightening for so long, and he was not far off in that assumption.

"We'll have to be very careful in transporting it, that liquid is extremely volatile, the older it gets, the worse that problem becomes." Cersei said thoughtfully, tapping the raven-delivered note in front of her. She hated to even be reminded of her younger brother, but this was actually happy news for her. *It seems as if he is making a place for himself among the northern barbarians. Now if only he would stay there,* she thought.

"We can also use this opportunity to empty the prisons of those on death row, unless they choose death, of course. They can all go to the Wall to join the Night's Watch and then we can send them up by ship." Ser Barristan said, speaking up for once.

"I've always thought that was strange, actually." Ranma replied, shrugging. "It might be hardship duty but guarding the Wall is an honor and we give it to murderers, rapists, and thieves? We may wish to look into creating a new order of knighthood based upon guarding the Wall in the future."

"Some other time, perhaps." Cersei said smiling faintly at the younger man, thinking how she could use such an 'honor' to keep Tyrion at the Wall and far away from herself and her children. "Do you think we should send aid immediately or wait for the next scheduled recruiter to stop into the city?"

"I could wish we could send more aid than that. Spend a week or so to gather the alchemist's fire, search for volunteers among the alchemists, and then send them and the prisoners up by ship to Eastwatch by the Sea." Eddard responded for his son, before turning and looking at the king. "Then send messages to all nations of Westeros, telling the ruling houses to send men up to the Wall. This is an invasion, and all the lands must make aid the North in repelling it."

"I still contend that this is nothing that would warrant such a momentous move." Said Varys, pointedly looking over at the King. "The kingdom can ill afford to send men to the Wall given how in debt the nation is still, despite your efforts Lord Stark. And most especially with the murmurings my spies are now reporting, not just in various nations here, but also from across the ocean in Essos."

Robert's face flushed angrily. The Spider had shared several whispers from the Crown Lands, Dorne, and a few from the Vale of lesser nobles suddenly having Essos coins aplenty in their coffers, as well as murmurs of the Targaryens rising once again to return and reclaim their throne. "Have you found the reason for those Dragon lovers moving as they are?"

"I have indeed." Varys replied, his eyes opaque. "News has reached my web that the two Targaryen survivors have found a sponsor in one of the richest magisters of Pentos. Viserys is working hard on creating an alliance with many of the other magisters and is using their factors to contact sympathetic lords here in Westeros. This magister has also arranged for Daenerys to be married to one of the Dothraki war lords in an effort to weld the power of his horde to their efforts..."

'Ours is the Fury' was not just the motto of House Baratheon but also a good description of the line's fiery anger. That anger came out now. Robert roared angrily, slamming his large hands down on the council table so hard it bounced up slightly afterward from the recoil. "**I'll not have it!** I won't have some Targaryen **bitch** breeding out little dragons with a barbarian horde at her back to threaten my throne!"

"She's but a child Robert," Ned protested, "and the Dothraki will never cross the ocean. Move against the Targaryen supporters perhaps, prove we know of their dealings, but the two Targaryens are nothing worth bothering about."

"Children grow up and I'll not allow this one to grow anymore!" Robert growled. "No, we remove the little bitch and the conspirators here in Westeros will crawl back into their holes!"

"We could buy the services of a Faceless Man to send after her." Renly murmured. "I understand they are the best of the best when it comes to such."

"We could pay for a dozen normal assassins for the price of one Faceless!" Petyr protested. "Our coffers do not allow for such abuse!"

"She. Is. Just. A. Child!" Ned stated, each word coming out as if hewed from rock. "A child who has probably grown

up hearing of Baratheon, Lannister, and Stark ogres from her brother. No, remove their allies here in Westeros, remove this patron perhaps. Let the girl live out her life among the Dothraki, she is not a threat..."

"**NEVER!**" Robert bellowed, interrupting his friend, his eyes now more red than his normal drunkenness could allow for, both hands pounding the table once more. "Never! I'll not allow the Targaryen's to rise again, not after what they did! We'll send an assassin after this girl and her brother, cut off the dragons head once and for all!"

Ranma had heretofore been silent but as the bellowing continued that very silence made Ser Barristan notice him. The old knight shifted uncomfortably, as he saw the pure, cold anger in the boy's face, wondering what he was going to say, and suddenly feeling rather guilty about not having spoken up himself.

When Ranma spoke, it was in an even tone of voice but that very normality lent his words even more impact as it cut through the ongoing bellowing of the king. "Your Majesty, a month past I executed a rapist and murderer for the memory of the children he slaughtered. And I am willing to do the same to anyone who orders that same act."

The casual way Ranma had threatened the King stopped all thought processes around the table for a moment, and he continued, his eyes boring into the King's. "My father is right; this Daenerys is but a young girl, who has probably been fed on lies and propaganda from her brother her whole life. She had nothing to do with what her older brother Rhaegar or her father the former king did, Your Grace. Do not take out your hate on her for their misdeeds."

The King's face reddened with fury at Ranma's biting tone and his words but Eddard spoke before he could. "While my son was far too combative in his words, his meaning is my own. If you do this Robert, we are **through**. I will resign as Hand and return to Winterfell, taking my daughter with me. I will never allow her to marry into a house that would condone such immoral methods."

His friend looked at him his raging fury making his stare like that of a bull about to charge. Yet Ned continued, his voice as cold as winter but passionate for all of that as he stared into the King's furious eyes. "I **still** have nightmares about what the Lannisters did to Kings Landing, the burning of the city, the screams of the men and women, the bodies of the Royal children butchered by Clegane and Lorch. How the blood had soaked through the red of the blankets they used to try to cover the bodies up. I will not, I **cannot**, be party to the killing of more children, no matter their heritage."

Petyr struck before the King could explode again. It was too perfect, too easy, despite not having been planned at all. "Perhaps we need to think about this, Your Majesty. I know the anger you hold toward House Targaryen, yet it is fact that if you send an assassin after this girl, you send the message that you fear her. That isn't considering the fact that the assassin might fail. And there are Targaryen loyalists among the Crown Lands and Dorne, more than any of us would like to admit there to being. Dorne in particular is a thorny issue."

That won him some nods around the table, even Robert acknowledged that point, calming down slightly. Dorne was truly a land apart in many ways, even more independent than the North from the power of the Iron Throne. What was worse in many ways for the King was that the Dorne were all, to a greater or lesser degree, Targaryen loyalists. They might have lost the greater portion of the forces arrayed against Robert in his rebellion but that had been barely a fifth of Dorne's total military strength. If House Martell rose in true rebellion, then it would mean war once more.

Worse, Dorne was extremely difficult to invade. Even if you got through the mountain passes that protected it, the dessert was a daunting defense all on its own. The only way to conquer it would be to have partisans among the people, and Robert knew he had none of those.

"No," Petyr continued, knowing he had their attention now, even the King despite his choleric expression and furious glare at Eddard, who was ignoring his friend's anger to watch Petyr closely. "There is a better solution. We should send an agent yes, but one to capture and return Daenerys and Viserys if possible to the King's... protection if they are not actively working to come back to reclaim the Iron Throne. If they are not, if they are mere figureheads, then a few vows here and there as well as having them under our power would be enough to insure their loyalty and the loyalty of those who would look askance at more...final solutions. And if either is actively plotting a return through conquest, either through use of the Dothraki or more subversive means, then our agent can take what action he deems necessary."

Petyr's eyes flicked just once over at Ranma, as he smiled thinly. Inside, however, he was crowing in victory. "And I think we have just such a capable agent sitting with us right now. One who has already proven to hold honor in high regard. So what say you, young Stark? Would you be up to the task?"

The King guffawed, some of his good humor returning to him even as Ned and Ranma stiffened. "Hah, yes! That's a fine solution, Littlefinger!" He looked over at father and son, his eyes still showing a spark of anger at the way Ranma

had spoken to him. "After all, boy, despite the training you're giving Tommen, you've no real reason to remain here now that your engagement to the Tyrell girl has been postponed during this family crisis of theirs. You've proven yourself a warrior with few equals, you can think on your feet, and I bet you can even sneak around with the best of them!"

His eyes narrowed, showing even more of his fury at the way Ranma had spoken and at the very idea of the Targaryens trying to reclaim their throne. "You'll leave tomorrow. Your mission is to find these Targaryen lizards and, if they are willingly conniving to return to Westeros, to kill them. If it is only one or if they are simply being used to foment trouble, you're to return with the Stormborn bitch as your prisoner, to become a ward of the crown. Is that understood?"

Ranma's teeth clenched angrily and he shot a look at his father, who, after a fulminating moment, simply nodded jerkily. "Good." Robert snarled, pushing to his feet. "All this talk of the fire lovers has put my mind out of joint. I'm off to hunt something."

They all stood as the King stomped out, followed quickly by all the rest of the council. The Queen looked at both Stark men as she stood, shaking her head, though what she might be apologizing for, or if that was indeed what she was doing was up in the air. Ser Barristan paused as well, staring searchingly at Ranma, with something close to regret flashing across his iron face, before he too left.

Father and son sat there for a moment in silence before Ranma shook his head. "I'm sorry father, I spoke out of turn."

"Don't, who could have predicted Littlefinger would make such a suggestion. And what you said was true enough, there is no honor in planning the murder of children, regardless of their lineage." Ned sighed sadly, shaking his head. "Robert is a good man despite his vices, but he is consumed with unreasoning hatred for all things Targaryen."

With another shake, Ned began to lead the way out of the council room. "Come, we need to meet with Brynden and think what this could mean for our plans going forward, as well as prepare you for your trip. And I believe you have two Royal children to say your goodbyes to, as well as your sister."

Ned thought once more about telling Ranma his concerns where it came to the royal children, and after a moment's reflection decided to share his fears solely about Joffrey with him in a letter once Ranma got out to sea. After all, Ranma's disgust with Joffrey was already plain to see, and his son could be unpredictable about such things.

But until he had proof, in particular knowledge of what line, Lannister or Baratheon, always stamped its mark on the children of that pairing, he would not make the accusation against all three Baratheon children. And he had become fond of both younger children as well, and would not want them to be cast out as illegitimate, which was the nicest thing that could happen to them if that was indeed the case.

*Joffrey however, there is nothing in him to indicate he shares Baratheon blood. Though that still leaves the problem of who his father is, and the circumstances behind it. He frowned as he stood up, worrying at that problem for a moment once more before turning to more immediate problems. And Brynden and I need to prepare contingency plans as well.*

Ranma groaned at the idea of saying goodbye to the youngsters but nodded and followed his father out.

None of the small council, not even Petyr, noticed Obara Sand, where she had hidden herself inside an alcove while the small council met. As she carefully left the chamber, she mused to herself. *Interesting. Very interesting. I need to find Arianne. If she and I can sneak aboard his ship...*

OOOOOO

As the King ordered, the next day Ranma boarded a trading galley bound for Pentos that Varys had supplied the name of. He stood by the railing with Fenris beside him, waving goodbye to his family and the Royals, all of whom, even Joffrey, had come down to see him off.

Myrcella and Tommen in particular looked weepy; his farewells to both had been difficult to say the least. Tommen had made him promise to come back as soon as he could, while Myrcella had stolen another kiss from him as he hugged her farewell. Both of them felt this was a horrible idea on many levels but Myrcella was personally gripped by a horrible premonition of doom soon to come, though she couldn't quite describe where it would come from.

Sansa looked anxious and Ned had his stone face on, while Brynden was simply shaking his head, wondering how this adventure would pan out, not only for Ranma, but for all of them. Next to Sansa stood Joffrey, trying his best not

to appear victorious, hiding his thoughts under his mask with ease.

In one pocket, Ranma had a letter from his father, which he had asked Ranma to read as soon as he was out of sight of land, for some reason. Ranma knew it had something to do with his father's investigation, which he had been very careful to keep Ranma away from. Ranma wasn't certain why his father hadn't simply told him what he wanted to share, but he hadn't pushed.

The King and Queen were staring hard at him for different reasons. Cersei wasn't certain what to make of this good luck and how to best take advantage of it, or if she should at all, but she was going to do whatever it took to protect herself and her children. If that meant moving against Eddard now that his son was no longer around, Cersei would do it, if she could be certain of victory.

Robert however was simply glaring. He had been amused by Ranma's attitude more often than not but Ranma had crossed a line yesterday. On the other hand, if he returned with a prisoner or not this would solve the Targaryen issue forever, so he was relatively happy. Despite his anger at the boy, he knew he was an amazing warrior, who could see this mission through. "Take care boy and either bring us back a prisoner or a pair of heads!" He guffawed, turned on his horse and began to move back down the quay, the rest of the Royal party following after.

Ned and Brynden remained even as the sailors began to make sail, pushing away from the wharf. What none of the watchers knew, not even Varys or Petyr, was that in the hold were two stowaways, Obara and Arianne. Daemon had stayed behind to guard Tyene, who also remained to continue her job for Ned and his household.

The two women looked at one another, both dressed as men. This was something Obara pulled off much easier than Arianne, who had to wrap her chest almost to the point of being unable to breathe and pad her waist to hide her figure. "Well, we're away cousin, for better or worse. I hope this idea of yours works out as well as you hope."

Arianne smirked, subtly gesturing down at her body though it was covered with sailor's rags at present. "We will see this evening, won't we cousin?"

OOOOOO

For once, all the Stark siblings in currently residing in Winterfell were in the same place, outside the lord's bedroom. Early that evening, Lady Catelyn had gone into labor. Luckily, the midwives of Winterfell had long seen this coming and everything was running as smoothly as could be expected in such things. Not that you could tell that from the Stark siblings.

Jon had a firm hand on Shaggydog, who was whining and snarling in turns, feeling the anxiety in the air. Bran held Rickon on one shoulder, Summer pressing against both boys while Rickon looked around anxiously, worried about what was happening to his mother. Arya was pacing, with Nymeria beside her, from one end of the hallway to the other. More than once a maid had to ask them to move out of the way, as they raced in and out with clean linen and warm water.

It felt like an eternity for all of them, but in actuality, it was only an hour or so. Catelyn had always been able to give birth easily and, despite her adventures early on in the pregnancy, this time was no exception. The midwife came out, bearing a small bundle. She smiled at the children who all gathered around her, including Jon who she still thought of as that errant boy who would help Ranma steal apples from the kitchen. "My lords," she said grandly, "may I introduce you to your newest brother?"

End chapter

Hope everyone likes how things are turning out in the court, as well as the sudden skew turn at the end of the chapter. Cersei is still trying to play a soft game but is also preparing for more, while Petyr is willing to do the same so long as his position is secure. But Joffrey hasn't gotten that memo just yet, and has moved away from Cersei's control, though it remains to be seen if Petyr can take control of him in turn. And Ned and Brynden also have plans in place as well, though what those plans are or how effective, we shall have to see.

Also, I hope that everyone liked the view into what has been going on up North. Catelyn wasn't much of a character here but after her pregnancy will once again start to take part in things.

Let me say this about bows. I think, looking back at the history, it wasn't anything about the bows themselves per se that set 'English' bows apart, except possibly the size. What made them different, and so effective, was that the English saw them as battle winning weapons, rather than the weapons of the cowardly peasant. I get the impression, and tell me if you disagree, but the general idea in Westeros is the same sort of idiocy— cavalry is the king, while



archery isn't seen as important except in sieges. To put it bluntly Ranma is not of that opinion.

I really enjoyed the stuff about the Wall, though I still don't know if I'm doing Tyrion's character justice there. If you're a fan of the Imp, tell me what you think of him.

Something about the Others: yes, the Wall blocks their magic but they can move around it. However, what Dacey and Jon have theorized is what they think; it could turn out to not be the reality.

And whatever you are thinking is going to happen in Essos, probably won't be what actually happens. I could have continued to pile on more in this chapter, but the Essos/Daenerys section couldn't be added without including a cliffhanger, which I am loathe to do. Next chapter will see a lot of Daenerys and Ranma as well, with the attention shifting to them, and to King's Landing and other events in the south now that the Northern picture has been painted as it were.

Hope everyone liked reading it, have a happy Christmas, and as always, review please.

## \*Chapter 7\*: Chapter 7

I don't own Ranma or George R. R. Martin's work. If I did, let's just say the first would be very different and by this point the second would be done... and no, saying that never gets old.

I have looked into the majority of fics revolving around Daenerys and Robb (not pairing just one of the other as a main character) and found them sorely lacking. In fact there was only one or two that were any good, by which I mean not getting caught up in the drama/angst. I would like to read a story that concentrates on the warfare side of things as well as being Robb centric, but haven't found one, so if anyone has one they can think of, PM me the name of it. Mind you, I have pretty high standards for combat and warfare scenes/setup LOL. They are the scenes that come easiest to me, oddly enough.

Speaking of which, I was amused by how many reviews mentioned my impression of the longbow. I assure those worried about it that I don't think the longbow is a war winning weapon (except in the old game *Lords of the Realm 2*, heh), and others that I do know how good a weapon it truly is, I was more arguing that it is the tactics and strategy that wins, not a specific weapon's use. Also I wanted to make the point that cavalry is not on its own as effective as many people think. The roman infantry and combat engineers carved them an empire, which their later use of cavalry could not enlarge much. And whatever else, charges against prepared heavy infantry, that is infantry wielding polearms, have never worked unless the infantry formation was already broken. Cavalry has its place, but there is a reason infantry are called the kings of the battlefield, men on foot are simply more adaptable, and much less expensive, a horse eats more than a man after all, and cannot be grazed on the land and perform at their peak. In Westeros, the point is made several times that even among the Northerners, the cavalymen were seen as 'more important' than the infantry, because many of them were nobles and knights. That will not be the case going forward.

A combined arms force, which uses all the disparate units under its command as a unified, organized force, is far more dangerous than an enemy that relies overmuch on one tactic or one arm of their army.

I also got my first flame for this story! It was from a nameless guest, and basically said the story had turned to shit, then said the protagonist was dickless and an idiot. Wow. Someone put in a lot of work to come up with that. Really. LOL. So, yeah, dude, your review was deleted with prejudice.

I would like to give a shout out to Jessolt for his beta-reading. Without him this chapter, like my other works he has looked at, would not be nearly as good as they are. We are both human which means we no doubt missed some mistakes here and there, but it would be much worse without his efforts.

**Warning: Bad things** start to happen in this chapter, warning you all now.

### Chapter 7: The Pebbles Start Falling

"You had best have a convincing reason for my daughter not being with you, Oberyn, or else I may have to do away with the only remaining sibling I have." Prince Doran's voice was level, yet dangerous, his eyes locked on his hotheaded younger brother, who, for some reason, was carrying something covered by a cloth under one arm.

"Ah, but first, brother dear, I need to get you into a better mood to hear me out." Despite his brother's icy anger, Oberyn's voice was jaunty, full of good humor. "Ah, even the two week's voyage from King's Landing hasn't diminished my pleasure in this. There is nothing, **nothing** at all like a vendetta fulfilled!"

He went on, his voice suddenly becoming much more serious as he moved the box from where he had been carrying it under his arm, holding it with one hand underneath as the other gripped the loose cloth that covered it. "Doran, may I present... the head of the Mountain that Rode!" With that, he removed the cloth with a flourish, presenting the preserved head of the hated Ser Gregor, preserved in the blue fluid the alchemists had prepared to his brother.

Doran's eyes widened. His lips, which had been locked in a thin frown now quickly formed a grin, such a grin the likes of which he hadn't shown since boyhood. He leaned forward, taking the glass container from his brother reverently.

Turning it this way and that, he examined the head inside minutely, part of him almost certain this was a trick. After a moment, he looked up at his brother once more. "As an opening gambit to keep your own head on your shoulders, this would indeed take some beating, Oberyn." There was even a hint of true humor in Doran's voice but he had some control of himself again, which showed in his sharp old eyes. "It seems as if we have more to talk about than just my wayward daughter. What exactly is going on in King's Landing?"

"That will be quite a telling, brother, and all of it centers around Ranma Stark, his father, and the effect they are

having on the halls of power." Oberynd chuckled, shaking his head. "And that in turn is tied up with what your daughter is up to presently."

From there Oberynd went on to describe what he had seen occurring in King's Landing, not only about Ranma and his execution of the Mountain but all that he had heard or seen for himself. He didn't know everything, not having made any contacts in the court but he knew about Eddard's anti-corruption campaign and how many enemies it was winning Lord Stark.

He also knew that while there seemed to be friendship between Ranma and Margaery, the Rose of House Tyrell was also playing for the Crown Prince. And he had seen the friendship, almost the squire-ship, between the youngest Baratheon and Ranma. Oberynd had also noticed how unlike their father any of the Royal children seemed in countenance, though how alike in spirit they were he had no way of knowing.

Through all this, his older brother listened silently, asking no questions. Occasionally, Doran could not stop his eyes from twitching over to the head in its container, but he always turned away. He was a Prince, the ruler of his kingdom. He could not allow himself to be swayed by something like that, no matter how long his hatred for his sister's butchers had simmered. In that, Doran was utterly unlike his hotheaded kin.

Doran also knew things, plans going forward that he had long since made with allies both in Essos and Westeros that made any idea of allying with the Starks premature. *Let the wolves beard the lions in their den and weaken both families. A scorpion knows how to wait, to plan, and to hide until it is in position to deal a fatal blow.*

Oberynd finished by saying. "And so brother, I think Arianne is on the right track. Influencing the Stark heir can influence young Tommen, killing two birds with one arrow, let alone gaining us an ally. Tyrell has overreached badly. If we can but take advantage of their arrogance, step forward with our own offer, a real one, to House Stark, then we will gain much influence over the usurper's own household."

"You think we should prioritize our vengeance against the Lannisters over House Baratheon?" Doran said coolly. "Remember it was the Usurper's war that allowed the Lannisters to betray their rightful King and all that happened to our sister and her children. Do not forget that the Starks stood beside Robert, though their reasons, even I will admit, were better than most. Yet even so, I will not ally with the House of honorable **fools**. You said it yourself, House Stark is making enemies in King's Landing, and even a direwolf can be pulled down by enough hyenas. Let the wolf and lion savage one another, we can wait."

"I am sick to death of waiting!" Oberynd shouted, standing up suddenly and smashing his fist down on the small desk Gregor's head rested on at present. Luckily, the desk was a sturdy affair and withstood his blow. "Wait, wait, wait, that is all you ever council, Doran! We have done nothing but **wait** for far too long! Dorne is seen as a joke now, a barbaric land with a coward for a ruler! We must risk **something** to gain **anything**, brother."

"Besides, the Baratheons without the Lannisters, or even with the Lannisters badly weakened, will be much easier to destroy! Robert is a drunkard, drinking himself into an early grave. Joffrey is a buffoon, arrogant and egotistical, and, as I said, if we influence Ranma, his influence on Tommen could turn the family into an ally for us. Renly is a fop, a toy knight who knows nothing of war outside the tourney and Stannis is so cold, I doubt he could muster enough humanity to rally more than a few of the Stormlands' lords to him."

Doran kept his cool with the ease of long practice in front of his brother's bluster. "And Tywin? What of him? He is no fool, and he has undoubtedly already taken action against the Starks for their daring to remove one of his best tools. You make the error of seeing their influence in King's Landing as the source of their power. Brother, I assure you it is not. So long as Tywin lives and has control of the gold mines in Westerlands, his power will remain unchanged. No, I will send a message to one of my factors in King's Landing to find and remove Arianne and your daughters from the city as quickly as possible. Regardless of how good you think this Ranma is, he cannot be everywhere nor is he proof against arrows or other means of attack."

He paused for a moment, staring sternly at his oh-so-much younger brother. Such happened when all the children between the youngest and oldest of a family died but it was at moments like this that brought it to his attention. "There are plans in motion, Oberynd, plans that have been moving for years now, plans that have just recently begun to bear fruit. I will not act precipitously when waiting a little longer may bring us an ally with which we can have our justice in full."

Oberynd scowled but saw Doran wasn't about to share more details of these plans with him he nodded abruptly. He stalked off angrily before he could say anything they would both regret, leaving Doran alone to contemplate the future, his plans, and the head of one of his House's enemies. *Let there soon be many more heads beside this one. The winds of change are blowing; one only needs to know how to harness them...*

OOOOOOO

Almost at the same moment, Oberyng was speaking to Doran, two weeks before Ranma left for Pentos, another Lord Paramount was contemplating the news of King's Landing. Though in his case, he knew quite a bit more than Oberyng had been able to discern, right from the wolf's mouth, so to speak.

Despite his body failing him, Hoster Tully's mind was still sharp and could discern the most important bits from the news Jason Mallister had just imparted to him. The Lord of Seagard had stopped in Riverrun on his way back to his demesne, to speak to his ruler about his grandson and what was going on in King's Landing.

"Ned's overreaching." Hoster said after staying silent for several minutes, so long Jason was afraid he had fallen asleep as old people were wont to do without warning. "He believes that his friendship with Robert will be a shield against his enemies while he does away with the corruption in the capital and searches for why Jon Arryn died so abruptly. He is wrong, Robert is not the man he once was, he is far too easily swayed in many ways and distracted in others. I'll send another hundred men to augment the men I've already sent. Hopefully, they'll help keep the stiff-necked Stark alive when things go badly."

"Hah!" Hoster laughed suddenly, a hacking, sickly sound despite the humor in it as he switched his gaze over to where his son Edmure was leaning against the wall. "I'll send you as well, Edmure. You could not do better than look to Ned for a teacher, in many ways, and this Ranma sounds fascinating, above and beyond his martial prowess. Perhaps he can help you live your ideas up, boy! A friendship between you would also strengthen ties between Tully and Stark."

Edmure scowled a little, irritated at the idea that the younger Stark heir was somehow brighter or a better heir than him. Hoster knew his son thought himself a fine lord but he was untried, too full of the vain glory of the tourney when it came to matters of war, and disinterested in the management of his lands. Edmure had also not settled down yet, too busy wenching, something Hoster was always irritated by. But he lacked the desire to estrange another family member by coming down on his son too hard about it or by attempting to set up a marriage for him.

He had hoped Edmure would grow up on his own but he hadn't yet. *Hopefully the example of Ranma Stark will start that process*, Hoster thought. *It's high time that boy settled down and begot some brats to secure the line of succession and if he doesn't by year's end, well, I'll have to take the plunge and set one up for him.* "I'll let you in charge of choosing who to take, Edmure, though I want you on the road within the fortnight, so you best start now."

Despite knowing his father simply wanted him out of the room to talk to Lord Mallister alone, Edmure went gladly, eager to be off on this jaunt despite the reasons his father had for sending him. King's Landing and the pleasures found therein, called to him. Edmure also thought if he could prove himself an able leader of men on this job then it would show his father he needed no further training to be ready to take over the lordship of Riverrun and the Riverlands.

The moment his son left, Hoster turned back to Jason, his rheumy eyes hard. "Eddard is too focused on finding the reasons behind Jon Arryn's death to see the real threat coming. Tywin may reply to the death of the Mountain in some fashion, though in what fashion I know not, but regardless, once word reaches Tywin of the changes being wrought in King's Landing, he **will** react to correct his family's loss of influence in the court."

"I would not think he would care over much for the graft being so diminished." Jason replied, one grey eyebrow raising in surprise.

"It isn't that!" Hoster said sharply, pushing himself more upright in his bed. He had been confined there for a month, his body slowly giving out with age, his legs having gone first. "You're making the same mistake Eddard is making! No, it is the influence over the Baratheon children that will concern him. If, as you said, Eddard is preparing to push for Tommen to be named heir over Joffrey then that will be a disaster for Tywin's influence. Tommen will look first to Ranma and Ned, not to his grandfather who he has rarely met. The Lannisters, even with the Queen playing the game as well as she is, will lose the ear of both the King and the future King. Tywin will not allow that to happen without a fight and I am worried about what method he might use to offset it."

Jason chuckled a little despite the seriousness of Hoster's words. At his lord's interrogative look, he shrugged. "I would honestly think that Tywin could look to influence Ranma in turn by shoving young Myrcella into Ranma's arms. Certainly it wouldn't take much of a push, the girl was besotted with him, even I could see that the few times I saw them together."

This caused Hoster to chuckle as well but he shook his head. "No, he won't trust the girl to be able to guide Ranma, not when he has had no hand in her rearing. He'll act in some fashion to remove Ranma and Ned or force them to be

called back to Winterfell. And it is that action we must be prepared for."

"What do you think he will do?"

"That I do not know. Tywin is prideful but intelligent and pragmatic. Whatever he does, it will be calculated, yet what he will do I cannot say." Hoster paused, thinking hard then nodded his head. "I just feel as if there is a storm coming, one we need to be ready for. I will call up my men and prepare Riverrun for open war. That is the worst case scenario, though I doubt it will come to that and cannot ask my lords to do the same without proof of coming troubles rather than my own feelings on the matter. None, save the Freys, have deep enough pockets to weather the expense of such a move if it proves unneeded and I do not trust the Freys farther than I could kick their blasted castle."

Jason's eyes narrowed, making him look like the hunting eagle on his family's crest. "If he wants to draw Ranna and Ned away, then Tywin could make overtures to the Ironborn. They've been restless lately and I doubt the Starks having a hostage truly matters to them at all. They could strike the North or Seagard and the western holdings of the Riverlands. I will prepare my lands for such, in any event. I can cover the costs of ordering up my men for several months, at least, without aid from the Riverlands coffers."

The trade they got as a seaport and transportation hub through the Hag's Mire to Fairmarket and thence down the Blue Fork, made Seagard a rich holding in comparison to most of the Riverlands lords. Though not large in area, since it abutted into the mire on its southern reaches and Frey holdings north and east, Seagard itself gave House Mallister both some industry and a decent population to call upon.

The two lords looked at one another, wondering if this would be enough, and somehow knowing it would not be.

The next day before he left Riverrun, Jason made use of one of the castle's ravens that was set to the Citadel, home of the order of maesters, down in Oldtown, in the Reach. With it, he sent the sealed message Eddard had asked him to send, unopened of course. Jason had no idea what the message contained, some suspicions were too terrible to speak of until they could be proven and this was one of them. The return message would be marked as if it came from Winterfell so no one in the Red Keep would be concerned by it.

OOOOOOO

A week before Ranna sailed from King's Landing, Illyrio and Viserys looked up from their conversation as the door to the sitting room opened. Daenerys stepped through. She curtsied to Illyrio while ignoring her brother, who scowled at that act of defiance, yet smoothed it away from his features quickly.

*After all, the girl is just trying to get a rise out of me. Illyrio's right, she's doing all she can to get out of marrying the barbarian.* The thought brought Viserys some mixed feelings, irritation and anger, of course, but some approval as well, which was surprising. It was the first time that his younger sister had shown the will that he expected from someone of their house. Daenerys' disdain for physical wounds and her actually trying to get him to wound her further in an attempt to put off her marriage showed she had some Targaryen will to go with her looks.

Yet, it ill-suited their House's purposes for him to continue to fall to her games and Daenerys still had no idea of the big picture, obviously. Otherwise, she would embrace the opportunity to bring such a force into the fold. She still had romantically foolish ideas of gaining popular support in Westeros, which was foolish in the extreme. *No*, Viserys thought to himself, not for the first time, his eyes taking on a glittering aspect even if he didn't know it. *The only way to return our house to power is through fire and sword!*

Illyrio knew nothing of his prince's thoughts, of course, though he could read some of it from his face. Still, he stood up, light on his feet for all his weight, bowing grandly to the Princess, his florid beard flouncing forward. "Your highness, I trust you are feeling better?"

"As if the nurses you have set upon me had not already informed you." Daenerys said smiling thinly. "I am well enough, at least to once again take part in discussions. What have I missed?"

Her brother would probably not have told her anything but Illyrio spoke up before Viserys could send her away. He filled her in on what the two of them had been up to, gathering support among the other powerful merchants in the city, paying for a fleet of hulls to be set down to carry their forces across to Westeros, making further overtures and inquiries to various lords in Westeros for their aid when the time came. There they were not having much headway, not yet at any rate. "Dorne remains the only land that as a whole is waiting for us to make our move."

Viserys smirked as he thought about that. He was looking forward to seeing if the stories about the licentiousness of the women of Dorne was accurate and with that marriage, he would bring Dorne in on their side.

"What of the Riverlands?" Daenerys asked, looking at the two of them. "You've mentioned the Vale, Dorne, and the Crownlands. The Stormlands obviously won't welcome us in the main, though I think our continued search there for one or two lords that might at the very least be willing to pass on knowledge is a good idea. But you haven't mentioned the Riverlands or the North."

Illyrio smirked, his beard twitching. "The North is completely devoted to a new issue your highness, one that has only recently been confirmed. You recall that Jorah Mormont told us of a rising threat, the new King Beyond the Wall? I've talked to a factor of Lord Manderly here in the city. He was asking around for mercenary bands that would be willing to travel to the Wall to help defend it. Unfortunately, he hasn't found any takers here in Pentos, though I would assume that other factors might be having more luck in the rest of the Free Cities."

For just a moment, Daenerys shivered and didn't know why, feeling a cold bite in the air for a brief second before she shook it off. "Are we certain that that will occupy the North's entire military strength? We know that Lord Stark is loyal to the Crown and is, I would not doubt, an effective Hand at present. Surely, the North would send him aid in some fashion? And, if he is removed or called home, who would replace him?"

"It's almost certain he would not be called home at all; his son would be sent instead." Viserys said shaking his head with a laugh. "The tales we've heard from Domicus about him make that almost certain. Even if only half of them are true, that move would be a good thing for the entirety of the kingdom and..." he said rather grudgingly, "Illyrio has an idea there."

Daenerys cocked an eyebrow at Viserys and then looked over at Illyrio, who smiled blandly. "Eddard Stark is probably making a lot of enemies, going by what Jorah has told us at least, which are simply waiting for the right opportunity to drag him down. By the time we are ready to invade, he might already be dead and his son fighting on the Wall. If so, sending overtures to the North saying that we will aid them on the Wall in return for their remaining out of the War against the Baratheons and the Lannisters could well gain their neutrality, if not their aid to avenge him."

Daenerys actually nodded thoughtfully at that seeing, it could make sense, though she didn't agree that Lord Stark would be gone by the time they were ready. She had talked extensively with Domicus about House Stark and both Lord Stark and Randa struck her as survivors. On top of that, they were honorable men, who took their duties seriously, though where that might take them was beyond her ability to predict. Certainly, Eddard would not go down without a fight, at the very least. "And the Riverlands?"

"We have several powerful agents there, just waiting for an opportunity." Viserys scowled a little. "They're not bound by honor or loyalty to us, unfortunately, so they'll probably have to be removed in the future but they can serve our purposes until then."

"A treacherous blade is ever one the hand that wields it should fear." Daenerys said, nodding, as she sat down. The conversation continued from there. Daenerys fully participated in it, interjecting what she could, trying to plant the seeds of doubt in Illyrio's mind as to which Targaryen child he should back.

In this, she was successful. Illyrio retired that evening rather wistfully wishing that he had decided to invest more time in Daenerys when he contacted the two initially. An accident could easily have been arranged for Viserys and, with some careful molding, Daenerys would've been an excellent leader. Now, he couldn't get out of it; his personal word was on the line now with Khal Drogo and the next time Drogo stopped by the city, Daenerys would have to be presented to him. It would win them the swords they needed to conquer Westeros. No single other act would bring them as much strength.

OOOOOO

Since Jorah's arrival, Domicus had found himself being slowly pushed aside as a source of information on the Westeros. He was still called upon for his expertise on the Stormlands as well as the Reach and the Crownlands, where he had spent the majority of his time since leaving the North, but that was all. No longer did either Viserys or Illyrio call upon him for his opinion on other matters nor did they ask him for any new information about general goings on there.

He still showed up occasionally with tidbits of information but for now Domicus allowed himself to be pushed to the side. Indeed, he seemingly only stayed out of a desire to see what was going to happen firsthand, as well as the various lovely ladies on Illyrio's staff. He put some effort into that image and did not attempt to grow close to his fellow Northerner. The man had been a slaver and, despite his time in Essos, Domicus still looked upon that practice as abhorrent in the extreme.

Of course, this also allowed him more time to get to know the guards. Domicus could be regularly seen in the guard

house singing songs, admittedly mostly bawdy ones for them as they bought him drinks and they shared tales of wenches they had known.

He also finished making his key to Illyrio's strong room and found out when the guard on it was weakest. None of the guards actually believed that the watch on Illyrio's strong room was needed at all since to get to the strong room one would have to get into Illyrio's house in the first place and the watch on the walls was as strict as always. So during the dark of night, two youngsters, the newest members of Illyrio's guard, a pair as yet not blooded in any kind of battle beyond training, had been forced by their fellows to take this watch.

Other aspects of their planned escape had not been going nearly as well. For one thing, Daenerys and Domicer both knew that Daenerys could no longer incite her brother into attacking her. Not only was Viserys showing more self-control lately, as if he had cottoned on to Daenerys' plans there, but Illyrio had taken the precaution of hiring several female guards, massively muscled women who looked almost like extremely strong men, to stand guard over Daenerys at all times. Any overtures in their direction were firmly rebuffed and they only answered to Illyrio. They almost reminded Domicer of stories of the Unsullied, but not quite, and they seemed immune to Daenerys' charisma.

That meant talking to her about their plans going forward had become much more difficult. They had gotten around this by creating a system of hand signals to tell one another simple information but there was only so much they could convey that way. The news elsewhere wasn't good either. None of the captains that Daenerys felt could be enticed to help them escape the city had put into port.

Checking on that was what Domicer was actually doing now. He sat in a dockside bar speaking to another bard, exchanging news. "Captain Costanzo won't put into any port ever again." the man said shaking his head, talking about one of the captains Daenerys had mentioned. "If you're waiting for him you'll wait in vain. Costanzo's ship was sunk about ten days ago. It looks as if the Ironborn are acting up again or, at least, a few of their captains are at any rate. There've been several ships that have gone missing recently, all of whom were plying the straits between Westeros and here."

"Ironborn? They are far afield then, aren't they?" Domicer asked cocking his head, remembering his time fighting those bastards when they tried to rebel. He was also trying hard not to curse, since that meant the two most likely captains to be sympathetic to Daenerys' plight would not be available, no matter how long they waited. This would force them to find one they could appeal to with only what they could steal from the magister, a chancy business at best. "Their islands are on the other side of Westeros!"

"True, but that doesn't matter to the Ironborn. They go where their ships can take them and this isn't the first time they've been able to sail straight around the Dornish Peninsula and through the Stepstones. It's the first time in a few years, true, but it isn't all **that** unusual. The merchants and captains here in Essos consider them more of a nuisance than anything, simply because they are unpredictable and fractious."

"And you're sure it's Ironborn, not some kind of pirate band questing out from the Stepstones?"

"Positive." Was the firm reply. "The pirates who ply the waters around Essos know they can only take so many ships every month and know what ships not to take."

"Are you telling me that piracy is also part of the game here?" Domicer scoffed. He had never even heard a hint of that before.

"Indeed." His fellow bard said, laughing. He was an older man with the slight accent of Norvos in his voice. "The cities of Essos are ruled by gold, my friend, and their money can buy many things, including the pirates keeping their hands off certain ships. And if the pirates act up, a city could buy enough mercenaries and ships of their own to go in and clear them out, as has been done before."

Domicer nodded, he knew that of course. Westeros had mounted such an expedition during the Ninepenny Kings war.

His fellow bard continued. "That's what makes the Ironborn so irritating. They don't play the game. They aren't willing to be paid in gold, mouthing on and on about their 'iron price'. Worse yet, they don't take prize ships. Pirates always do that, and they can be bought back later. No, the Ironborn always sink their victims. That kind of thing could ruin some of the smaller merchant houses, let alone the loss of the actual cargo."

"Interesting." Domicer murmured. "Tell me more."

For the next few hours, he plied his fellow bard with questions and returned with this news to his employers, which

interested Viserys and Illyrio greatly. After all, if the Ironborn were getting restive, that would hopefully draw off the Westeros fleet to deal with them. If so, their own moves would be made that much simpler.

Unfortunately for Dmeric and Daenerys, he had been unable to find any news that would help them. Both went to bed that day with anxiety slowly growing in them.

OOOOOO

Littlefinger was not one to leave anything to chance. Despite this, the sudden nature of Petyr's convincing the King to send Ranma out of the city on this mission to find the Targaryen siblings had forced him to use common footpads to make certain that Ranma would never come back, rather than a single specialist as he would've preferred. These two were former sailors, able to fit in easily with the crew of the trade caravel that was carrying Ranma to Pentos.

That was part of why the two had been chosen but it was offset by their eagerness to get the job over with and the fact that they had no idea about Fenris. Used to the way Fenris was around Tommen and Myrcella as well as how Lady was all the time, Petyr had overlooked the direwolf, considering him a pampered pet. This was, to put it mildly, a false assumption.

That evening, the first evening out from port, Ranma was asleep against the railing at the back of the ship. While he had been given a cabin, for now Ranma simply wanted to enjoy the sea air for a time, clear his senses of the stink of politics mixed with the actual odor of King's Landing, which he had never gotten used to despite the amount of perfume he used. Fenris, however, was awake keeping guard and could move almost as silently as his brother Ghost despite his somewhat larger size.

The deck was empty of other observers that first evening save for a few men on watch at the front of the ship and some men up high in the rigging. None of them were near enough to make out anything occurring on the deck, however, nor were the men on watch even facing the right direction.

"A'ight." whispered one of the would-be assassins to the other, his lowborn King's Landing gutter accent thicker even than usual. He pulled out a long stiletto from a belt scabbard, which had been specially oiled. The knife, too, had been darkened so as not to reveal itself by any chance gleam of moonlight.

Despite his lack of education, there was nothing wrong with his survivor's instincts, so even as he prepared to kill the wolf heir, his thoughts were on his own health. "Let's da this quick-like, and then ahh 'tink it best dat we stay in Pentos. Assassins who gulch lardships never live long if'n they be stupid enough ta return ta tell such."

"Truly, I'll agree ta that." his companion said, his own accent far less pronounced. He frowned for a moment looking behind them. One of the hatches to the crew quarters had opened, but at night, with only a few men up on deck for the few hours of deep night, there shouldn't have been anyone coming up onto the deck. After a moment, no one appeared and he nodded. "If we're going ta do this, best we do it now." With that the two of them moved forward silently across the deck.

Halfway to their target, there was a sudden growl behind them. One of them had a moment to turn and whimpered in visceral terror as the direwolf, who they had been told was some kind of neutered pet, loomed up out of the night. Before either assassin could raise their weapons or even scream, Fenris was on them. His jaws closed on the head of one, ripping it off with a 'shluck' sound that disappeared in the background noise of the ship at sea. At the same time, his foreleg flashed out, catching the other man in the jaw and snapping his neck.

Waiting for a moment to see if the sounds of combat had carried, Fenris glared at the two men he had just killed, wondering why they had been trying to stalk his bonded human. With a shrug of his large shoulders, Fenris pushed that thought aside. And wasn't that fun, the ability to actually think was a treasure to Fenris and his siblings.

For now, Fenris ducked his head down and got to work cleaning up, whining a little at the smell. The man had voided himself right before his death, which made this even worse than it would have been.

Moving quickly to the side of the ship Fenris tossed the body overboard with a swift flick of his head. Fenris padded back to the other body but stopped just as he reached it. Two more humans, both female (despite the way they were dressed he could smell the difference) had just come up from the interior of the ship and were now staring at him.

Arianne stared at the gigantic direwolf. Standing on his four feet, he was nearly tall enough to look her in the eye and far heavier looking. "There is something decidedly unnatural about that creature." She said looking at her cousin who was gripping the hilt of her short sword, hidden under her sailor's smock. "And I'm not just talking about his size; it's his intelligence that bothers me. When I look at him, it is obvious he is looking back at me and seeing far more than



an animal should."

The direwolf huffed in amusement, taking that as a compliment. And if the humans, other than his master and those bonded to his littermates, didn't realize they had all been able to understand much of human speech even before Fenris left the home place, all the better. He stared meaningfully at the human female who was pawing at one of the metal claws the humans had. So amusing that they could hide them like that or take them off at all, yet also sad that they needed such. Why, their fangs were practically nonexistent, too.

Obara stepped forward lifting her hand away from her hidden sword. "You haven't been around him every day for the past few months." she muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "Unnatural is putting it mildly." With that, she turned back to Fenris holding out her hands in token of peace. "Hello Fenris, I don't suppose we could wake up Ranma? We wish to talk to him."

Fenris looked the two females over, then shrugged his massive shoulders and turned away. He kept one eye on them while he disposed of the second assassin's body, causing both girls to start, not having noticed it before behind his bulk.

"I don't suppose you have any reassurance to give me about this?" Arianne said, waving her hand a little and moving slightly away from the large direwolf. "He's not going rabid or anything?"

Fenris spared her an irritated glance at that insult but continued his way carrying the dead body easily before tossing it over the side. The direwolf then came back to smack the man's head, which he had spat out after ripping it off (skulls were horrible eating and humans were unhygienic in the best of cases), over the side to join the body. Job done, Fenris padded over to the two women, looking at them again before moving towards Ranma. He nudged him in the side, growling lightly.

Under his familiar's gentle nudging Ranma awoke swiftly. He glanced around and towards the two newcomers cocking his head. "Obara? What are you doing here?"

While saying this Ranma what had stood up and was poised for trouble, though his stance told nothing of that. Despite interacting with them on and off since the tournament, Ranma did not trust the Sand Snakes and seeing one of them here on the ship that was to carry him on his hunt for the Targaryen siblings made him even warier of them.

Obara shrugged. "I'm here sort of as a bodyguard. Ranma Stark, be known to Princess Arianne of Dorne."

Ranma looked at the other woman, his eyes widening in surprise.

Arianne swept her covering cloak and hood back, revealing her face. Her dark hair, which Arianne had let loose from her initial disguise, cascaded down the back of her neck and down the back of her cloak, her eyes luminous in her face. The rest of her disguise, alas, was not so easy to remove nor was Arianne willing to reveal her gender entirely, not at least until Ranma took the two of them under his protection.

This crew, after all, was not beholden to her father or, indeed, to any other noble. It was simply a trade vessel, one of the more than three dozen privately owned ships that traded almost constantly between King's Landing and the various free cities. That was why it had been chosen, after all. Nothing about it would indicate that its passengers were anything special until they arrived and disembarked, at least. That meant that she wasn't about to trust the sailors as much as she would her own.

"As my cousin said, I am Princess Arianne of Dorne, heir to the lordship of Dorne." Arianne said, bowing her head slightly never letting her eyes waver from Ranma's deep ocean blue ones. He really was quite handsome, with that Stark stern sort of manner, though it was much softer in his case. It was not the softness of easy living, for if there was an inch of fat on his body anywhere she couldn't see it. No, it was the softness of kindness, which went well with what she had heard from her two cousins and seen for herself, albeit from a distance.

That also meant her task here might be easier than she had hoped. "I have a proposal for you, Ranma. Did you know that your mother, Lady Catelyn, sent us a raven asking for the two of us to meet as you and Margaery of House Tyrell have?"

"I did." Ranma nodded, but his tenseness did not go away even as he leaned back against the mast. "I also know Prince Doran declined it. I'll even say that some of his reasons, which my mother sent us in a missive after receiving his reply, made sense. The fact that Dorne and the North are so far apart and so different socially makes any such union not nearly as good in real life as it seemed to my mother on paper. But how does that tie into you being here aboard this ship?"

"Ahh, but that was without having met you." Arianne murmured, coming forward to stand close to him, undoing her cloak a little further. *The sailor's clothing I'm wearing doesn't do my body enough justice for this, she lamented a little, but needs must.* She had taken the time before coming up on to the deck to undo her bindings around her chest and she knew that Ranma was getting of very good glimpse down her shirt at her large breasts. "And did you really think that your mission would remain a secret for very long? I know what you are about, Ranma Stark and I want to talk to you about other... **options**, both for your mission and for your marriage prospects."

Ranma groaned. *Not another one. I'm getting tired of women who try to use their body to try and influence me!* He moved back quickly, his eyes hardening. "None of that, lady. You will not find me as easily swayed by such impulses as you might think."

He shuddered a little internally, wondering if he would've been able to muster the will to ignore stuff like this back in Nerima, if he knew what the hell was going on. Ranma thanked his lucky stars that he hadn't had to. *Shampoo would've had me wrapped around her little finger and that would've been in many ways a fate worse than death. Maybe Ukyo as well, come to think of it, she was a looker too. Although, I might have realized what I was feeling for Kasumi, too...* He shook that thought off and stared hard at the woman in front of him.

For moment, Arianne was nonplussed by this but then she smiled. "Very well," she said, redoing her cloak and moving forward again but keeping well enough away to make Ranma think that she wasn't about to attempt any further seductions. She, however, kept close so they could keep their voices down. Despite Fenris prowling around the three, she wasn't about to assume that they could be overheard. "What you know about my country, Ranma?"

"I know that Dorne had close ties with the Targaryen Dynasty, even before your aunt, I believe it was, married into the family. I know that your family still has a somewhat unfriendly relationship with House Lannister and Baratheon. Historically, you don't get along well with The Reach, either, though that has since stopped because the lands that were formerly causing that dispute are now counted among the Stormlands. Did I miss anything?"

"Not much." Arianne shrugged, still smiling faintly. "However, you do not understand the totality. You may say the words that Dorne is a nation apart but you don't understand. We are Dorne, unbowed, unbroken, unconquered! The Targaryens could not subjugate us, we did not, like your ancestor, bend the knee to them." She went on, ignoring his sudden growl, sounding very much like his pet, who had come suddenly to stand beside him to stare at her. "The desert and the terrain is a better deterrent than any martial force. If the Targaryens couldn't conquer us, Robert Baratheon certainly couldn't."

"But neither do we have the forces to fight an offensive war against the other nations of Westeros. So there is an uneven sort of peace between us. You know of the rising power of the Lannisters. Tywin, their Lord, is not the sort to allow any nation to remain aloof from the power of the Iron Throne. Even with the help of your family, Robert's position is precarious and that of his sons, as well. The Stormlands are the weakest in terms of men and money of any realm, save the North, which means Robert's power base was small to begin with and, as King, he has left the running of that land to his brothers so he doesn't have even that to call upon as his own. If either of his sons comes to the throne, it will be their grandfather who truly rules."

"I think you overestimate the strength of the lions at court." Ranma said smirking. "My father has been doing an excellent job of pruning back their fangs, not just because of the corruption but because he saw the downside of their rise to power as well as you do. Robert might not be my favorite individual or even a good king but he is strong of body, at least, and should last another five years or so."

"I don't know about that one." Arianne murmured shaking her head. "I think he's drinking himself into an early grave. I have seen such things a few times and it happens much more quickly than most would suggest. That is neither here nor there, your influence over the young Tommen is fine but you haven't any influence over the Crown Prince and, if he comes to the throne, his grandfather will rule all seven nations behind the scenes. Do you want the man who allowed Gregor Clegane to remain a lord and knight to become that powerful?"

That struck home she could tell, and she closed quickly, now attacking Ranma's thoughts from another angle. "And you said it yourself; Robert isn't that good a king. What has he done for the kingdom since claiming the Iron Throne? No new laws, no new building projects, all he did was put down the Greyjoy Rebellion, and what good has that done the rest of Westeros? Oh, the Ironborn are no more threat but they weren't before the rebellion either, which only happened because they thought Robert was weak."

"Robert was an excellent general." She went on staring at him earnestly. "But that does not mean that he is a good king and he set a very bad precedent. Even if the Baratheons are distantly related to the former ruling line, his kingship boils down to 'might makes right'. Can you truly say that a nation built on that ideal is a safe one? Your former fiancé Margaery must've told you about her family's misgivings? Their concerns about what might happen

when Robert dies. What about Stannis, will he allow a young, untried boy to take the throne or even Renly? How many will try to claim the throne?"

"Get to the point, lady." Ranma said crossing his arms and staring at the woman belligerently.

"You know Robert will have both the Targaryen siblings put to death, if not in the near future then in a few years' time, when he thinks he can get away with it. Do you want their lives on your conscience, the lives of the true heirs to the Iron Throne?"

Ariane licked suddenly dry lips, somewhat put off by the predatory look in Ranma's eyes. *Whoever thought that Ranma was some kind of northern bumpkin or dunce was far off the mark*, she thought. The mind behind those eyes was clear for her to see and, now that it came to it, she wasn't certain at all that she could pull this off. His completely ignoring her body and sexual nature had thrown off her stride, taking away her most potent weapons and leaving her with only her words.

Still she pressed on gamely. "If the Targaryen siblings die in Baratheon custody, Dorne **will** rise in war. And despite your fathers influence, the Baratheons are on the decline and Lannister gold has bought many allies. But if you find Daenerys and Viserys Targaryen and return with them to Dorne, they can be kept safe. If needed, they can make a vow before the Seven to never seek the throne but alive they can still be married into the line to the ruling line, strengthening its legitimacy.

"And also give Dorne a powerful tool against Lannister and Baratheon power." Ranma replied dryly, shaking his head. "I might be a neophyte at this politics crap, lady, but even I can see that. I will say this for your... concern for my conscience. I never had any intention of murdering the two surviving Targaryens. The only reason I would do that is if they were already showing signs of Targaryen madness and I doubt they could gather any support, even in Essos, for their return to power if that was the case."

*Really, how could someone think I'd be willing to do that, no matter how much a threat they are, right after threatening Robert about giving that very order!?* "No, I'll decide what I will actually do when we get to Pentos."

Though he hadn't said anything about it for months, Ranma hadn't forgotten about the real threat building in land of always winter or what weapons had been used against such in the past. He didn't know if the Targaryens still had it in them but he was willing to take the chance to see. And if that proved to be the case, and he had to anger Robert fucking Baratheon to keep one of them around in the North, well that was just tough. *Still, we'll see when we get there.*

Ariane looked at him, every part of her stance screaming at Ranma, begging for more information but Ranma merely waved her off, laying back down against the railing. "Now, it's late and I'd like to get some sleep in the fresh air here before tomorrow. You two can take over my cabin; sleeping with the rest of the crew would be asking for trouble. I'll tell them you're under my protection tomorrow, if you want, but for tonight, let me get back to sleep."

The Dornish women looked at one another but realized they weren't in a position of strength here and that Ranma wasn't about to tell them more than he already had. They backed away, turning to go as Fenris curled up next to his master, both of them closing their eyes once more.

OOOOOO

Tommen sighed dejectedly. It had only been a few days but he was already missing Ranma. He hadn't realized until Ranma wasn't there how much of his time was taken up with the Stark heir, training and simply hanging around with him, being treated as a younger sibling.

But that was it really; Ranma had seen **him**, not Tommen the youngest Prince, Tommen the young Baratheon, or Tommen the baby of the family, just Tommen the boy. He would never tell his mother this but she tended to treat all of her children almost as extensions of herself at times, simply assuming that they liked to do the same things she did and ignoring all evidence to the contrary, while everyone else in the court was worse, even the master-at-arms and others.

Over the last few months, Ranma had instilled in Tommen a need to train, which was why he kept on getting up early despite not having their exercises to look forward to. So here Tommy was, running around the castle grounds which Ranma had started him on a few days before his departure. Then he would go through exercises with the practice sword, swinging it twenty times per each form to build up his muscles, after which he would perform calisthenics exercises designed to keep him limber.

He was halfway through those sword practices when he noticed Lord Stark walking into the exercise area, stripped down to an undershirt and padded leggings, holding his own practice sword. The older man moved up to Tommen and smiled his slight public smile at the young Prince. "As my son is no longer here to instruct you, I hoped to take over the position."

Ned looked around as if checking to see they weren't going to be overheard and leaned down. "Between you and I, Your Highness, I also need the exercise. The rich food here at court and all that sitting I've had to do going over the books has had a marked effect..." he patted his stomach suggestively.

If Caitlin had been there, she would've sighed and shaken her head with a fond smile. It was moments like this, where he let his inner warmth and good humor show, that had caused her to fall in love with Ned in the first place, despite all the issues they had faced.

The droll tone this was delivered in caused Tommen to chuckle a little and he replied in the affirmative. He soon found that Ned was a somewhat sterner teacher than Ranma and, yet, he noticed certain things that Ranma seemed to take for granted.

For instance one of the exercises, a group of movements with six strikes and two parries all made to be done while on the move, had been giving Tom fits. Eddard paused him mid-form and then gently tapped one of his feet back into another position with the end of his own practice sword. "Try again." he ordered. "Keep your front foot thusly, facing at an angle from your opponent, which you had correct, but not that far forward, while the other is ready to move or pivot at need."

With his feet now corrected, Tommen moved much more smoothly through the form. He cocked his head quizzically as he finished.

Ned smiled faintly again. "My son is a genius when it comes to anything related to combat. However, geniuses often overlook the fact that other people aren't so quick to notice little things. He neglected to correct your position on that form from what he showed you to address your shorter stature. Now, why don't you show me a few of the other forms giving you trouble and we'll go through them?"

Tommen nodded eagerly and the two of them spent the rest of the morning together in this fashion.

Later, Ned watched Tommen walk out of the training area up with a faint smile on his face. The time spent with the young boy had reminded Eddard of the time he spent with his own children up north. It had given him a pang of homesickness, though that hadn't been the real reason why he joined the young boy in exercising.

Part of the reason was indeed he wanted some exercise but the other part was the fact that Ned wanted to see if the changes Ranma had wrought in the young child had stuck. Over the past few days they seemed to have, which was a very good thing his opinion. *It will make transferring the position of Crown Prince to him all the easier*, he thought shaking his head. Regardless of what he discovered about their parentage, Ned was becoming more and more convinced that Tommen would become a much better candidate for the position of King than his older sibling Joffrey was turning out to be.

He sighed as he moved up the stairs of the Hand's Tower, then was almost bulled over as he finished ascending the stairs into the family area by Lady, once more decked out like a doll. "Oh, dear." Ned muttered, shaking his head. "I'd apologize for my daughter but I think that you wolves knew precisely what you're getting into in some fashion when you entered our household."

Lady huffed, seeing her escape route blocked by her bonded's patriarch and then turned leaping through the open doorway to Ranma's room, quickly turning and closing it behind her with a flash of that intelligence in the direwolves that was so startling to people who weren't used to their ways.

A second later, Sansa and Myrcella came out of Sansa's room. "Don't run away lady!" Sansa ordered, angrily looking around. "We're just having fun."

"Sometimes, daughter, one person's fun is another person's torture." Ned replied with a faint smile on his face in a dust dry tone.

Myrcella quickly dropped a curtsy to the northern Lord, although Sansa simply sighed with a nod. "I suppose. I was just trying to cheer myself and Princess Myrcella up. It worked... for a time anyway."

Both girls looked a little disconsolate. Since Sansa had made up with Ranma, the two of them had spent at least an

hour a day together. It was only now, with Ranma once more gone, that Sansa realized how she had enjoyed that time.

She was still enjoying her time here in King's Landing as a whole: the Queen was magnificent, Joffrey was **her** Prince whatever that **bitch** Tyrell girl had tried, the court was lovely, the dresses were amazing, and she loved being treated like an adult. But without her oldest sibling here, there seemed to just be a bit of a spark gone out of the place. She still enjoyed it of course, since she spent most of her time around Joffrey, who, to her admiration had not been effected by it but could not help feeling melancholy sometimes.

Myrcella on the other hand had been quietly miserable since Ranma had left. Not only had Joffrey stepped up his bullying of her, though thankfully not Tommen from what she could tell, but Myrcella had come to realize that the few 'friends' she had cautiously made in the court were not really her friends but were merely hangers on. Thanks to spending time with Ranma and Sansa, she could tell the difference. And while Sansa was lovely, she was besotted with Joffrey.

In contrast, Ranma's presence had simply lit up her life. *I should've gone after him harder after Margaery left*, she groused to herself now, keeping her thoughts off her face with the ease of long practice. Myrcella didn't know what was behind Margaery's suddenly being recalled to High Garden but she should have taken advantage of it, regardless of her mother watching her like a hawk, for the little time that had been between that and Ranma himself leaving. She had actually developed some curves, after all, and she knew Ranma enjoyed spending time with her, so maybe...

Ned smiled faintly, reaching down to pat the girls' heads. "I think you should leave Lady alone for now and find something else to do, perhaps a walk across the gardens or something else. Call for Ser Jory or Mattimeo if you wish to go into the city and they will provide an escort for both of you along with your primary guard." He looked over to Ser Oakheart, who was leaning against the wall by Sansa's bedroom, smiling. The two men nodded at one another and, with a final pat to his daughter's head (unheeding her pout at being patted so like a child), Ned entered his room.

Alone he smiled quite a bit wider than he would have in public, shaking his head with a chuckle. *Myrcella would probably be appalled to know how easy it was to see how infatuation with my son but it still was amusing*. He frowned then shaking his head. *Neither girl has even a hint that I might be canceling the engagement to Joffrey. If they did their reactions would be entirely at odds with one another, I'm sure*.

He smiled even wider when he saw a small raven carrier roll with the mark of Winterfell on it on his bed, left there by Ser Willowtree, who Ned had assigned to watch the raven's tower and pick up any messages from Winterfell. Ned didn't trust any of the servants assigned the task of taking care of the ravens; they were all Pycelle's men, after all. Reaching forward Eddard picked it up, pulling out the note and smiling tenderly at the familiar flowing script of his wife

He began to read the message but was interrupted by a bellow from outside. "Ned!"

With a sigh, Eddard opened his door to see his old friend standing there, his rather pudgy now that Ned can come came to notice it, face formed into a grin. "Ned, the huntmaster has told me of a stag of six tines being sighted in the Kingswood! I already have the horses prepared!"

"And?" Ned said coldly. "What is it that you wish of me, Your Majesty?"

Robert frowned at the 'Your Majesty', and glared at his friend. The past few days had not been pleasant ones to those that were around the two men. Where before there had been an easy comradery, built on an old friendship and mutual adventures when they were young, now there was a cool distance between them. "Are you still on about that, Ned? Give over! Who cares about the Targaryen bastard and bitch?! Your son will see to the two of them one way or the other."

Lord Stark carefully did not roll his eyes. Honestly, if any of the small Council thought that his son would kill either of the two surviving Targaryens, they should have their heads examined. Oh, that was what the King had ordered, if they were a threat take them out, but there was no chance of Ranma following that order. He would probably return with both of them and hand at least one over to the Baratheons as a ward of the crown or some such. But the only way he would put either down was if they already exhibited the madness that had shown so up often in the Targaryen line to the detriment of all around them. If that was the case, Ranma would put them down like mad animals but he would take no pleasure in it and he would only do so as a last resort.

All of which Ned was fine with. He had not been lying when he said he still had nightmares about what happened in King's Landing during the rebellion, the sight of those bloody sheets covering the tiny bodies of the children, the baby not even a year old. No, some things could not be born. "I regret to inform you, Your Majesty, that I have a lot of work

I need to do today, the running of this kingdom doesn't happen by itself, after all."

"Damn it Ned! Why do you care so much?! They're just dragon-fucking scum! Don't you remember what they did to us!?"

"That is the difference between us, Your Majesty." Ned replied coldly, shaking his head. "You have extended your hatred of Prince Rhaegar and Aerys to the rest of the family, I never did. I hated the King and I hated the Crown Prince, but I never allowed that to splash over to the rest of the family. Vendettas like that are pointless."

Robert flushed angrily but Ned shook his head. "I can understand your anger and I can even accept it, in part, but I will not condone such a dishonorable act as sending assassins after them. Such is not the act of an honorable king or man."

Robert growled but with an effort of will contain his anger and shook his head. "Well, that's why your son was sent, after all."

"Indeed..." Ned sighed letting go a bit of his own anger in turn.

There was no point to getting angry at Robert. He certainly wasn't going to change his ways and the worst of it had been deflected thanks to Littlefinger's suggestion. *If only I could figure out if that had been done for the good of the Kingdom and of the Crown or, in some fashion, for his own good.*

Despite the several months they had been hearing King's Landing, Ned was no closer to figuring out where Littlefinger or the eunuch stood in relation to the Lannisters or the Baratheons or even their loyalty to the Crown itself. He suspected that Varys, at least, was loyal to the Crown, though that didn't necessarily apply equally to the person wearing it. Stability was what the eunuch wanted, though where that would take him, Ned did not know.

He sighed again shaking his head. "I really do have work, Robert." he said, making that little overture to patching the breach that had opened between them. "I might be able to get some time off in a week or so but we're going through the books for the Reach for the next few days. Renly and I are having issues with a few of the Lords down there. I might be sending out a few tax collecting parties if what we seem to be finding the books are accurate."

"Ha!" Robert guffawed. "Well, at least I don't have to deal with those paper pushers. All right, but I'll hold you to that, mark you. By the way," he went on slightly more serious. "I noticed you were training my boy up this morning. What you think of him?"

Ned saw that line for what it was and stared into Robert's suddenly serious eyes. Inwardly though, he was amused that Robert had called Tommen his son, something he had never done for any of the children before, they were always the 'queen's brats' before Tommen began to change thanks to Ranma's tutelage. "I think we should have that discussion in a few days as well." he murmured

"Good." Robert said firmly, nodding his head. He guffawed again. "Tommy might not look it, but he's certainly beginning to act more like a Baratheon should." He clapped Ned on the shoulder and, turning quickly, descended the stairs. Ser Selmy, as always guarding the King's back, stood there for a moment bowing his head to Lord Stark before following his King, a faint but noticeable smile appearing on his face as he turned away.

OOOOOO

Elsewhere in the Red Keep, Littlefinger soon heard of this conversation. His one spy in the Hand's Tower had begun to act as the Jane-of-all-trades in the Tower, an act of forward-thinking that proved she was a very valuable agent indeed, one he would have to be careful to keep from harm.

"Now," he murmured to himself, "should I share this information and with whom? Or should I sit on it for a time?"

After a moment's thought Littlefinger decided to sit on it for a day or two, and then he would share it with his newest... pet project. It would be interesting to see the Prince's reaction after all.

With that decided, he turned back to writing out a few notes to send his factors in Dorne, specifically those anywhere near the castle Starfall, home of House Dayne. Something was nibbling at his mind, something about Jon Snow, the bastard Stark boy, and he had decided to find out who the bastard's mother had been.

He also made time that evening, to seek out the young Prince. After all influencing just one of the Princes was silly, especially with the way the winds were blowing. Regardless of what happened to his machinations to incite open violence between the Lannisters and the Starks, he wanted to be in a position to still have the heir's ear.

OOOOOO

Ser Jorah looked up from exercising with a few of the guards as Daenerys Stormborn came out of the mansion, holding what looked like a large, well-made knife. It wasn't the first time he had seen her but all sign of injury was gone from her face now and her sheer presence took his breath away. "Your Highness," he said moving over to her quickly, "can we help you?"

Daenerys looked up at the giant bearded man. He was easily a foot taller than Dmeric and wider in the shoulders to boot. "I wish to get some exercise; I have been sitting down or laying down for too long. Multiple convalescences will do you that to you."

She smiled thinly and Jorah winced. He had heard about what had happened between Daenerys and her brother soon after he arrived. Still, looking at the girl you would have to look closely to see any marks from her two beatings and, indeed, her beauty was incredible. More than once, Jorah had to stop himself from simply staring at her face from afar. Her body too, despite now being covered in an exercise mock (probably cut down from one of her guards-women's for her use), was also showing signs of what would become a magnificent womanhood.

Jorah was eager to see that, though he had to clench his teeth when he thought about her married to the Dothraki Khal. Even if she hadn't been, he knew that he was not even in a position to woo her. Still, he could watch from afar and he agreed with the plan Illyrio had thought up, in general. The Dothraki number and the speed of their armies would be impossible to stop.

Of course, Jorah had never been a field commander and, indeed, had only fought in a few battles so his perception was quite a bit skewed. Nor did he really understand tactics as a whole, the difference between light and heavy infantry, or what heavy cavalry could do to light cavalry like the barbarians. After all, most of the Dothraki didn't believe in wearing armor other than leather Jerkins nor did they train with or use lances for battle.

He watched as Daenerys moved over and began to do some calisthenics exercises, joined by Dmeric who patiently walked her through how to hold her knife and how to use it. He would wait a while before teaching her how to use a sword, letting her muscles build up before that.

Dmeric didn't notice Jorah's stares but Daenerys did and decided to keep her distance from the man. While she knew that many women would have been willing to use their bodies to gain an ally in her position, Daenerys was not. She would win allies through personality, friendship, and the rightness of her cause; she would not try to woo them with her body. Such was beneath a Princess and she was a Princess of the House of Targaryen.

OOOOOO

Margaery sighed faintly in relief as High Garden **finally** came into view on the horizon. Her party was still several hours away but the end of the journey was in sight, at last. *And what an interminable horror this journey has been*, she thought to herself. Margaery had no trouble roughing it, as it were. She had gone on many horse riding expeditions when she was a young girl, after all.

No, what she objected to was the fact that Horas Redwyne had taken nearly every opportunity to try and sing her praise, or insinuate that Ranma wasn't worth her hand. He most certainly was, in every sense of the word, and this **fool** wasn't. For one thing, her grandmother was a Redwyne, which meant they were far too close to wed in terms of consanguinity, at least to her anyway. For another, there was no point. Redwyne was tied to Tyrell already and would remain so. And for another, the man was an **idiot**, who only saw her beauty and body, rather than her mind.

*No, if I marry my husband needs to see more than my tits and ass, no matter how fantastic they are. He'll need to see my mind and appreciate that view as well.* She thought sardonically to herself. Such terms should never have entered her highborn head of course, addressed so crassly anyway. But in the privacy of her mind, Margaery allowed herself such language at times.

Her thoughts were also much tarter these days because she was irritated with the knowledge that she was leaving Ranma behind where Myrcella could get at him. That little girl had far too much influence over her betrothed as it was.

Margaery still thought of Ranma as her betrothed, despite hearing word that her grandmother had called off formalizing said arrangement for the present, while their 'family crisis' continued. She hoped to persuade her grandmother to end that state of affairs, because, in her opinion, Joffrey was not only not going to be the Crown Prince for very much longer, if Lord Stark had his way, but was also not exactly a catch.

Beside her, Loras laughed, shaking his head, brunette locks bouncing in a way that many a maid would envy. "Are

you that eager to see home, little sister?"

"Eager to get away from Ser Horas the Halfwit." She quipped, having already made certain that the man was out of earshot. "Have I thanked you lately for how often you have come to my rescue there?"

"It is a true knight's duty to rescue a lady from any harm she might come to. Even if that harm is simply having her ear talked off by a well-meaning, yet foolish young man."

"You have been working on being better at the diplomacy thing, haven't you?" Margaery murmured wickedly, shaking his head. "Who would've thought it?"

"Well, I am of House Tyrell, we're known for our words as well as our deeds, you know." Loras said, bowing from the saddle toward her causing Margaery to laugh. She looked down the road as the sound of horses hooves reached them.

Her guards closed ranks around her, but it turned out to only be her oldest brother. "Willas!" she cried happily, kicking her heels against her horse's side, urging him forward.

Willas rode forward slowly, his lame leg always paining him on horseback, worse at higher speeds, nor was he anywhere near as comfortable as his siblings in the saddle. But he was still hale and hearty, and was among the kindest men that Margaery had known, despite his somber appearance, with a dark beard and deep-set, thoughtful eyes.

He folded Margaery into his arms kissing her on the cheek lovingly. "Welcome home, sister." He murmured. "You have been away for a while and from what I've heard." Willas went on, pulling back and looking at her. "Things in King's Landing are decidedly odd."

Margaery looked up at him shrewdly, standing back as well and the two of them moved over to the rest of the party, where her younger brother reached over to grab Willas's arm affectionately. "Brother." he said simply, smiling.

All the younger siblings had a great amount of affection for their oldest brother and respect as well. Even Loras, who really only had interest in martial endeavors, respected him. Willas was educated, insightful, calm, and, above all, kind, always making time for his younger siblings, though it was well known that he had a special soft spot for Margaery. *As should be the case. The Knight of Roses thought amusingly. One daughter among all of the siblings? Of course she'll be the apple of all our eyes.*

"So..." Willas said in his soft tones, looking at his sister and waving away the other knights, indicating he wanted to talk to his siblings alone. As heir to House Tyrell, he was of course obeyed, even by the knight who wished to make himself seem presentable enough to earn Margaery's hand. "From your perspective sister, tell me what has been going on in that chamber pot of a city."

"That's a loaded question." Margaery said, looking at him closely. "Is this for you or are you simply prepping me for our grandmother?"

Willis laughed quietly, shaking his head. "In part I suppose, but even if I prefer to spend all my time with my hawks and dogs, and my horses of course." He patted his horse on the neck affectionately, making the magnificent roan wicker in pleasure. "I do know that I have duty to prepare myself to take over from Father. Though I do hope that time is far in the future of course."

Actually, Willas was well thought of by his grandmother, despite the fact that they sometimes disagreed on political matters and even other things at times. Olenna Redwyne was and had always been of the opinion that her son-in-law wasn't very intelligent and certainly wasn't that good of a leader but her firstborn grandson, at the very least, had the makings of one.

"Where to begin..." Margaery muttered, stroking her chin thoughtfully as the party continued. "I suppose I should begin by saying that Ranna and Lord Stark are not... quite what I expected. Yes, Lord Stark is rather a stiff-necked individual, especially when it comes to matters of honor, but he's also quite cagey. Did you know that he had asked for the Blackfish to join them in King's Landing?"

Willas's eyes narrowed. He had met Brynden Tully at one point, before the disastrous tourney in which he had maimed his leg falling under his horse after being deposited on the dirt by Prince Oberyn's lance. While not as well read as other people might be, Blackfish was able to discern things about people far more quickly than most would've liked. "Interesting. That speaks well of his planning, at least. Go on."



"I wasn't able to truly earn their confidence, though I think it was coming close with Ranma, at the very least, before I was called away. But they definitely think there is something going on, something suspicious about the former Hand's death. What that could be I don't know nor did they truly seem to have any clear idea."

"And this Ranma fellow? What did you think of him?"

Margaery went into detail about Ranma, emphasizing his blunt manner as well as his extreme intelligence before going on to his martial skills. At that point, she handed the conversation over to Loras, who went into greater detail on that topic. Through it all, Willas asked few questions but spent most of his time simply searching his siblings' faces, frowning faintly, not worriedly, but contemplatively.

That interview was somewhat easy for Margaery. Her meeting with her grandmother later that evening did not. She sat across from Olenna on a small stool made more for a child than a young woman, while Olenna reclined in a soft stuffed chair.

Her grandmother's wrinkly face was almost hidden by the shadow of the torches set into walls behind her in Olenna's private study. "You were supposed to entwine the Crown Prince with your vines, my dear." she said, coldly. "You were not supposed to be enchanted in turn by this Stark boy."

"What makes you think I was, grandmother?" Margaery said scoffing.

"The fact that you only spent a few hours a day with Joffrey, even at the very beginning and increasingly spent as much time away from him as you could. The fact you spent so much time talking about this Ranma fool right now and that we have not heard any hint of the Queen, at the very least, pushing to change Joffrey's marriage from the Stark girl to you!"

Margaery frowned angrily. "It's true that the more time I spent with Joffrey the less I wanted to be around him but that alone should have told you something." Margaery looked to her side to stare at Septa Nysterica where she sat on a much more comfortable chair, wondering what the other woman had told Olenna.

Nysterica stared back defiantly. She had done her duty to the family that she was sworn to. It wasn't her fault that Margaery had forgotten her own duty.

"Regardless," her grandmother growled, "you put us in a dangerous position girl, seeming to join sides with the Starks against the Lannisters."

"I don't know about that one." Margaery said truthfully, shaking her head. "The Queen certainly wasn't interested in pushing for her son to wed me rather than Sansa. Oh, I think she might've been open to it at first. But she was too deeply involved in whatever is going on the Small Council to really spend time pushing the King away from his position on that marriage, which, I learned, is something of a dream for him, his homage to the memory of Lyanna Stark."

That caused her grandmother's eyes to narrow. "What can you tell me about that? How much influence have the Starks gained and the Lannisters lost?"

"Hasn't Loras reported anything? His friendship with Renly should at least have told him something." Margaery asked, giving her some time to think.

"Nothing beyond the normal power struggles that go on whenever a new Hand is chosen." Olenna scoffed, waving her hand. "Stark's overreaching, he doesn't have enough men in King's Landing nor the right sort to protect himself if things go to pot, and they will. Still, tell me what you can."

"I can only speak from what I have seen, grandmother." Margaery warned, before going into detail on what she had seen of the power struggle going on. She ended by saying "And while Lord Stark might not truly know friends from enemies just yet, it would not surprise me in the slightest if he had more resources on hand than his enemies know about."

Olenna nodded thoughtfully, having asked a few questions here and there, but mostly taken her granddaughter's words in silently. "Hm, well no one has ever said that as a general he wasn't decent, at least, but this isn't his kind of fight. Regardless, you'll be safe here."

"Safe from what?" Margaery exclaimed, angrily shaking her head, losing her normal self-control for a moment, the better to get her points across. "Who in their right mind would risk angering House Tyrell by harming me, let alone could get through the guards I had and Loras too! All you did was remove one of the most important of our House's

political pieces from where I could do the most good! I was influencing Ranma, not the other way around. Yes, I didn't want to get close to Joffrey. Yes, something about him bothers me! You haven't even met that boy, grandmother. There is something **wrong** about him! That is as plain as I can put it! There were rumors. I know you don't want to hear about them but if they had any substance to them..." she shook her head.

"All the more reason for you to have played them both off against one another." her grandmother growled. "Besides..." she shook her head. "Like I said in my message, the brighter the candle, the faster it burns out. This Ranma Stark is heading for a burnout, as is House Stark in King's Landing. Whether that will spill over to the rest of their House I don't know, but you are well out of it now."

Margaery sighed, sagging back on her stool with a shake of her head. "I think you're wrong but I obviously can't change your opinion. I will say, however, that any physical confrontation with Ranma will end horribly for the opposing side."

"She's right." Loras nodded from where he was leaning against a nearby wall. He never came near his grandmother if he could help it, her opinion of him and his being a knight was acidic at best, but he couldn't get out of not being here at all. "You didn't see him utterly destroy the Mountain, grandmother, it was staggering. Jaime Lannisters may be the best **known** swordsman in the land but he is no longer the best and I don't think he's even within spitting distance."

"The Seven save me from fools!" Olenna growled. "Then the solution is simple, you young idiots." She went on, lifting up a message from one of her agents in King's Landing. Simply remove the boy and place him on something that can be destroyed easily."

"What do you mean?" Margaery asked, going cold inside. While she would have scoffed at the idea of her being madly in love with Ranma or anything of that nature, she was firm friends with him, with more very possible in the future, and any threats to him like that was not something she wanted to hear.

"Your Ranma Stark has been sent on wild dragon chase, apparently. It was a closely kept secret so obviously it only took a few days for it to be noted by practically everyone but he was sent after something in Essos. And unless he can swim hundreds of miles, I daresay that something dangerous will happen to him and the ship he's on."

Mace spoke up now, for the first time of the evening. He had been content to let Olenna talk, for the most part, but this he was more interested in. "Besides, Tywin is ready to move against the Starks. I've read reports and I think he's going to try to break up 'the pack' so to speak, kill each of them in turn. Hah, but he doesn't want to face us at the same time and has taken steps to make certain we don't move against him since he knows we could smash him in the open field! Specifically," he tapped another missive, a formal raven tube with the sigil of Casterly Rock on it, "he has opened talks between House Lannister and House Tyrell to marry you to his heir, Tyrion."

To her credit, it wasn't the thought of the Imp's well-known deformity or his japery that made Margaery blanch. No, that was caused by how good a match that was from her family's perspective. It was with a sinking stomach that she realized she was well and truly boxed in and had lost any way to help her friend.

"Ah, it's just a delaying tactic." Olenna cackled, having watched her closely. "After all, if Tywin removes the Starks, he'll no doubt 'accidentally' have something happen to Sansa; such a shame the girl got caught up in her father's machinations but..." She shook her head again. "Pity, she's a valuable piece but one too likely to turn in the hand. No, the marriage will be cancelled one way or another, regardless of Robert's feelings about it. Heh, we might be able to put a crown on your head eventually, girl!"

Margaery carefully kept her scowl off her face but silently vowed to kill Joffrey in their marriage bed if such a thing came to pass. There were some things that she would never do, even for her family.

Olenna could tell her granddaughter was unhappy about that and shook her head mentally. The girl had obviously more feelings for the Stark boy than she wanted to let on but Olenna had no doubt she would do her duty. "That is all: leave me now, both of you."

From his position by the window, where he had been looking out over the castle while still listening to everything that went on, Willas turned to watch as his two younger siblings left, then looked at his grandmother and father. "While I think you are correct in removing Margaery from King's Landing, perhaps we should think about sending Loras back."

He held up a hand calmly as Mace seem to ready to explode on him. "Regardless of what else is happening, we could use a person on the ground there and our friendship with House Baratheon through Renly is strong. We should be there to back him up, at least, and take what advantage we can if the worst comes to pass. Robert's friendship with Lord Stark is strong and there is no way to know what he will do if open combat occurs between Stark and

Lannister nor how far Tywin is prepared to go to regain his House's influence in court."

Mace frowned thoughtfully and his grandmother nodded sharply. "Loras will go back in two days, and will remain there while we think about what to do with Margaery's hand."

Mace left soon after that, leaving Willas alone with his grandmother. "There is one other point I feel should be said, grandmother, one you and father both missed, even Margaery missed it. As impossible as it sounds, what if House Stark survives? What if the wolves are able to win out? They'll be in a stronger position than ever and they won't forget that you, that House Tyrell, pulled away when it seemed that they might be in danger. Their honor will compel them to never trust us again and we will have missed a massive opportunity."

His grandmother scowled at that but it was thoughtful scowl and she tapped one finger on the table, thinking hard, while Willas bowed his way out.

OOOOOOO

The village was small, with nothing to denote it from any other hundred or so small villages scattered hither and yon over the Riverlands, a true one horse town, or so it would be called in another dimension. Unfortunately for its denizens, it was also near the border between the Riverlands and the Westerlands, as well as defenseless.

This made it a perfect target for the Mummies, who had descended upon it like a horde of locusts, if locusts came to pillage and rape rather than merely eat you out of house and home. A few hardy villagers had escaped but not many. Of course that too was part of the plan, after all to bait the trap you had to make the prey aware of the bait in the first place.

OOOOOOO

"Damn it, it's like the Kingswood Brotherhood mad Aerys had to deal with! Well, I'll be damned if I let a bandit army operate so openly like this!" Robert pounded the table in front of the small council, irritated beyond all reason by the messages that had reached the Red Keep from the villages and small holdings along the border between Westerlands and Riverlands, reports that had demanded a very early meeting of the small council, including the King himself. "Where did they come from, by the Seven, they must know the mountains between Riverlands and Westerlands like the backs of their hands to move so many men around without using the main passes!"

"My father might have been slow to respond to the threat but I have no doubt that forces are already on their way to deal with these bandits if they remain on the Westerlands side of the borders. My father has short shrift with such men. Though we also must respond, especially if these bandits keep working the border like they are. What they plan to do in the long term I don't know but such men seldom think that far." Cersei frowned from her place, her face a mask of cold fury at the idea of these bandits, though in reality she knew precisely what they were.

Indeed, she had been given her marching orders to say that very thing. Cersei hated being ordered around like that but at least her father had given grudging approval for what she had been doing of late, even if he ignored her advice in that same message by acting in such a manner to redress the loss of Gregor and their continuing loss of influence.

"We'll have to squash this, true." Robert groused. "We don't want other bandits popping up with the same idea elsewhere. How many men can we pull from the garrison here in King's Landing?"

"We could pull some six-hundred easily enough." Ned said after a moment, the various nobles and knights here could easily muster that number. "That plus any forces coming out of the Riverlands and whatever Lord Lannister sends should be able to run these bandits to ground, no matter where they hide."

From his place, Littlefinger frowned, wondering if this was an overt move, a prelude for a larger, bloodier game against the wolves or if it had been made merely to draw Ranma out from the city to where he could be overwhelmed, removing his influence on Tommen before moving against the other Starks. *If so, Lord Tywin missed the mark but I can use this just as well as the Lannisters can. It isn't Lord Stark that is most dangerous one here at the moment, at least to me. That would be Brynden, who is getting dangerously close to realizing how much true influence I have throughout the city. If he finds the dummy merchant houses where I've laundered the money I've taken from the loans from the Iron Bank, it will go poorly for me rather quickly.*

"We should think of who to command them carefully." he murmured. "You're right that the force will be large enough to do the job but the commander will have to be someone all portions of the force can respect and who is diplomatic enough not to step on any toes. Might I suggest the Blackfish?"

Eddard very carefully did not jump on Littlefinger hard for that suggestion. Once again, he didn't know if that suggestion was just a suggestion with Petyr simply trying to look out for the best interest of the kingdom. After all, Brynden was truly an able commander, an expert scout, and leader of light infantry and cavalry. He also wondered if Petyr was beginning to feel the pressure from something Brynden was doing.

Beyond that, Eddard was resolved not to lose his ally. "I don't think so. After all, he would be seen as a representative of the Riverlands. No, we need to stamp a Royal signature on this, though I will send ten of my own men and twenty of the men from Riverrun led by Ser Desmond Grell to serve under whoever we assign to the command."

At those words, Petyr subsided, knowing he couldn't push farther without bringing more suspicion on him.

Robert grunted in acknowledgment and thought hard for a moment before nodding. "I'd love to go myself but I get the impression I won't be allowed to." He pouted outrageously. "I never get any fun." he muttered.

A polite chuckle made its way around the table but Ser Selmy spoke up seriously. "We cannot afford to lose you, Your Majesty, and no one is arrow proof. The chaos of war respects no crown."

"Then I think Ser Thoros and Ser Dondarrion should go." Robert said swiftly, as in his element here while talking about battle and commanders as he wasn't talking politics or anything else. "Thoros is a good friend, an able warrior, and known ally of the Crown, while Dondarrion is an upcoming blade of the Stormlands known to be well thought of in court. Experience on one side and diplomacy on the other. Both of them will have the King's Remit as well, and will be able to command whoever is sent by either the Riverlands or Westerlands."

The small counsel thought for a moment then all of them nodded one after the other. "I would prefer to send one of the Kingsguard but, of them all, only my brother and Ser Selmy have real command experience. The commander obviously can't be sent and my brother would, despite his positions as a Kingsguard, be seen as representative of the Westerlands." Cersei said. "If you believe Ser Thoros and Dondarrion can handle this, I won't suggest anyone else."

*And neither will be missed either,* she thought to herself. Cersei was still hopeful of playing a soft game but of late she had decided to put into place her own plans, just in case. With her father's missive open warfare seemed a much more certain thing.

She looked slightly past the King at her cousin, sighing internally with revulsion as she thought of one particular scheme she had thought up as a contingency. *Hopefully, it won't come to that. After all, even if, as I am almost certain will be the case, Joffrey is passed over eventually and Tommen is named heir, he is still my son and Ned seems more and more certain that he is Robert's true heir. That will protect me and I can sacrifice someone else, if push comes to shove, to cover myself in Joffrey's case. Regardless, he will live as my son and I can make some sort of deal there to keep my oldest cub's head on his shoulders.*

This thinking was part and parcel of the Queen's greatest fault. She loved fiercely but it was a possessive love, a controlling love and, alas, she did not realize that the tools and the people she loved might have their own plans. Nor did she realize that her own needs might not be as important as their own.

At the moment it didn't much matter and the King snorted as if the Queen's impression of fighting men or commanders was worth anything, sneering at the very idea. "In that case," Robert said getting to his feet, "I'll find Sir Thoros and the rest of you can get to organizing the expedition."

The small counsel rose as one to bow to the King as he and the Queen left, Cersei not having anything to contribute to such a discussion. That discussion didn't last long. The logistics, thanks to the city, its stores, and storehouses was easy enough and within two days, a force of six-hundred, mostly mounted light infantry and heavy cavalry in the form of knights and their retainers, marched out of the city.

OOOOOO

The Queen frowned as she strode off, having left the King while he went in search of his drinking partner, Thoros. Though just this side of a roaring drunkard, there was no doubt he was an able commander of men, so long as he remained sober. Still, how likely that was, she didn't know. *Of course, the 'bandits' are only part of the problem he'll face. I wish my father hadn't taken this step, though from his perspective, it makes sense and, if Ranma were here, it would possibly have even worked out well enough to...remove him from play.*

That thought made Cersei's frown deepen slightly but she pushed that to the side. She could not allow her thoughts on Ranma Stark and how much she actually... liked the boy, despite being a Stark, to color her responses to her father's actions. Cersei knew why he had set this in motion and agreed with the need to curtail House Stark's growing

influence. Still, a part of Cersei was thankful that Ranma would not be caught in this trap. She doubted that anything Ranma ran into chasing down the Targaryen siblings would be nearly as dangerous as the trap Tywin had laid out.

*And it still removes a few of the King's most staunch supporters. Cersei reasoned. Both of them would certainly back Robert's chosen Hand should anything occur here in King's Landing. And it well might. I know Eddard is still looking into Jon Arryn's death and, though I have no idea how close he is to finding out how Jon died, I know Eddard is suspicious of how unlike their 'father' my children are. Ranma was actually a help there. With him taking an interest in Tommen, he's changed him enough so that my little cub seems to be a stag.*

Entering the Royal suites in the holdfast, Cersei looked up as a maid, one of the ones assigned nearly full time to her daughter, came up to her. The maid's expression was a mix of the normal servant's mask, amusement, and a hint of what Cersei could only think of as commiseration. "Your Majesty, the Princess requests your presence in her room." She moved close and went on in a whisper. "Her highness has had her first bleeding this morning."

Cersei nodded, her face a mask, though she now knew where the amusement and commiseration in the maid's face came from. Cersei's thoughts however were much more serious, wondering if this would add to her current troubles, not matter at all, or aid her in some fashion.

OOOOOOO

"Our main target is no longer in the city." one man murmured to another as they were forced, as if by happenstance to share a pillar of in upscale whorehouse in the capital.

"True." said the other man thoughtfully, tapping his glass, his eyes quickly moving from place to place, making certain that none of the highly paid concubines in this brothel could overhear the two men. After all, the best way to keep his secret was for no one to know about it. And despite the fact that they were whores, that didn't mean they didn't have ears. "We missed him by at least a week."

"So, change targets to the secondary one?" The first asked lifting a mug of wine to his lips.

"Yes, I believe we should." the second said. "Tomorrow?"

"Well, the secondary and tertiary will be meeting in one of their safe houses the day after tomorrow. That will do nicely for me."

"Indeed, I on the other hand, will need to wait and watch for a time."

The two professional assassins nodded to one another. After a moment, one moved over to a sofa vacated by a whore and her client while the other sighed sadly making his way over to the matron of the place and paid his shot, shrugging his shoulders as if to say he had run out of free time.

Neither man had noticed that one of the whores had stopped in the doorway leading to the kitchenette area behind where they had been leaning against the pillar. *I think Alayaya will want to hear about this.*

OOOOOOO

Two days later Ned and Brynden were down at the Mountain Honey, meeting with a rather swarthy looking sailor in the backroom of the alehouse. He was a former Valeman who had migrated north and joined up with a crew out of White Harbor. He was the go-between with the captain of the ship that Lord Manderly had sent southward to provide a ready escape for Ned and his family if needed. The fact that it also had a crew of a hundred and eighty men aboard, all of whom, despite being sailors, were also men-at-arms was a bonus.

The ship's reason for remaining in port was a simple one and easy to understand. It was a chartered vessel, but the captain's current employer had yet to pay him for their last job, and the captain refused to leave on the next until they were paid.

If anyone looked into it, they would find that the lord the ship was chartered to, a middling level Vale lord, was in debt and couldn't pay for it. But the captain had no way of knowing that, going by the correspondence he regularly received from his current employer, whose pride would never allow him to say he was penniless..

Ned and Brynden were filling the man in on some failsafe plans to pass on, verbally, to the captain when they were interrupted by the tavern master knocking on the door in the signal for a serious business. In his hand, he held a note wrapped in red cloth. Both Ned and Brynden's eyes widened at that, and the man passed over to them quickly before leaving.

Ned waited several minutes before opening the note. He smiled faintly at the rather rough script. While the whore Alayaya could read and write, thanks to her mother teaching her so she could help her with the books, her writing style left much to be desired. Still, it was legible enough, nor was there a problem with the mind behind it. 'Two assassins were seen talking to one another about a target being out of the city and switching to a secondary target. Since this was only a week after Ranma left, we might assume it mean you. Be on your guard, Hand.'

The two men looked at one another, then left quickly. The sailor would wait another few hours and then exit the inn in the company of one of the barmaids.

As they passed through the public drinking area, Brynden made a specific signal, holding his pinky and forefinger with his thumb and wiggling his hand in the direction of the table where several men from Riverrun had been waiting for him to leave before following him as usual. The squad of six quickly stood up and made their way over. "There might be an assassin or possibly two looking for myself and Lord Stark." the Blackfish said quietly. "Be on your guard; we will be heading back to the Red Keep now."

"And from now on," he said looking over Lord Stark, "you're going to stay there, Ned."

"Agreed, unfortunately." Eddard replied with a grimace. This world of assassins and shady dealings was foreign to him but he was becoming adept in moving through it. *I just wish I could convince myself that was a good thing.*

Despite these precautions, one of the assassins had already moved into position near the Mountain Honey alehouse, high up on the roof of a nearby tanning hall. It was a little over four stories tall and allowed him a vantage point down into the road that led from the Keep down to the alehouse.

Seeing his targets come out, he sighted down his specially made crossbow, a very expensive one, whose use and his own skill with it was why he could command such high prices. Of course, his fellow assassin was almost as good with his little knife but given the fact that both of their secondary and tertiary targets tended to wear armor most of the time, the sniper believed he had a much better shot at fulfilling their task in the capital.

He frowned suddenly, noticing the six men with Riverrun colors circling around his targets. Still, they didn't have nearly enough of an angle to block him from shooting down at the two men. He closed one eye again sighting down the line of his crossbow; waiting until the tip of the bolt was pointed directly at Ned Starks face, then moved slightly forward, leading him along the road. He waited a moment as he got used to his target's pace, allowing him to correctly estimate his position. He breathed in, then out and then fired.

One of the men from Riverrun was named Ernest. He had particularly good ears and large ones; it was a point of japey for his fellow men-at-arms. They were always making fun of him for having 'the most honest ears in the country'. At this point, however, they served him well because he heard the faint twang in the air of a crossbow being fired over the general hubbub of the city. Decided to err on the side of caution, he pushed both his Lord's brother and Lord Stark down to the ground, throwing his body over them.

Even as Ernest's fellows gaped in shock at his sudden action, the crossbow bolt smashed into the paving stones after passing through where Ned Stark's head would have been. Two of the men-at-arms immediately turned and traced the quarrel's trajectory. Looking up at the tanner's rooftop, they could see a man moving away quickly. Both of them raced towards the building, one towards the front of the Hall, the other to the back in an effort to cut the man off.

"My thanks, Ernest." Brynden said, pushing himself to his feet after Ernest moved off him.

Ned, too, got to his feet, nodding in thanks to the man who had just saved his life. "What do you think the chances are that they will be able to catch that man?"

"Off of the main streets, the city is a warren. If the man knows where he's going, I doubt they'll be able to catch them." Brynden replied sadly.

"Damn." Ned said shaking his head. *So, someone with a lot of money wants my son and I dead? I wonder why... Lord Stark suddenly snorted slightly, shaking his head. Spoiled for choice really, just wish there was some way to figure out which of the reasons apply.* He shook his head, wondering what his son was doing just then and how long it would take a message from the Tower to get back to him. All he knew was that this was only the beginning.

O O O O O O O

Ranma ducked under a lunge from his bonded direwolf, who skittered along on the wooden deck for a moment before his claws found purchase. Fenris turned, his teeth bared as he lunged again. The two were roughhousing at the

moment, Ranma not really having much of anything to do aboard the ship. Even though he had offered to help, Ranma didn't know enough about sailing so he had been turned down. Apparently, you needed a lot more knowledge than could be taught in a few days to be a help rather than a hindrance.

Ranma thought he probably could've learned enough to be of help but he wasn't about to push it. He didn't really trust the crew, not after Fenris had killed those two assassins or whatever they had been. However, he had made it known that the two girls were under his protection, which had allowed the both of them to come out about their sex, much to the relief of Arianne who had been suffering quite a bit thanks to her given disguise. There was only so long she could have gone wrapping her chest the way she had to.

The thought of the Dornish Princess brought a frown to Ranma's face even as he grabbed Fenris in a headlock, then began to noogie the direwolf mercilessly until he was lifted off his feet and thrown through the air with a growl. He laughed, landing easily on his feet before he was pounced upon by Fenris and borne to the deck.

Even as he wrestled with his direwolf, Ranma's thoughts remained on the Princess. The girl had not stopped in her attempts to use her body to influence his thoughts, always asking Ranma what he was going to do with the Targaryen children, never ceasing in her daily attempts to get close to him, to flirt with him. With his protection of her and Obara, they had both gone back to wearing their normal clothing and this had allowed Arianne to use her charms. Arianne didn't seem to understand that very insistence and the way she was so open with her sexuality, drove Ranma off.

It wasn't like with Alayaya who was equally beautiful but preferred simple closeness, more of a soft sell than an overt one. Alayaya had simply been looking for a good time and, though Ranma might have imagined it, he thought she might have simply liked Ranma for himself and the sheer mystery of the Rock Hurler persona he had taken on.

It was also different from Margaery who, after getting to know Ranma, didn't make a point of her good looks, simply befriending him. She never used her body to try and get something out of him, save for a few times jokingly during chess games. Myrcella, for all her crush on him (Ranma was still of the opinion it would fade in time), would never think of using her body in such a manner.

And although Cersei had, she never acted so obviously. But like the Queen, Arianne wanted something from him and was using her body as a weapon to get it, yet far more directly and more, well, **seriously** than the Queen. Cersei seemed to have simply seen it as a game after their talk at the inn, knowing nothing more could come from it.

Arianne on the other hand didn't know enough about him to like him as an individual, she simply liked the fact that he was powerful and could help her ambitions and that of her family and had already done so by killing the Mountain. She made no bones about the fact that act had been the one to really get her interested in him.

Frankly, she sort of reminded him of a mix between Shampoo and Kodachi, though why he couldn't quite say. Maybe it was the mix of her sexual nature and imperious attitude when dealing with the sailors. *Kodachi could be like that*, he thought to himself, *always sure of herself and her so-called noble family*.

Ranma was suddenly forced to take his fight with Fenris a little more seriously when he found himself almost on his back with Fenris gnawing playfully at his shoulder. Fenris had long gotten used to the fact that his human was quite a bit more durable than most and that impacted what he could do during their play. So Ranma put aside his thoughts, simply enjoying his time with Fenris, the sun and the sea, and the moving waves around them. Despite missing Myrcella, Sansa, Tommen, Brynden, and his father deeply, the time away from the court was just what the doctor ordered.

Two days later, this idyllic time was interrupted by a hail from the lookout up in the crow's nest. "Sail ho!" A moment later his voice came back, now sounding almost terrified. "Ironborn! It's one of their damn longships, can't mistake that shape!"

Ranma stood up quickly, heading towards the room that had been given to him that he had turned over to the two women, though he still left his weapons there. He passed by the merchant captain and asked quizzically, "I thought the Ironborn had given over their raiding and isn't this rather far afield for them?"

"They go where the waves can take them, the black hearted bastards." The Captain grunted, looking worried, though he smiled at Fenris and Ranma for the first time on this voyage. He hadn't liked the big beast since it had boarded his ship and the northern prince also worried him in some way. But now they might just prove their worth. "I trust we can call on you to help aid us when they try to board us?"

"Sure." Ranma said with a shrug. "Though, if they come close enough, I might be able to stop them from boarding at all."

Seconds later, he was in the room where Arianne and Obara spent most of their time aboard the ship. Obara was asleep until the door banged open, causing her to jolt awake quickly, her hand going to her short sword, laid out on the bed next to her. "What?"

Arianne had been sitting at the small table, one hand using a brush on her hair as she stared at her image thoughtfully. The fact that she was wearing a white silk negligée that showed off her body to great effect was not lost on Ranma but he ignored it. *I'm getting as good at that in this lifetime as I was in the last*, he thought to himself amusingly. *Only this time it's actually on purpose!*

He quickly made his way over to the sea-chest where he had stored his gear, pulling on the greaves and chest plate of his armor. He scowled a little as he flexed his shoulders irritably. The plate armor was simply a little too cumbersome for his tastes and he debated taking it off but decided against it. Then he reached in pulling out his two katars, sliding them into the special sheaths at his lower back, before looking at his katana, before shaking his head and leaving it where it lay.

"What's going on?" Arianne asked quickly.

"Ironborn. You two should stay here unless you have a sudden hankering to become sea wives, I think they call them? Raping, slaving bastards." He said grimly shaking his head. "Never understood why Theon thought that was such an honorable occupation."

"Theon..." Arianne muttered, even as she raced over to her own sea-chest pulling on her most practical clothing, which incidentally covered her body completely, also hiding a few small holdout knives. "That would be that Greyjoy heir that was taken to Winterfell to ensure the Ironborn did not rebel again?"

"That's him." Ranma nodded. "He's a friend but he had some truly odd ideas of what was honorable and what wasn't until I sorted him out."

"And how did manage that?" Obara asked looking up from where she had just pulled on sailors pantaloons. "From what I know of the Ironborn, they have nothing but disdain for anyone else and their idea of 'paying the iron price' is a central part of their culture."

"By dangling him out a window as we talked philosophy." Ranma said, shrugging. "It worked."

Both women gaped at him for a moment then laughed as he turned away, racing back out of the room. "You might not be making much headway in influencing him but at least it's been an amusing trip." Obara muttered, shaking her head.

Arianne shrugged. A few days ago she would've said it was only a matter of time until she broke the young man's self-control down but Arianne had been thinking the past day or so that it simply wasn't going to happen. Something about the way she was going about it seemed to put Ranma off, though she couldn't figure out what. She was simply acting as a woman of Dorne would when trying to woo a man and she had never run into a man who would be unwilling to give in.

And then there was her fear of Fenris. Something about him touched off a deeply hidden fear in her; the giant wolf was simply too smart and far too large. Thankfully, Fenris didn't seem to care one way or another about her or her flirting with his master. Still, Arianne was beginning to think she might need to look out for other opportunities when they arrived in Pentos.

Outside, Ranma had quickly joined the crewmen who were being handed out weapons from the weapons locker. He grabbed up a bow and a bundle of arrows tied together by twine, noticing that none of them actually had quivers; there weren't enough arrows on board for everyone to have one. Still, he moved over and looked at the incoming Ironborn ship, stretching the bow out and getting a feel for the pull of it.

It was a hell of a lot lighter than he would've wanted. Even Edd, who was the weakest of the wolfsworn, would've turned his nose up at it and Theon would've used it for kindling rather than an actual weapon. He looked over at the captain and shook his head. "You should probably fire whoever bought you your weapons. These are pathetic."

"Most of the Essos city states frown on free traders being heavily armed. If you need protection, you pay for one of their galleons to escort you to and fro or join a merchants' guild." the older man growled. "These are the best I could get away with."

"Lovely." Ranma muttered, pulling back on the bowstring with an arrow already notched as he sighted along it at the



incoming ship. He couldn't fire at the distance he wished to and, despite what Theon thought, Ranma had almost as good an eye for this as Theon and was far stronger. But the bow simply wouldn't be able to withstand the strain.

He frowned further as the Ironborn longship came into range, pulling up their sail, going to full oars. Like the Vikings back on Earth, the longships of the Ironborn were low to the water in comparison to a trade cog, slim and fast moving through the water under either oars or sail. Despite the captain's best efforts they were not going to out run them, the cog could not move under sail as quickly as the Ironborn longship could under oars, nor could it move under oars itself for any length of time.

That didn't mean the captain was going to make it easy for the reavers however. He was able to keep away from them for an hour, but then the Ironborn ship was within Ranma's range. He let fly at the lookout who was still perched up in the mainsail, his bow, despite his best effort at controlling his strength, snapping under the strain. The man gave a choked off cry and fell to the deck below, Ranma's arrow in one of his shoulders. "Damn and I was aiming for his head."

OOOOOOO

Turom Myer was an Ironborn captain of middle age, with a flowing beard and deep-set, beady eyes in a face that showed the wear of a life spent at sea. Like most Ironborn, he disdained the normal sailor's fear of drowning and wore heavy chain mail along with a large helmet. At his side, waiting for the action to begin, was a large hafted spear. His family's coat-of-arms, ten nooses on a shield of white marked by a blood red edge, was painted proudly on his ship's sails.

He was the younger brother of the head of his house, whose name was Jon. Though Turom was a better fighting man than his brother, he knew he was nowhere near as smart. Turom had long chafed under the fact his house was a vassal to their old time foes, Harlaw. He, like his brother and their sometimes ally, Euron Greyjoy, wished to return to the days of glory, when the Ironborn took what they willed when they willed.

That was why he and his personal ship, the *Undertow*, were here. The trade between Essos and Westeros was rich, the women of Essos made good salt wives, and the rest of their goods were valuable as well. Plus, the Essos city states didn't seem willing to chase him so long as he stayed well away from their fat, useless cities. This would be the fourth ship he had taken since arriving in these waters and not a one of them had put up much of a fight.

He looked up in surprise as his lookout fell out of the crow's nest with a cry, landing with a splat on the deck. He laughed. "Looks like the soft Essos pussies have found someone with a spine, boys! Let's see how well he can do when we feed him a foot of steel!"

His crew roared back at him in agreement, both the men readying themselves for the initial push onto the other ship and the half working the longship's oars. Once they had a few grapnels in the other ship, the oarsmen on that side would join their fellows first, followed by the others while the two ships were tied together. Everyone would have a chance to bloody their blades and win some glory.

He laughed as more arrows fell, most of them missing, others being blocked by the shields of his men, though a few fell. All the better, the portions of the spoils would be more for those who survived and death in battle, even by arrows like this, were worthy deaths in the eyes of the Drowned God.

He continued to laugh as the first grapnels flew out, then there was a cry, one that he hadn't heard since he and the other Ironborn rose in rebellion against the Iron Throne. "Winter is Coming!" And suddenly the easy victory Turom had envisioned disappeared.

OOOOOOO

Ranma didn't wait for the Ironborn to come fully alongside, seeing the Raiders ready their grapnels he raced to the back of the ship where the Ironborn were coming from. Knocking aside a few of the grapnels as they came in Ranma then leaped across the five yards of open water to land aboard the Ironborn ship, his hands both holding one of his katars. "Winter is Coming!"

The nearest Ironborn spent a few precious seconds gaping at the man who was performing this acrobatic act, then charged him as he landed aboard their ship. Four of them died before they could even raise their swords, his katars punching through their chain mail armor with ease.

The next few were better prepared and came forward with their shields high and their swords lashing out. Soon, Ranma was in the middle of a melee on the deck of the Ironborn ship but despite his best efforts the ship was still

being propelled forward by the rowers on either side of the longship and coming alongside the caravel.

Several more ropes were hurled across to tie the two boats together so that the Ironborn could pull the ships into contact, their oars on that side pulled in expertly at the same time. But before they could finish this maneuver, Fenris followed his master. With a snarl, the giant direwolf leaped across the space between the ships, slamming into the shields of the few Ironborn from the initial group ready to board the caravel that hadn't already been pulled into combat with Ranma.

When their blades struck Fenris, they found to their shock and dismay that his coat turned their blades. Ranma had spent every evening he could teaching Fenris how to armor his fur like Ranma could his skin. He had been able to learn to do it, though he couldn't do it for very long.

For this battle, it would be enough. With a howl, Fenris was in and among the humans before they could reform their shield wall, snarling and lashing out with paws that smashed aside men and jaws that could bite through mail. A few tried to move up behind him, only to find that his hind legs were just as strong as his forelegs, a kick lashing back quickly and smashing faces or bodies as he leapt around.

For his part, Ranma was simply too fast. He was nicked in a few places but that was all. While his katars couldn't match the range of the Ironborn's longswords, they allowed him to use his full range of mobility. Even in the middle of battle, a few Ironborn had first looked at the odd weapons quizzically but that quizzical state passed quickly as they saw the somewhat short, triangle shaped blades slamming point first through chain mail easily and even once finding the eye-opening of a helmet.

The men aboard the caravel had not been idle. They were shooting into the ferocious melee occurring on the Ironborn ship, aimed fire now that they could fire straight over the shields that the Ironborn put up on the sides of their ships to protect the crew somewhat while they closed. Despite none of them being trained archers, they they killed many of the outriders of the melee before they were attacked by several Ironborn, who split off from the battle occurring around Ranma and Fenris to assault the free trader, pulling the ships into contact with one another, then throwing themselves across the gunnels with a roar. Whether that was eagerness to get into the fight or because they were running away from the two monsters in their midst was debatable.

More men poured out from the longship's hold, and soon the entire crew of Ironborn was engaged in either attacking Ranma and Fenris or attacking the crew of the caravel but Fenris had done his job even better than his master. Without the force necessary for that initial rush onto the other ship's deck, the Ironborn found themselves matched against two or even three defenders at a time and were unable to break through the defense of the caravel.

With Ranma and Fenris firmly ensconced on the longship, breaking up any attempt to create an actual wedge to drive onto the other ship, the battle was slowly going against the Ironborn. They didn't realize it at first, being too busy trying to fight off the two insane monsters in their midst, but the sailors of the trading ship could feel it, and it heartened them despite their own losses.

Turom himself tried to spear Ranma, slamming his spear forward toward what he hoped was a weak point in the creature's armor; no way could this be a human, after all. But Ranma ducked aside, one katar slashing out to cut into the shaft of the spear, slicing through it and continuing to slice into the captain's shoulder.

The man grunted in agony but his other hand quickly pulled out his short sword and he tried to stab Ranma. Ranma blocked it with his other katar even as his leg lashed out at another Ironborn, catching him and throwing him into two more. He then spun away from another spear thrust, still with one katar locked with the other man's sword.

The captain tried to head butt him but Ranma also wore a helmet and slammed his own head forward with as much strength as he could. The captain flew backwards, his neck broken and his helmet smashed from the force of the blow.

"Winter is Coming!" Ranma shouted again with Fenris now howling in support. That howl seemed to break something in the remaining Ironborn, touching a very primitive part of their brains and invoking terror. Now they were no longer trying to fight back against Ranma and Fenris. No, they were hacking at the ropes tying them to the caravel, trying to get away. Fenris and Ranma, however, were still there, still fighting, still killing.

The crew of the caravel sensing the turn of the tide finished the Ironborn on the trading ship's deck then charged over the gunnels themselves. They hacked down the Ironborn who had been trying to chop away at the ropes then began to push the reavers back.

Nevertheless, the Ironborn did not give up. They well knew what awaited them caught in the act of piracy like this and

it was better to go to the Drowned God in battle than to be executed or sold into slavery in one of the Free Cities. Several of them decided to offer themselves up personally, tossing themselves over the side of their ship, sinking quickly thanks to their armor.

About twenty minutes later the battle was over. The last Ironborn fell to the deck, gutted by a particularly swarthy sailor who grinned as he went about his work.

When the last Ironborn fell, Ranma sighed, looking around at the butchered Ironborn crew. In this kind of battle, Ranma knew he'd had basically every advantage above and beyond his own skill and strength. He had better weapons, although the Ironborn's swords had given them better reach but their shields had offset that by hampered their mobility and his armor and ki techniques to strengthen it had allowed him to take far more punishment. He was more mobile in an enclosed space like the deck of the ship, which was also too small for anyone to create any kind of formation against him, and far too small to get away from him to use bows.

Worse, the Ironborn, for all their ferocity, weren't really trained as Ranma understood the term. Oh, they had learned how to use their weapons well enough. They might even have been decent against a comparable force but they didn't know how to work well as a unit together, they fought as individuals, getting in one another's way a lot of the time once they were on the defensive.

Then Fenris was added into the deal. His size, ferocity, and his immunity to their weapons had terrified the Ironborn, who would've stood undaunted against Ranma by himself.

Though his ki-enhanced toughness hadn't lasted for the entire fight. Ranma could tell he had taken a few slashes and one on his side, in particular, looked like it might leave a scar and he was favoring one of his back legs, where he had taken a blow from a maul.

Fenris shook himself, covered with blood and ichor, lips wrinkling in distaste as he licked away some blood along his mouth. He moved gingerly over to his bonded master, nudging his head against Ranma's shoulder, whining lightly. "Yeah." Ranma said, shaking his head. "It's kind of always like this after a battle."

The two of them left the cleanup to the crew of the caravel, all of whom were now staring in mixed awe and fear at the two of them. He stalked through the ship to his room, Fenris padding after him. The door was barred and only opened when he said "It's me." in a loud voice.

Obara opened the door quickly, looking at him and Fenris in shock of the amount of blood splattered over them. "You won?"

"Yeah." Ranma said shaking his head as he moved past her, ignoring Arianne even as he stripped off his armor, dropping it to the ground not noticing the rivulets of blood seeping out of his clothing and trailing from the armor where it landed. All Ranma wanted right now was a bath and to forget, for a time at least, that the last hour or so had ever happened. "We won."

OOOOOOO

Edmure stretched his shoulders as he dismounted from his horse, keeping tight hold of the reins of the stallion as it tried to jolt away from him. It had been a gift from his father and Edmure had trained it himself but the animal still had a fractious attitude, made worse by the pace they had set. He and his men had used barges as often as they could, cutting down on the time to King's Landing a lot, but he had still set a hard pace when they were on horse.

He looked up from doing that as Lord Stark and his uncle came towards them smiling in welcome. "Uncle!" Edmure said happily, moving forward to pull the older man into a hug. "It's good to see you."

Whatever problem lay between the Brynden and Hoster had never stretched to the children. That problem had begun decades ago when Brynden had refused his father making a match for him with Lady Olenna Redwyne. Now, with Olenna having earned the name Queen of Thorns, that seemed like a very good idea indeed, at least on a personal level.

Politically, it would've been a major advantage for Riverrun, which was why Hoster had made it, but Brynden had always maintained that his older brother had no right to make his marriage for him. In their youth, both men were hotheaded and words were said that could not be unsaid during that confrontation. Brynden had left Riverrun and had not spoken with his older brother since.

"Edmure." Brynden replied. "We weren't expecting you, any particular reason for this visit?"

Despite his youth and headstrong nature, Edmure had a decent idea of how the game of politics was played, so said in a loud voice. "Well my father has been sort of irritated with me lately, says I need to liven up my ideas." He scowled theatrically, which he would be remonstrated for later. After all, there was no need to be a ham about it. "So he sent me here so that Lord Stark and the King could be examples for me."

He went on in a much quieter voice. "I'm also supposed to meet with Ranma and see if we can become acquaintances. While your marriage to my sister makes you family to us, Lord Stark, a stronger bond between Riverrun and Winterfell could only be a good thing."

Ned nodded, and waved his hands towards the Hand's Tower. "Let us get some food, and we can set your men up in the barracks."

About five minutes later, Edmure sat down in the family area of the tower with his uncle and Lord Stark. "How many men did you bring with you?"

Edmure grabbed up the glass of wine in front of him, sipping at it for a moment before answering. He frowned, looking around and down at the staircase leading up into the family area, one eyebrow raised. Ned nodded and made his way over to make certain that no one could be listening from the stairwell. After that, he came back and Edmure answered quickly. "I brought another hundred men from Riverrun. My father thinks there's going to be trouble here, and sent us to aid you, however we may. I had them enter the city over the past few days with myself and the thirty men with me coming last."

"Good thinking." Brynden grinned slapping the younger man on the shoulder. With those men, they made up the men lost to the punitive expedition and many more besides. "We may need you and them here before long." The two older men exchanged a glance.

When Eddard spoke, he sounded almost reluctant to share anything but he was willing to share enough to put the younger man on his guard. The central accusation against the Queen was too terrible to share with anyone, not until it could be proven. "The corruption in King's Landing was utterly appalling," he began, shaking his head. "The kingdom is still in debt despite my best efforts this past while and we still don't know precisely how but we're leaning towards someone stealing money from the treasury when and how they could. We haven't cleared anyone of that accusation yet, up to and including the Queen."

That made Edmure blanch but Ned continued. "The Lannister influence in the town is still much too great, in my opinion, though we've done a good job thus far in trying to cut that back. However, it may well come to a physical confrontation eventually, even with the Queen not willing to take part. She is not the only Lannister here nor is she her father's representative."

Edmure looked dubious; surely influence like that would not be enough to cause open conflicts to break out in the city. Ned could understand his dubiousness but if the accusation about the children or at least about Joffrey was true, the Queen would face death for treason and desperate people often act irrationally. "Surely, the Gold Cloaks would help you, you're the Hand, you speak for the king!"

"The gold cloaks are still full of corrupt officers and other men, despite my getting rid of their commander." Ned smiled, he had managed that, at least, and Janos had gone with a ship full of new Night's Watchmen up to the wall, along with another ship full of Tyrion's cargo and the alchemists to tend to it. "We're not certain who they would answer to in a crisis, though they should respond to the King's call for aid."

"And the King himself? What does he think of all this?"

Loath as he was to speak ill of his friend, Eddard had to admit the truth. "Robert doesn't care for politics or the small counsel. It's all I can do to make him care about the kingdom being in debt at all, which has somewhat curtailed his antics, at least. He spends most of his time hunting and carousing, that's pretty much it."

Ned was no longer willing to turn a blind eye to his friend's faults, not since Robert had agreed to send Ranma away at what could be a wild dragon chase. He could now see what had become of Robert once he put the Crown on his head and did not like it. Still, he was the King and, as such, was the center of the government. The Queen's influence over him was minimal, at best, but her control of him, her ability to steer him was extremely well honed.

He said so and Edmure scowled. "I hadn't known his carousing had gotten to that point. It's no secret that he jumps from bed to bed. The Queen is both a figure of pity and jasper for that but I didn't realize that he had pushed all of his duties on to you, Lord Stark."

"According to Robert, this is what the Hands does, shoveling the shit so that the King can smell the roses." Ned said dryly, causing both other men to laugh. "I doubt I'm the first Hand to say something like that, anyway."

"Regardless, we're here to help if it comes to it, though it's a wrench. I had hoped to be told to just keep going and meet up with the men heading out to fight the damn bandits raiding out from the Westerlands." Edmure said, shrugging his shoulders. "Still, if you need us here, there's no arguing with it. But what have you been up to, uncle?"

"Oh, quite a few things." Brynden replied smiling thinly. "We'll be getting you up to speed as quickly as possible, and then..."

OOOOOOO

That evening, Ned Stark smiled faintly as he leaned back, swishing the single glass of wine he allowed himself. He normally wouldn't be that abstemious but watching his old friend drinking himself into an early grave these past months had impacted his own preferences greatly. "Off on another hunt, then?"

"Soon as we're done here." Robert answered nodding his head. "That stag is still around, my huntsmen says. I'll run it to ground eventually!" He guffawed loudly. "Best fun I've had in weeks! And it'll be another month or so before we hear back from the expedition forces sent out against those bandits raiding across the borders between the Westerlands and the Riverlands so I've naught to do for a time."

"True, but that is not what we are here to talk about is it?" Eddard asked looking at his old friend smiling still faintly, not willing to point out there was indeed a lot of work the King should have been working on. They had healed the rift between them somewhat, though they remained a little more distant than previously since Ranma had been sent off. They simply didn't talk about such subjects but it remained between them unspoken. Still, Robert knew that he could trust Ned's loyalty to the Crown and to him.

The King nodded. "I'm ready to make my decision about that, yes. It's been a week and a half now and Tommen hasn't shown any sign of backsliding. Oh," Robert waved his hand airily. "He spends too much time with his books, sister, and mother still but that can be fixed over time."

He laughed, shaking his head. "He's certainly a better fit for the Crown than Joffrey is! That boy's older but he's not wiser, and..." Robert shook his head cutting the thoughts off. He hadn't seen any sign of his oldest son going back to the cruel ways he had as a child but they still remained in Robert's mind whenever he looked at the boy. "That," he said, looking up at Ned, "and the fact that he will look to you as a guide as well as to me. Joffrey looks to his mother too much."

Robert had never liked the way that his wife coddled all three of her children but at least Tommy was trying to step away from her shadow, whereas Joffrey seemed perfectly willing to lean on Lannister men for everything. Robert had also continued his ham-handed way of getting close to his youngest son and had succeeded, for the most part. They were now much closer than they had ever been before and Robert was now actually happy to call Tommen his son.

"Good." Ned nodded. "I don't wish to say anything about your oldest but by this point in his life, Joffrey should at least have some knowledge of logistics, land management, and so on, rather than how to move in court, how to dress, and how to conform himself in parties. Those are important, I suppose..." Ned said almost as if he was forcing the words out, which caused Robert to guffaw, though he agreed with the sentiment. "But he simply isn't ready to be King or even the leader really. Tommen, on the other hand, shows promise and is young enough that we can start teaching him what he needs to know in time for him to take over from you when you pass on."

"Hah!" Robert laughed. "I'm not planning to pass on anytime soon but you're right, Tommy will respond better to further learning. Joffrey is too set in his ways by this point. I'll make the official announcement in a few days' time, though I'll have to beard the lioness in her den first."

"Agreed, it would be best not to spring this on Her Majesty. Far better all-around, I think." Ned replied nodding his head, not mentioning the fact that the wine and ale his friend was even now sloshing down his throat would kill him before long unless he cut back. But Robert was also too set in his ways, something he had in common with Joffrey, though Ned wasn't going to point that out.

Moments later, the King left for the hunt once more. Ned headed up the stairs to his desk, sighing as he girded his loins once more to battle with the dreaded paperwork.

Neither man saw the servant who had been listening at the key hole. She had previously been a scullery maid in the kitchen of the tower, but had since taken up other jobs as needed, which had allowed her run of the Tower.

OOOOOOO

Numb. That was all Daenerys felt, just numb, leeches of all emotion for the moment. She had tried so hard to think of a way to get away from her older brother's mad plans and her upcoming marriage to Khal Drogo. Yet, it had all come down to this. The Khal was one week's ride away from Pentos and she was to be presented up to him upon his second day in the city. They were to be wed immediately or as soon as could be contrived, considering that the barbarians insisted on having their own ceremony out on the plains. She was out of time and no opportunity to escape that presented itself.

Over the past two weeks, Daenerys had been going out of her way to try and ingratiate herself to Illyrio, trying to show that she was a better candidate for queenship than her brother was for kingship. Unfortunately, Illyrio knew that they needed more men and that the Dothraki could be their main force, if she married the Khal. Therefore, he was unwilling to even think of changing that plan.

"I know it's a hardship," Viserys said consolingly as he lightly stroked her arm, though the smirk on his face went poorly with his tone. Of course, he had been the one to come and tell her about the Khan's upcoming arrival. "But think on this, sweet sister, you will be doing your part as best you can for our cause. With the Dothraki behind us we will sweep any open field and, with the connections we've gotten elsewhere, we will have an infantry army to take any castles we need to."

His eyes shone with fervor as he exclaimed, "With the ships we've ordered, we can have a force of barbarians in King's Landing within a month and when King's Landing falls the rest of Westeros will bow to us or face our conquering hordes!"

Daenerys shuddered a little at the light in his eyes, as well as the touch on her arm. "I'm sure you think so, Viserys. Yet, if there is one thing I've learned since studying here in Illyrio's library, it is that warfare is never so simple as those who have not experienced it believe. And there is no such thing as certainty in that kind of chaos." She said coolly trying to move away from him but his touch on her arm suddenly became a grip on her bicep.

Viserys scowled a little at her negativity but then smiled, leaning forward. "You know," he murmured looking down at her body lustily, "you don't have to go to this barbarian with **no** knowledge of the carnal arts. Even though your brides-head needs to stay intact, I could give you some sweet memories to hold in your heart as he ruts with you, sister."

While this comment was mostly a continuance of Viserys flirting with his sister, as he had done most of their lives following the Targaryen tradition of incest, it was also fueled by Daenerys' body. She was well on her way to what would be an astonishingly beautiful womanhood. Her breasts were more than a handful already and her hips were that of a dancer. Pale of skin, wide luminescent purple eyes, a gorgeous face with high cheekbones, small, yet pouty lips, framed by the silver colored hair that was another mark of their family.

There was not a mark or blemish on her, save for one or two scars that Viserys had given her, one above one eye, and another on her bare forearm. When he looked at them, Viserys found himself feeling proud of that. His sister might be going off to be wed to give him the force he needed to reclaim his throne but when the Khal made her bleed, she would already bear the marks he gave her.

"I think not." Daenerys said moving back again and Viserys' face went from a smirk to a scowl. His other hand made to come up and touch her breasts despite her protests causing Daenerys to flinch back.

Thankfully, at least in this instance, Illyrio's forward thinking work in Daenerys' favor. One of the massive women that guarded Daenerys stepped forward. Viserys might have put on some weight and he had been training extensively with some of the guards in swordsmanship during the mornings but he was nowhere near the weight of these women. The woman gestured him away from Daenerys, one hand dropping to her heavy, almost cleaver-like blade at her waist.

The Crown Prince of House Targaryen glared angrily at the woman but released his sister, thrusting her away from him. "In a week's time you'll wish you had such memories to bolster you, Daenerys." he said laughing coldly. "The barbarians think themselves horses in truth, they don't make love with their wives; they just mount them!" With a laugh he turned, leaving Daenerys to shiver and shake for a moment.

The door remained open after her brother flounced out and, looking through it, Daenerys saw Domic moving past her the doorway. He nodded solemnly at her. Daenerys took a deep breath, gaining control of herself and waving off the massive woman who was looking at her sternly.

Daenerys straightened her shoulders, visibly throwing off the effect of her brother's visit and then tapped three fingers as if it was a nervous tick against her thigh before moving further into her room. Three nights, no more, and, come what may, Daenerys was going to try to escape. Without any of the captains she knew in port, she didn't have much hope of them getting away but she was still bound and determined to try.

O O O O O O O

Jon ducked, using his sword to block before bring up his free hand to grab Arya's elbow when she failed to recover quickly enough. He slipped his foot in between her own, then heaved, throwing her to the ground with ease. Before she could rise, his sword point (he was only using one at present since she had disarmed him of the other in a rather neat parry) was at her throat. "Don't over extend. You're too small and too weak to go for all that over the top crap. Economic movements, constantly moving from place to place, that is the way you need to fight. You got overconfident when you disarmed me of one of my weapons, **don't** make that mistake again."

A moment later, he had retrieved his blade and smirked over at her. "Again!" he said, stepping back, raising both swords in a stance that Ranma had taught him, one sword pointed forward held waist high, the other in a guard position higher up his chest.

Arya pounded the ground with her free hand but rose quickly to her knees and, moving up faster than most would've thought she could, bounded towards him. At the last instant, she ducked aside, avoiding trying to go sword to sword with Jon, her own sword, a practice blade made to be as light as Fang, flicking out at Jon's legs. Jon was forced to dodge backwards and before he could set himself, Arya was once again on him, flicking this way and that, using her mobility and smaller stature to badger him from all sides as best she could.

Jon laughed and nodded. "Yes exactly, that's it! Keep moving, don't stand still, don't try to go sword to sword with me again." But with his twin blades, Jon was able to fend her attacks off, moving her this way and that, until once again she made a mistake. One of her feet was just barely out of position to allow her to dodge if Jon went on the attack.

He did so ruthlessly, now hounding Arya in turn. She couldn't get herself set again, and after a few more parries Jon smacked Arya's blade off to one side, his other practice sword coming up to smack against her inner arm, causing her to drop her sword. A shoulder smacked into her chest, tossing Arya once more onto her rear.

"Much better." Jon laughed thrusting his twin swords into the ground before reaching down to lift Arya up easily. "Well done. If you can keep up with me for that long, you're almost as good as any of the wolfsworn." That was a bit of an overstatement, actually. It would be at least another few months before Arya could make that claim but Jon knew if she could hold out against him, she was well down that road.

While Jon knew he didn't come close to Ranma, after all, the **cheater** had an entire other life of experiences to call upon, Jon felt he was probably better than any of the other blades of the kingdom possibly even Jaime Kingslayer. He wished, sometimes wistfully, sometimes eagerly, for the opportunity to put that to the test at some point in the future.

Arya grinned and hugged her brother fiercely. She **loved** this! Now that her mother was busy with the new baby (who wouldn't be named until their father came home), there was no one to stop Arya from hanging out with Jon as much as she could, exercising and training with him and the men-at-arms he was training.

The first two 'echelons', as Jon called them, had been trained already and had moved out in small squads to train the men of the minor lords who looked personally to House Stark as well as those of House Cerwyn. Arya didn't know the totality of the numbers or why the training had been decided on, with its emphasis on endurance and working together. But she was slowly coming to the understanding that Jon, her father, and her other favorite brother, Ranma, had made plans for this kind of training long before and Jon had simply jumped on the opportunity offered by the troubles up north and possible troubles down south to implement it.

"What's next?" she asked eagerly almost bouncing in place.

"Next," Jon said sternly, "you have some lessons with Maester Luwin to get to. After that, you can come back and you and I will go on a bit of a hunting expedition." He smiled, looking at her disconsolate face. She brightened up immediately and he laughed. "Mikken has already finished the bows. Apparently working with the bones of the lizard lion was much easier than working with the armor. You and I can try ours out before I send Theon his."

Jon smirked grimly. A message had arrived a few days ago from White Harbor about how Theon had already proven his worth to the convoys going up to the Wall. The gift of a new bow made from lizard line bones would fit the archer of the wolfsworn quite well.

Arya nodded and the two of them silently moved over to put their practice swords away. Around them, sixty men who had been watching the exercise of the two Starks, moved forward to take their places, going through strength exercises. Half of them were wielding large pikes, practicing thrusting them forward as a group and moving in formation. After that, they would go on a march for the rest of the day wearing heavy weighted packs.

The others were being taught by several others on how to fire a bow. Of course, they all knew how to do this already. Most northern smallfolk hunting on the side for their food but there was a difference between using a bow for hunting and using it in battle. While hunting, you needed an archer's eye and the skill to find your target. In battle, speed was more important than specific targets. This put much more strain on the bowman's upper body, which needed to be built up.

As they were finishing up, Arya looked up at her bigger brother. "Jon," she paused and looked much more like a young girl than she normally did, her wild nature suddenly in abeyance, "do you think Father and Ranma will be all right?"

Jon finished putting his own swords away in the practice bin before he answered. "I don't know. Things are... different down south and the threats there aren't nearly as easy to see as they would be in a physical battle. All we can do is prepare the men here for whatever happens and trust that Ranma and our father will be all right. Besides" he smiled suddenly. "I don't think anything the Southerners can do to him would matter much to Ranma. It would take a giant's strength to take him on." Jon said with authority, having seen that exact thing. The memory of the broken arm Ranma had gotten in that battle against the frost giants or whatever they had been had stayed with Jon afterward, even if Ranma had healed from it.

Arya nodded and went inside, a little more somber than she had been before she asked that question but also a little happier with Jon's response.

Jon stayed outside the training area for a moment, gazing south past the walls of Winterfell, hoping that his father and brother were all right as he had said. Then Jon turned his gaze north and his eyes hardened noticeably. *By this point, Dacey should have arrived in mountain clan territory and begun working her way northward, though that journey will no doubt take a while. Still, I wonder what she'll find, and what is going on down south. We've done all we can to prepare for whatever comes, but is it enough?*

After a moment he shook off his maudlin thoughts and turned to go inside Winterfell, not knowing that the avalanche he had been preparing for was about to begin.

OOOOOOO

Cersei smiled slightly as Joffrey pulled her chair back for her at the breakfast table. "Thank you, my dear."

Joffrey smiled at his mother, bowing slightly from the waist in a regal manner before taking his own space, while Myrcella and Tommen waited until their older sibling was seated before sitting themselves.

The servants came forward with the meal and Tommen began to regale his mother with what he and Ned had been talking about that morning in a loud voice. "So we talked about how rivers and stuff are important for carrying goods and stuff like that, and then he quizzed me on my maths before he taught me this new exercise for my legs, they kind of hurt now, but it's a good kind of hurt you know? Where you know you've pushed your body to the limigahhh"

At that noise, Cersei looked up from her meal where she had been smiling faintly at the deluge of information coming from her youngest. Her eyes grew alarmed as she noticed her youngest clutching at his throat, making gagging noises. "Joffrey!" she ordered standing up and moving towards him, "quick, he's choking on something!"

Myrcella, however, had already moved around the table, grabbing up her younger brother, who was actually a little heavier than she was now after putting on some decent muscle. She placed her fist underneath his chest, trying to pull back and pump his stomach like she had seen done a time or two to get him to spit out whatever was bothering him. But nothing came out.

"Give him to me!" Cersei pushed her daughter away, taking her son and trying to do the same maneuver but, again, nothing came out, though he still was making gagging noises. "Send for the Maesters!" she said quickly looking around at a servant who had been looking on with a shocked expression. Knocked out of his stupor, he nodded then quickly raced off.

"Jaime!" The shout brought her brother from where he had been standing guard with Ser Oakheart outside the dining hall. Seeing what was going on, he moved forward quickly, trying to do the same thing but even with his strength,



nothing came up. "It's not anything in his throat!" he reported. "He's having some kind of reaction!" Jaime put the young boy on the table then began to pound on his chest with one fist. Nothing happened, though the boy bounced lightly up from where he lay on the table.

Myrcella stumbled back in horror as her brother began to thrash where Jaime was trying to hold him still on the table. Oakheart began to thump on his chest, trying to get whatever was causing the reaction out, but nothing came up.

Pyrcele arrived quickly, pushing aside the guards and servants, laying one hand on Tommen's throat. The boy looked over at his mother, his eyes pleading with her to help him before rolling up in their sockets, his convulsions ending with the suddenness of a guillotine.

The Grandmaester frowned grabbing up the boy's wrist. Finding no pulse, Pyrcelle's frown deepened horribly and he shook his head sadly. He opened the young boy's mouth, scowling in rising fury at the site of the bright yellow tongue that greeted him. "Poison!" he muttered shaking his head.

"Do something!" Cersei shouted tears now running down her face.

"There is... nothing I can do, your grace." the Grand Maester said, sighing faintly. "He's already gone."

"No!" Cersei shouted the word, pushing him to one side to clasp Tommen up into her arms with one arm smacking his face with her other hand, as if to wake him up from a stupor. "Tommen! Tommen, open your eyes, my little cub! My babe, can you hear me!?"

The maester looked past her at Jaime and shook his head, motioning Jaime to come forward and separate the two. Jaime did so but his sister fought him like a wildcat, trying to move forward to grasp her baby boy to her chest again. After a moment she suddenly wilted, throwing her arms around her brother and sobbing into his breastplate, as Jaime stared at the body, his face a rictus of horror and rage.

The servants milled around uncertainly, not certain what they should do as Cersei sobbed and the Princess fell to her knees in shock and horror, staring at her younger brother's body. One moment he had been alive and vibrant, talking excitedly as he always did and the next, dead!

Eventually Cersei got control of herself for the moment, pushing away from her brother. "Poison!" she growled angrily, the light of grief-stricken madness in her eyes now. "Send for Littlefinger and the eunuch!"

Then she looked over at her youngest son's body and shook her head visibly stopping herself from crying once more. "Th-Then send a runner out to find the King." That thought seemed to anger her further. The King was once again out and about, ostensibly on a hunt, but Cersei knew he had stopped in at one of the brothels in town last evening and had not returned to the Red Keep yet.

The two thus asked for arrived quickly. Only someone very good at noticing things would have seen Littlefinger's eyes widening just a little bit more than shock should have allowed for, before he pasted a look of shocked horror on his face.

"What has happened?" Varys asked quickly, looking at the little dead body and away. Unlike the others, he didn't seem to show much emotion, shock yes, but no grief. This was not the first dead child he had ever seen or the worst body, either. Indeed, part of him was thinking it more along the line of poetic justice, though of course he kept that thought off his face.

"Poison!" Cersei hissed. "Poison most foul. You know where that Sand Snake **bitch** lives in the city, find her now! Search her premises!"

"We have no evidence to link her to this crime, yet," Littlefinger said, trying to calm the situation.

But Cersei would not be quieted. "**My son** has been poisoned! I will have whoever was behind this, I will have my **justice!** Go!" she said now looking at her brother.

Jaime nodded, his own eyes hard and his face grim. He looked over at the master of whisperers, who sighed and gave him an address. Within minutes he and two other Lannister men were racing into the city, accompanied by one of Maester Pyrcelle's students.

With that done, Cersei looked down at the body still lying there on the table. "Find out what the poison was in, Pyrcelle." she said coldly. "Then, then prepare, have the servants, have them see to his body." At that, she broke down again, collapsing into a chair nearby sobbing into her hands.

At this point, Myrcella also lost control and rushed forward, burying herself into her mother's side, while Joffrey moved over to his younger brother's body and closed his wide staring eyes. Only Myrcella and Littlefinger noticed the very, very small, yet triumphant smile on Joffrey's face before it disappeared under a mask of grief.

Petyr shook his head mentally. *I had not intended this when I told Joffrey about Eddard and Robert thinking of passing him over for being the Crown Prince. I had expected him to try and liven his ideas up, or to go to his mother and whine about it, further deepening the rift between the King and Queen. And maybe he did, Cersei has been especially cagey of late, unwilling to further risk her position. Still, to willingly become a kinslayer, even if he just did the planning...*

The Master of Coin shook his head. There were some things even he would not be willing to do. Of course, Petyr didn't have any kin but if he did he certainly wouldn't be willing to plot their murder. *The boy's viciousness is far worse than I had expected, which I will need to account for in my plans. If he cannot be controlled, my... aspirations for Sansa, if I cannot have Catelyn, will be much more difficult to prepare.*

Myrcella knew none of Petyr's thoughts, she had simply seen Joffrey's small smile and suddenly had begun to wonder in gathering horror how far her older brother would go to get what he wanted.

OOOOOOO

Tyene and her bodyguard Damien still roomed in the same inn that Arianne had found for the trio of Dornish women. It was in an understated, yet very good part of the city, home to merchants who specialized in small but expensive goods, who relied on one or two very good guardsmen and anonymity. The room itself followed similar lines, with simple but well-made and comfortable furniture, a heavy oak door, and a private stair leading up to it from the inn's grounds.

At the present moment, however, Tyene was more concerned that the bed was large, fluffy, and comfortable than anything else. The evening before, she had been consoling herself with Damien's help on not being able to get close to her personal target. Her pursuit of the Blackfish had not amounted to much, the man was cagey and experienced. He was quite willing to flirt with her but kept his distance beyond that. That only made Brynden more attractive to her, easy prey was never worth the chase in her opinion.

Still, a woman had physical needs and Damien was a young man with that breed's wondering eye. He and Arianne had a brief affair when they were younger, which had been sweet and tender, something that recommended him to Tyene. It was clear however that Damien had learned since then, coupling eagerness and earnestness with actual knowledge rather than curiosity and a fast recovery time.

That explained why they were both naked when two men-at-arms in Lannister colors burst through led by Jaime Kingslayer in his white enameled armor.

"What is the meaning of this!?" Tyene shouted drawing the blanket up to her neck. Damien, on the other hand, had quickly rolled out of bed, coming up with his sword out of its scabbard from where it had been leaning against the bed table.

Jaime's blade also flashed out of its scabbard and he stood there grimly, none of his normal insouciance in his face or tone. "You two are under arrest for the poisoning of Prince Tommen Baratheon. Search their belongings." he ordered the other two men.

"What!?" Tyene exclaimed, her normal self-control gone, the accusation and the sudden intrusion impacting her harshly. "Why in the world would I try to poison... you can't..."

Before she could protest further, the two men in Lannister colors had moved forward, dumping her belongings out onto the floor from the chest. Pycelle's student came forward, sifting through the potions and ingredients quickly, looking for the poison his maester had described to him. He scowled angrily, picking up one particular potion, which was a green goop with black specks here and there.

He opened it quickly, bringing it to his nose and taking a single sniff before holding it at arms-length. "This is it." he said grimly. "Devil's Blood, there's no reason for anyone to have this on their person, it's a poison through and through, can't even be diluted to anything useful."

"I've never seen that before in my life!" said Tyene but cut off as the two men moved forward grimly.

"Take them." Jaime growled, his eyes hard.

At that point, Damien had had enough. He darted forward, his sword slamming into the hazily raised blade of the first man throwing him backwards before twirling away to bring around his elbow into the other man's unarmored temple, who went down like a sack of bricks.

But then Jaime was on him. Despite the fact that he wasn't close to Ranma's level, Jaime was one of the best blades in the kingdom, if not the best. Damien was marked as a good swordsman, one of the best in Dorne but in comparison to Jaime, he was barely at the journeyman level.

He blocked the first few blows desperately but could already tell that Jaime had begun a series of moves, ones Damien never seen before. A thrust, then a shoulder slash, followed by one to the other shoulder, then to Damien's surprise there was a slight opening in Jaime's defense. Too late, Damien realized it was a feint and before he could recover, Jaime had stepped backwards lightly, his weight having already been on his back foot, then the Kingslayer's sword was suddenly flicking down, avoiding Damien's clumsy attempt to block it.

Jaime's sword came down in a short economical stroke that bit deeply into Damien's unprotected thigh before Jaime pulled it out just as quickly, the blade having not bitten into the bone, just enough to make the leg useless to bear weight. Then his blade smashed Damien's sword from his suddenly nerveless grip.

The younger man screamed, going down to his knees, both his hands trying to staunch the flow of blood from the crippling injury in his thigh. He looked up and the sword thrusting quickly towards his chest was the last thing Damien saw.

Jaime kicked the dead body off his sword and looked over at the bed. Tyene's eyes had widened in horror at seeing Damien so dispatched, without care and so easily. She just lay there as the two Lannister men moved toward her.

"Clothe her first, you idiots, my sister wants her for questioning, we're not here for your pleasures." Jaime growled, cleaning his blade on the bed sheet by Tyene's feet. Under the Kingslayer's watchful eyes, the two men forced Tyene to dress, then tied her hands together before leading her out the door.

OOOOOO

Ned and Brynden had been in the city again when the news of Tommen's death reached them. Both of them immediately gave over what they had been doing to hurry back to the Keep. In the Blackfish's case, he had been trying to figure out a way to follow the money trail his agents had found several weeks ago.

There were several of what Brynden had come to call dummy houses, merchant houses with only a few people in them, who were laundering money in some fashion, though where the money originally came from was what Brynden was interested in. If it was just a Lord who dabbled in merchant mercantilism in such a way as to be somewhat illegal, such as the sale of drugs from Essos, that was one thing. But if that gold actually came from the King's coffers, Brynden might be able to follow that link to someone who had a hand in putting the kingdom so far into debt.

He gave it over the moment the news reached him however and arrived back at the Keep about an hour after Lord Stark had arrived from his own task, surveying a few of the docks, which were, according to the books, due to be repaired but didn't actually need it yet.

Ned had immediately questioned the Sand Snake, but unfortunately, with Damien dead Tyene could produce no witness to where she had been last night. Worse was Obara's absence and Tyene's reticence on saying where she was.

The poison being found on her belongings was damning evidence, in itself, but a servant, well known to be loyal to the Royal family, had come forward, saying she had been in the Red Keep late the night before. Cersei was pushing for Tyene's execution immediately.

Her grief was palpable as Ned entered the room where the Queen sat with the body of her son several hours after first returning. The boy's body laid out on a bed in his best clothing. The servants had done their best to make him look, if not noble, then peaceful, but there was only so much they could do. The young boy's body looked unnaturally pale and all the energy and strength that had marked Tommen of late was gone as his body lay there. Ned stared for a moment, bowing his head in grief of the young boy who had died before he ever truly had a chance to live his life.

"Your Majesty." he said softly, bowing his head to her even though Cersei had not turned to see who had entered. "My deepest condolences for your loss. I know how hard it is to lose a family member, I... I cannot imagine the pain of a mother that is forced to bury her son."

"No." she said loudly looking up with her tear streaked face. "You cannot, so spare me your empty platitudes, Stark!" In her mind, Cersei was wondering if this was the start of the prophecy that she had been given by that old wise woman back in Lannisport. *Will I be forced to outlive all my children? But where is the young queen that was supposed to be my downfall or the brother?*

Her thoughts were all of a jumble and she was having more trouble thinking clearly than had been the case for many, many years, clouded with growing rage and a deep, bone wrenching grief.

Ned remained silent in the face of the Queen's spitting fury. He moved forward, laying his hand gently on the dead boy's face sighing sadly again. Eventually, after several silent moments of shared grief, he looked down at Cersei. "Had His Majesty shared with you the knowledge that we were planning on naming Tommen the heir over Joffrey?"

Cersei looked up, her eyes widening in shock. She had known that was coming but had thought that Tommen's age had given her time to possibly counteract it, if she found it necessary, knowing her father's concerns on Stark influence over her little cub. "No, I didn't know. When did you decide this?"

"Barely five days ago and I would've sworn that no one could have known of it." Ned said now a little colder than before as he gazed down at the dead body of a young boy who might have lived to become a fantastic king in time.

Even through her grief, Cersei was a political animal and she nodded thoughtfully. "You believe the person behind his did this more because they thought they could influence my firstborn rather than my youngest?"

"Possibly." Ned nodded. "And, though I hesitate to bring this up, even with the poison being found on her, there is not enough evidence for me to believe that Tyene had anything to do with this, since we lack even a hint of a motive. Moreover, she has been at the Hand's Tower many times when Tommen was there, and even shared food with us several times. Tyene had ample opportunity to act if she wanted to do him harm and I had not seen even a hint that she wanted to. Besides, what could she gain from such an act?"

"Perhaps something changed, or she was merely the hand carrying out someone else's order!" Cersei growled angrily. "Prove her innocence or..."

They were interrupted as the door banged open and Robert strode in, his florid face a mask of grief. Behind him, Ser Selmy bowed his head, his own face ravaged by sadness. For once, Robert and Cersei were united and the king moved forward laying a hand on her shoulder while he stared down at the boy. The only one of his three legitimate children who Robert was starting to become proud of calling his own was now dead. "Who did this!?" he growled angrily. "Who murdered my son?"

"We've arrested the Sand Snake Tyene for the crime." Cersei reported shaking her head angrily. "Lord Stark here believes that there might have been some other person behind it but I am uncertain. The poison was found among her possessions, and we have a witness who said she was here in the holdfast late last night."

Robert growled angrily. "Of course, Dorne! They might well have taken any opportunity to strike back at us!"

"But why now?" Ned asked, trying to calm matters. "As I just finished saying to Her Majesty, Tyene had plenty of opportunity before this to attack Tommen if she so wanted. And Tyene herself says she was in bed last night with Damien Sand, one of her guardians."

"They might think they might be able to move someone in to influence Joffrey." Robert said, waving his hand. "The Princess of Dorne isn't married yet and you keep on pushing back Sansa and the brat's marriage. I agree with your reasons, at least on the surface, we do need to pull out the kingdom out of debt before we pay for an extravagant wedding. Yet, it leaves the possibility that the Princess of Dorne could marry my eldest son, despite her being older than him."

"It matters not! What matters is we have the murderer in custody and the poison found on her. Question the Snake bitch closely, find out if there were any other hands in this, then I will see her executed for the death of my son. I will have my blood for this Lord Stark, if you cannot find out who was behind this, then Tyene will die for it!" Cersei said hotly.

Robert nodded in angry agreement. Seeing their united front, Ned bowed his way out leaving the two Royals to their grief. He immediately went to the keep's jails, finding Tyene there. She hadn't been ill-treated, not yet, but she was shocked and scared. Ned wished he could comfort her but the only way to get her out was to find the real killer and Tyene was no help there.

Ned questioned her over and over but with Damien dead it was her word against the servant's and the poison found in her belongings, which was damning since she could give no explanation of how it came to be there. She and Damien had been in the Hand's Tower as usual the day before, so hadn't been watching over their belongings for much of the day. Yet no one could be found to say that someone had entered their room during that time that could have planted it. Her position wasn't helped when she admitted that Obara had gone after Ranma, having overheard the mission he had been sent on. Even now, Tyene would not speak of Arianne.

That unfortunately was enough to make Robert see red and assume that Dorne, while still unwilling to do so openly, wanted to weaken his family for their Targaryen masters. It was all Ned could do to keep Robert and Cersei from declaring open war against Dorne for it, and that was a near run thing. The entire small council united to help convince the Royals, themselves acting in concert for once, that doing so with no real evidence linking House Martell and the rest of Dorne to the crime was beyond the untenable. Robert and Cersei unwillingly backed off, but it had been a near run thing..

The servant who had come forward saying he had seen Tyene in the holdfast late the night before Tommen's death checked out, unfortunately. A Lannister man, he turned his hands to anything that needed doing in the keep and was well respected by those who noticed his presence at all. He was the most non-descript man Eddard had ever met, but that wasn't a crime. His words were clear, concise, stood up to Eddard's questioning and were utterly damning for Tyene.

Two days of frantic searching went by, with both Cersei and the King now demanding Tyene's death. After those two days, Eddard could not stop them despite all his efforts and Cersei's ultimatum was born out. However, thanks to his efforts Tyene was merely to be executed, not tortured first to force her to give up any other conspirators.

Tyene's mouth was gagged and her eyes wild, wide, and disbelieving as she was lead, still fighting to get away up to the executioner's block. Waiting for her was the executioner, Ser Ilyn Payne. She scanned the crowd, looking, hoping for a sympathetic face, an act of the Seven, anything to get her out of this, wishing with all her heart that she had never agreed to come with Arianne on this 'adventure' of hers, that she had left with Obara and Arianne, that she was anywhere but here. Yet, the grip of the guard on her shoulder propelled her forward and she knew there was no escape.

Ned was there, unwillingly watching this travesty of justice knowing, even if he couldn't prove it, that the girl was innocent and deserved someone there for her. Tyene's gaze found his, trying to accuse him, but all she got in turn was a sad, sympathetic expression, and his lips moving in prayer. Next to him Brynden too was gazing at her, compassion and sadness etched on his features. Yet both were powerless now, and could only watch as Tyene was dragged to her doom.

Myrcella did not attend. She had been spending as much time as she could in the tower with Sansa, being comforted by the other girl, yet also feeling safer there than anywhere else. When she wasn't with her mother or Sansa, she would spend time with Brynden Tully or Eddard Stark. Doing nothing but simply sitting in the same room reading or knitting. After her younger brother's death, and her own, admittedly wild and unprovable supposition as to who caused it, the young princess needed that sense of security now more than ever before.

Her face still a mask of grief and rage Cersei watched as Tyene was led to the executions block. She had urged the king to simply execute the bitch, but Robert had been unwilling to overthrow convention like that, even in a case like this. So when Tyene reached the executions platform placed at the front of the prison's courtyard, he stood up from his chair on a nearby dais.

He looked over the crowd. The smallfolk and court alike had heard the news about Tommen's death over the past few days, and there were literally thousands here to see justice be done. Tommen had been a virtual unknown to the smallfolk, they were merely here to see an execution. But Tommen had been looked on with fondness by many of the nobles, including many who feared Joffrey would be a disaster for the kingdom. Now that hope was gone, and they glared hatefully at the woman they blamed for it.

"Tyene Sand, you have been found guilty of treason for the death of Prince Tommen Baratheon, for which you are to be executed today. As per ancient custom, you are allowed to say your final words before us, your executioner and the Seven above." Robert intoned the formal words, glaring at the woman hatefully before nodding at one of the guards who removed her gag. "Say your piece now, or go into the ever dark silent."

Tyene glared back at him fearfully for a moment before looking around at the crowd. The uncaring masses stared back, wanting the show to move forward, while others were hoping for a bit more drama for their entertainment. Only Eddard, Brynden, Edmure and the men-at-arms around them showed sadness.

Something about Eddard's face made Tyene's back stiffen. She spoke then, her voice cracking with fear of what was about to happen, yet her words came out with as much force as she could give them. "Before the Seven and the people of this city, though I know it will not matter, I declare my innocence. I did not kill the prince, nor do I have any clue who did. You kill an innocent today oh great king, though you and your queen I don't doubt have practice enough."

She spat on the ground, her eyes moving across the crowd. "Yet innocent blood will be paid for, mark my words! You will rue this day's work Robert Baratheon, you and all with you."

"So be it." Robert growled, ignoring the murmuring of the crowd, many within having been moved by either the girl's vitriol or her actual words. He nodded at the executioner, then sat back down. Moments later he watched, his face hard as the executioner went about his business.

On the Queen's other side, Joffrey sat. Joffrey's face seemed blank, yet, if you knew that boy well enough, you might have seen a tiny bit of a smile in his eyes, as the sword came down on Tyene's neck.

OOOOOO

It was that time of night where even a city like Pentos had gone to sleep when Daenerys stealthily got up from her bed, though, despite how quiet she was, the one guard that watched her during the night still noticed the movement. She came forward from the doorway looking at her charge, quizzically cocking her head to one side. "Toilet." Daenerys muttered quickly.

The guard nodded and waved her through the doorway, following quickly. As she entered the bidet, which was situated at the far end of the hallway, Daenerys slipped, falling backwards. Her guard quickly caught her, then gasped as Daenerys whipped out her small dagger and plunged it backwards, catching the woman right underneath her armor and into her guts. Before she could think about it, before the woman could scream, Daenerys had pulled her knife back out and slashed the woman's throat open.

As the woman collapsed on her, Daenerys looked down at the blood on her hands and forearm in shock. At that point Domic came out of the bathroom quickly, catching the body by the shoulders and dragging her in before doing the same to Daenerys. He stared down at her with something approaching admiration mixed with shock. "I thought the plan was for me to deal with her?"

"You..." Daenerys stammered. "Y-you couldn't have done it quietly or quickly. Better I do it." Her hands began to shake in reaction and Domic carefully reached forward, taking the small yet exceedingly sharp knife out of her hand before dragging the younger girl over to the washbasin to wash off the blood. The first kill was always traumatic, no matter how well trained a person was, and Daenerys, despite having trained to get back into shape, had never been trained to kill. Indeed, despite how rough her life might have been the past few years, this might have been the first time she had seen death up close.

After a moment Domic spoke, both to get her mind off what she had just done and get them moving. "Do we still stick to the plan, raiding Illyrio's treasure room for things to sell off? Or do we just try to run for it?"

"How are you going to distract the guards at the gates?" Daenerys asked, trying desperately to move on.

"I'm not. There's a guard on the eastern wall who's a drunkard. He almost always drinks while on watch and I gave him some extremely potent spirits earlier this evening before his shift. He should be out like a light by now and I have a good stout rope we can use to get over the wall."

"Good thinking." Daenerys said, regaining control of herself. Her hands were still shaking a bit but she took her now clean knife from Domic and then motioned to the doorway. "Lead on."

Domic nodded and the two of them moved through the darkened household, lit only by a few guttering torches here and there in wall sconces. However, the area right in front of Illyrio's treasure room was well lit by three such torches and guarded by the two young, untried armstrongs that Domic had known would be here. He waved Daenerys back into cover, then steeled himself, slowly drawing out his sword from its scabbard as silently as he could.

The two untried guards hadn't heard anything, their lack of alertness showing their inexperience and the general belief that guarding the strong room was unnecessary. They were engaged in a discussion about a barmaid that one of them had flirted with when Domic charged around the corners straight towards him. Before either could raise an alarm or their weapons, he was on them, sending one to the floor with an overhand strike that opened him up from shoulder to crotch before whipping his sword around to take the other across the throat.

The man on the floor tried to gasp through the agony of the blow across his chest, his studded leather armor having taken some of it, but before he could do more than take that breath, Domic's sword once again flashed, cutting into the man's neck from the side.

Domic sighed sadly, shaking his head. Neither man could have been older than seventeen or so, not even old enough to shave regularly, and had deserved a better death than being cut down like this. Still, now was not the time for such thoughts.

Behind him, Daenerys came forward, touching his shoulder briefly, understanding what the man thought in a way that she would not have been able to as little as an hour ago. The Targaryen Princess knew that she would have nightmares about her murdering her bodyguard. *Yet, it's better to have nightmares in my head than to be living one,* she thought grimly, then moved towards the doorway.

Domic reached inside one of his pockets and pulled out the key, putting it into the keyhole quietly. He knew noises at night tended to carry further than you would think. The deaths of the two guards had made some noise, as well, so now they needed to hurry.

The door opened soundlessly and they moved forward, with Domic taking up the torch from outside.

Inside was a very organized little area, about sixteen feet squared. The walls were lined with several different sized shelves and a small table set in the direct center of the room. There were some bags of gold coins here and there but the majority of things on display were small figurines of gold, silver, and other precious metals; a few bags of gems; and, in pride of place on the table three large, multicolored gems bigger than Domic's fists pressed together.

They were each laid out on a pillow of purple silk, each gem a different base color with hints of others. One was black with hints of scarlet in ripples and swirls here and there. The middle one was a deep green with sprinkled bronze flecks catching the light of the torches set into the wall outside the strong room. The third was a stunning pale cream color, streaked with striations of gold.

Domic gasped at the sight of them, wondering what kind of gems they were but Daenerys' breath had caught in her throat and she looked almost faint. "Dragon eggs!" she exclaimed, forgetting to whisper at present.

"Are you sure, they look just like gigantic jewels to me?" Domic asked, motioning her to lower her voice.

"I am **positive**. Viserys used to read me stories about what they looked like when we were younger." she replied, now moving forward, one hand gently stroking the cream colored egg. It felt slightly warm to the touch and she gasped in delight. "Domic, we **must** take them!"

At the utter certainty in the young girl's voice, Domic's eyebrows rose in surprise but he still jumped to obey her, quickly opening up the large sack at his side. Reverently, Daenerys put all three of the dragon eggs in it. This didn't leave a lot of room for anything else but she still piled a few in. After only a few moments, they were done and she nodded at him. "Let's get out of here."

As they raced out of the room, someone raised an alarm elsewhere in the compound. Evidently, the body of Daenerys' guards-woman had been discovered in the bidet and now the guards were being roused to the danger already within the mansion grounds.

"Make for the eastern wall." Domic said, looking around.

Daenerys paused, shaking her head. "Give me the pouch." she ordered. "If we're forced to fight, you'll need both your hands, you can't be weighed down." Domic didn't try to argue, pulling it off his shoulder and passing it over to her.

They didn't get out of the compound and out onto the grounds before they were surrounded by guards. Illyrio was not among them, being a deep sleeper it would take an hour at the very least before he could be roused. But Jorah and Viserys were there. Viserys had his slim sword in hand and he scowled angrily at seeing his sister and the bard who he had come to despise. Without him there, Daenerys would simply have been a meek, though intelligent bookworm, but with Domic's aid, she had begun to show a spine that ran entirely counter to what he wanted. "And what are you up to it this late at night, sweet sister? Trying to run are we? Still trying to defy your fate?"

"My fate is my own!" Daenerys shouted, a sudden rush of anger putting aside the lingering remorse she had felt for killing her guards-woman and her panic. "I will make it with my own two hands, brother, and I will not let you decide my fate for me. Your mad dream of using the Dothraki horsemen to carve your path to our former throne is a fantasy and I will have no part of it!"

"My lady," said Jorah softly from where he stood next to Viserys, glaring angrily at his countryman who was part of this farce even as he tried to reason with the princess. "You need that force if you are to even try to take back your throne. I realize it might be abhorrent to you but marriage to Khal Drogo is the only way you will be able to get those forces."

"Never." Daenerys said drawing her knife and holding it along her forearm as she had been taught. "I will never marry him. Besides!" she said, laughing suddenly and reaching into the pouch that she had along her side at present. She pulled out one of the dragon eggs. If these hatch they can give us all the strength we need!"

Viserys gasped in shock and then his eyes widened in fury. He could put two and two together. The two would-be escapees were coming from Illyrio's treasure room. He must have been hiding these. "Give them to me sister. I am the heir to our dynasty, I will figure out how to hatch them."

Daenerys put the egg back in her pouch and stood back to back with Domico who had been silent throughout this exchange, ready and waiting as he faced the majority of the guards that had come up from behind them. "If you want them, brother, come and take them."

A fierce light had been kindled in Daenerys' eyes, gone was her shaking from her first kill earlier and in its place was a fierce desire. A desire to be away from her brother and his control, a desire to be away from Illyrio's cunning schemes, and the Bears desiring looks. As she had shouted a moment ago, she would forge her own fate and ride the wind as a dragon rider.

Jorah still looked like he wanted to try and talk her out of it but Viserys waved his sword angrily. "Take them. Kill the Bard but my sister must not be harmed."

Domico bounded forward suddenly, cutting down a guard before he could raise his own weapon. "This way!" he shouted pushing another guard out of the way when their blades locked before kicking him between the legs and racing after Daenerys. Hampered by their large shields, the guards couldn't run as fast as they could. Their progress stalled further when Daenerys raced through a doorway at the far end and locked it behind them.

They ran down a corridor towards the kitchen, with Daenerys knocking the torches to the floor as she passed. The kitchen was dark this time of night. The cook would arrive in a few hours to begin breakfast but until then there was no one here.

"Keep going!" Domico ordered. "I'll hold them off here; they can only come at me one at a time."

Daenerys shook his head, looking around. "No not yet, we need a distraction. Something to pull the guards off chasing us and block them from chasing us directly."

She rapidly moved over to a few of the cabinets, having been in here a time or two before Viserys assaulted her to ask for snacks. Quickly, she pulled out the cooking oil, smashing the jar of it onto the ground in front of the doorway leading into the kitchen from the rest of the household. Several other bottles followed, spread out everywhere, and she also took two bottles of different liquors. Then she raced back to the entrance to the hallway, throwing more bottles at the torches she had knocked to the floor. They were already beginning to sputter, but when one of the bottles crashed down close enough to one it burst up in a flare of fire.

"Give me the candle." Domico passed it over without a word. "GO!" she ordered. "Try to clear us a way towards your escape route."

Domico stared at her, then nodded abruptly and tore out of the doorway out onto the grounds. She waited for him to get well ahead of her and then tossed the candle into the oil at the foot of the open entranceway. The oil immediately caught fire, springing up and around, filling the doorway with fire and smoke, joining the fires already flaring up out in the hallway. It also quickly spread back into the kitchen, moving faster than she had expected, consuming the puddles of oils and expensive liquors that she had created moments ago.

With that done, she turned to race away but Viserys, trusting in the Targaryen bloodlines immunity to fire, had come ahead of the guards. Just as she turned away, he burst through the doorway, coming out with only his clothing on fire.

Viserys tackled Daenerys slamming her into the wall where she grunted in pain, her breath pushed out of her by the impact. "Oh, no you don't, sweet sister!" he said, his voice deep and angry. He pulled back a hand to slap her but Daenerys kicked out, catching him in one of his legs and forcing him backwards a little. He scowled angrily, trying to grab her throat with his hand but Daenerys brought up her knife, cutting deeply into his arm. He screamed, reeling backwards in agony as he looked at her in startled amazement. She had never tried to fight back before, never, and



now she had done it twice!

"I am a Targaryen too, brother!" she shouted angrily into his face.

That enraged Viserys further and his sword flashed out smashing her knife out of her hand leaving her hand numb and shaking from the impact. He stalked forward, his sword flicking out, catching her lightly in the side, causing blood to flow down her side and actually into the sack she wore at her side. Viserys pressed Daenerys back against a cabinet where the fire had now spread up the wooden furniture, burning merrily. Daenerys' clothing caught on fire, as did the carrier she had been using.

"You will know your place!" Viserys roared but then doubled over in agony as Daenerys brought up her knee into his privates, her hand flashing out to smash into his face forcing him away. She scrambled on the floor for her knife, coming up with it as he charged forward again, stabbing it desperately at one of his legs. She only nicked him but he screamed, jerking away and taking her knife with him, caught in his leather pants.

Daenerys gasped as she noticed that the sack was on fire and falling apart, the items inside now pouring out as it came undone. She looked at her brother, once more making his wary way towards her. With a sudden sob, she reached down, grabbing up two of the eggs, the greenish one and the creamy one. With the two eggs in hand she turned away with a sob, racing out the door out into the mansion's grounds.

Behind her Viserys scowled at his sisters escape, but looking down at the black egg he stopped his chase. Sheathing his blade, he reached down to pick it up with his good arm, then began to laugh wildly.

Racing outside, she found Domic by the wall, waiting anxiously for her. At his feet was a dead guardsman, and another's body was halfway in a bush nearby. One of his arms was hanging limp by his side and he seemed to be bleeding from that arm. Despite this, he still looked at her in shock as Daenerys ran up to him, her clothing almost burned away entirely and now just carrying two of the dragon eggs in her arms. "Princess, are you alright?! What happened?"

"No time!" She exclaimed, while behind her the fire in the kitchen spread along the wooden floorboards and wall panels. "While they are all dealing with the fire, we must get away!"

He looked down in shock at the two now visibly pulsing eggs that Daenerys held in her hands. "Show me this rope of yours and let us be off!"

Before they could attempt to climb the rope, which they might not have been able to do in any event, given Domic's wounded arm and Daenerys holding the two eggs, seven more of Illyrio's men-at-arms came upon them. The commander had broken up his command, leaving four men on the gate and sending seven on a walk around of the mansion. The rest raced to create a bucket chain to help put out the fire, which was now almost out of control in the first floor of the mansion.

The men on patrol came upon the two escapees and quickly circled them but were unsure what to do since, the last they knew Daenerys, at least, was an honored guest and ally of their employer. Domic they weren't as clear on. Even if they knew him well enough and were friendly with him, his status in the household had been ambivalent, at best. Still, they were ready with weapons out and had pinned the two against the wall, surrounding them in a half circle.

Just as Daenerys and Domic were beginning to despair, there was a flash of movement above them in the night sky.

Ranma had arrived that very evening in the city. After waiting as the captain went about his business, Ranma had slipped off, had immediately hidden under the Umi-Sen-Ken as he and Fenris, with some help from Ranma, took to the rooftops. Fenris couldn't perform the Umi-Sen-Ken but he could move silently even over the rooftops and had refused to stay behind, going so far as grabbing Ranma's arm in his teeth when he tried to leave.

Despite needing to help Fenris up onto the rooftops initially (the direwolf couldn't quite jump high enough to make the jump himself), Ranma hadn't argued. He wanted to finish this job quickly and get back to King's Landing. Being away from his family like this was giving him an uneasy feeling. With Fenris watching from the rooftops, Ranma soon found people willing to give him directions to Illyrio's mansion. The name of the magister backing the Targaryen siblings had been among the information Varys passed on, though that was nearly all the information he had save the plan for Daenerys and the Dothraki.

When he finally caught sight of the mansion, Illyrio's home was on fire. Figuring this would only make his job simpler,

he continued on. He arrived on a nearby rooftop overlooking the mansion's wall just as several guards ran two fleeing individuals to earth, pinning them against the inner side of the wall so they could not escape.

By the light of the fire Ranma could see that one of them was a woman whose hair was silver-blond. The other's face looked somewhat familiar in the fire light. It took a moment for Ranma to recognize it but when he did he shook his head. "What are the odds?" he said to himself. "Still, if Domic is here and helping that one, who I guess would be Daenerys, that's a mark in her favor at least. One is better than none, though I wonder what they are carrying there, pretty large for gems." With that, he jumped forward, easily clearing the wall to land among their attackers.

The guards looked up in shock as someone (they couldn't make out much of his features in the fire light) seemingly jumped from beyond the mansion's wall to land in their midst. A hand flashed out, on the end of which was some odd looking large triangular shaped knife or something. The blade slammed into the ring mail protected chest of one of the guards, bursting through the armor and into the man's chest killing him instantly. A kick sent another guard flying backwards through the air to land in a broken heap several yards away.

The guards turned and charged this madman that had appeared in their midst. At that point Domic quickly grabbed up his blade, slicing one of the men in the back as the guard rather stupidly turned away from the bard. After that however, his contribution to the skirmish was over.

Instead, Domic gaped in astonishment at their savior who could be no other than Ranma Stark. Even years later, Domic could recognize those features and those bright blue eyes, lit as his face was by the light of the fire from the house. *Ranma Stark?* He barked a laugh, shaking his head incredulously. "The old gods move in mysterious ways."

Within seconds, the men were down and their savior turned to them. "Daenerys Stormborn, I presume?"

Daenerys looked at him in shock for a moment, then reflexively caught the shirt that had just been tossed to her with only two fingers of one hand, trying desperately to hold it and the two eggs. She very briefly handed one of the swiftly warming and now actually rippling eggs to Domic, as she pulled on the shirt one arm at a time. "You have me at a distinct disadvantage, Ser. Who are you, and where did you come from?"

"He is Ranma Stark." Domic said looking at Ranma, his eyes still wide even as he held the moving rock that he had previously thought was some kind of gem. He looked down at it in shock as he felt something inside the egg move. He was more than happy to hand it back to Daenerys when she finished pulling on Ranma's shirt. "I can never forget that face, though why he is here, I don't know."

Across from them, Ranma laughed quietly to himself. *Here she's standing there with her clothing in burnt tatters, using those dragon eggs, if that's what they are, to cover her modesty, battered, wounded, and probably exhausted, and yet, she's still poised and in control. What a woman! My father was wrong; this is no girl but a woman in truth.*

Ranma reached forward and taking the egg from Domic before Domic could pass it over to Daenerys, smiling slightly as he felt the heat coming from it and realized they were not just fossilized eggs after all. Daenerys glared, but stilled as Ranma turned to her, tugging at the hem of the large shirt she now wore unconsciously for some reason. "Right now, I think we need to get out of here. Unless you can tell me that no one else is going to be chasing after you?"

Daenerys nodded with a jerk of her head, looking over Ranma's shoulder worriedly at the fire that had spread throughout the large mansion's first story. Most of the guards would be busy trying to contain the fire but the fire had already attracted a lot of attention from the rest of the city and guardsmen from the other mansions nearby and even the city watch would be hurrying towards it to aid in putting out the fire.

There was nothing organized about it; it was pure self-interest at its finest. After all, a fire that got out of control of the city wouldn't care who burned to death, rich or poor, and the damage to houses and merchandise would be even worse.

Still, she wasn't about to go unquestioningly with Ranma, no matter how he had arrived on the scene to rescue them just in the nick of time. "How do you suppose we do that?"

"I have a ship waiting for me in the harbor. The captain's been paid to take me both ways."

Domic shook his head, looking around worriedly. Thankfully, the eastern section of the mansion's grounds was at the back of the mansion, away from the well, but they were still too close to the mansion for his liking. "We'll never get to the port. I don't doubt that the magister will have already sent a runner to close it against us."

"Then it will go badly for anyone who tries to stop us." Ranma said still looking down at the dragon egg he held. He smiled grimly as he handed it over to the Targaryen princess.

*It would appear as if this foolish mission the King sent me on has a major upside, though not for him. That thought nearly came out as a snarl in his head. No, the dragons and their Princess will be much more useful on the Wall then holed up somewhere in King's Landing at Robert's pleasure. And that, of course, supposes that Robert would be able to stop himself from killing her or them on sight, something I'm not exactly sure of.*

"You haven't told me why you're here yet Ranma Stark, nor why you are willing to help me." Daenerys said backing away now that she had both of her dragon eggs in her hands. A pang went through her again at having to leave the third behind but she couldn't have taken all three, she only had two hands after all. Even so, it had been hard leaving it behind in her brother's hands and she knew trouble would come of it.

Next to her Domicer nodded along with her words, though he trusted Ranma somewhat. They hadn't exactly been friends but Domicer trusted Ranma to do what he thought was right, and Domicer still retained his loyalty to house Stark and to Ranma personally for his rescue all those years ago. *And if he wanted us dead, he would already have attacked.*

Ranma smiled approvingly at Daenerys. "Good to know you still have your head on your shoulders even during a crisis like this." Before she could say anything to that, Daenerys found herself lifted into his arms, eggs and all. "Unfortunately, explanations can take a while so unless you want to wait until your pursuers arrive to hear it..."

The Targaryen Princess ignored that. She was busy trying to figure out how to slap him for his insolence in touching her while still retaining her hold on her dragon eggs .

Instead she let out a squeak, though she would later deny it, as Ranma rocketed up into the air to land on a rooftop nearby. There she found herself staring into the face of an enormous wolf. She never seen a wolf in real life but there was no denying what it was. She inched backwards against Ranma's chest for a moment before she got control of herself and hurriedly moved away when Ranma set her on her feet. "Wh-what?"

Ranma looked at the wolf for second and the direwolf, for at that size it had to be one of the almost mythical beasts, part of her mind gibbered to itself, laid down on his stomach and she felt herself being moved to straddle it's back. "You'll have to hold on with your legs if you don't want Domicer or I to hold those eggs."

Daenerys immediately clutched the eggs to her chest, glaring at him. Coming from a sixteen year old girl in her current predicament it should have been a cute or possibly angry expression, but on her, it was somehow more imperious than anything else despite the state of her clothing. Ranma chuckled lightly. "Thought not. I'll be right back."

A second later, he returned with Domicer, who looked as frazzled by the experience as Daenerys had been.

"Sorry we don't have time to look at that shoulder of yours, Domicer, and you and I are gonna have a little chat about a certain song of yours but now isn't the time for it. Let's get moving." Ranma said and Fenris stood up with Daenerys on his back. Daenerys lost hold of the greenish dragon egg as she automatically tried to clutch at the direwolf's fur with one hand but Ranma quickly moved to catch it.

He looked at Daenerys, who glared back, holding out one hand, her violet eyes locked commandingly on Ranma's own. Ranma grinned in mixed approval and admiration, then passed the egg over before moving slightly behind her. His hands lightly touched her thighs and buttocks, moving her forward slightly along Fenris' back. "Grip here with your legs, Daenerys, and lay forward as much as possible. That might let you use Fenris's back and your own chest to hold the eggs to free up a hand."

Daenerys shivered and not, she was surprised to realize, in revulsion at Ranma's touch on her bare skin. She hesitantly did as suggested, which did indeed allow her to free one arm to wrap around Fenris' neck. Turning to look at her the direwolf made a huffing sort of sound which blew his breath into Daenerys' face, but all Daenerys could see in that face with those fierce golden eyes was curiosity and amusement. For some reason that which made her feel more at ease.

While Ranma had been helping the Stormborn settle herself, Domicer had pulled off his belt, using it to tie his arm around himself to try and keep it still so as to keep from further aggravating his injury. When Ranma turned to him, he nodded, understanding that Ranma would have to carry him since Domicer lacked the skill to make his way over rooftops, as seemed the plan. He wondered how Ranma had learned that skill, as well as how good the direwolf was at it but, for now, he pushed aside such thoughts. Getting away was paramount.

Ranma picked Domicer up in his arms once more, taking a moment to glare down at him. "If you make up a song about this, I will hurt you, worse if you change your part into a woman again. I hate to tell you, I don't swing that way." Domicer winced, not looking forward to that conversation, as Ranma nodded over at Fenris. "Let's go!" With that, he raced away, moving easily over the rooftops, jumping from roof to roof with astonishing ease to his passenger.

Fenris followed, with Daenerys clinging to his back like a limpet. Even so, she exulted in the speed with which the direwolf moved after its master, wondering if riding one of her dragons would feel similar. Soon Fenris caught up with Ranma, in time to hear Domicer ask. "I had heard that the Starks had found direwolves from Ser Jorah, though I hadn't realized how big they could be."

"Ser Jorah?" Ranma asked looking down at him. "I remember that name, wasn't he the one who ran off to avoid execution for slavery?"

"The very same. He showed up here a few months ago to offer his services to the Targaryen. He brought a lot of information, though he was also promised a captaincy in whatever army we put together."

Ranma frowned. "I wonder if he was the one to tell the Master of Whispers what was going on here."

"And is that why you are here?" Daenerys asked looking over at him. Despite the exhilaration she was feeling at getting away from Viserys and their present mode of transportation, her mind was still working. She was quickly becoming aware she might have merely changed one type of prison for another.

"Robert and Varys certainly seemed to think so." Ranma said laughing aloud and looking over at her before looking away. *This girl is gorgeous! Yep he thought to himself, competence and personal courage are definite turn-ons for me.*

He shook his head to get rid of that thought, now was not the time for it. "The King heard what you and your brother, apparently, were planning, and wanted to send some assassins after you." Ranma shrugged even as his two listeners stiffened. "Needless to say my father and I would not have anything to do with it but Littlefinger, I don't know about him, the Master of coin, he outmaneuvered us. At his suggestion, the King ordered me here to find the two of you and return you to him. He thinks that I'll put you down like dogs if you are a threat but frankly I'm no assassin and I would not follow such an order."

"In my brother's case that might be a pity." Daenerys said, shaking her head then had to spit out a few hairs that got into her mouth thanks to the wind in her face. "Yet, that does not tell me what you plan for me. If you do not wish to return me to King's Landing, what **do** you plan?"

"That will wait until we are aboard the ship." Ranma said a little grimly. "I'd like an idea of what happened here before I tell you anything about me, milady. Regardless, we might need to know everything you can tell us about your brother and his schemes to appease the king, but you personally will be safe, you have my word."

For a moment, Daenerys balked at the idea of selling her brother out to the Usurper let alone what else Ranma might ask of her. But then one of the draklings actually started to make noises in its shell and she felt something bump against the outer membrane of her egg. For her children, she would wait until she heard what else Ranma had to say.

In an astonishingly short amount of time, they had crossed the entire city and were now overlooking the wharf area, where the rooftops gave way to the docks. The business of the city did not stop during the night. Daenerys could see dozens of men still working, so it didn't surprise her when they looped around slightly to come to a place where no one was working for the moment.

There Ranma and Fenris dropped from the roof into an open area between several large crates and some kind of warehouse. With Ranma leading the way, followed by Fenris still carrying Daenerys, and then Domicer, the group with made their way through the docks to the waiting ship at the end of its quay.

The two guards on duty gaped at Ranma and his guests. Though they were simple sailors, even they knew the traits that denoted one of House Targaryen. That and the eggs they were carrying, which were now rocking and moving violently in Daenerys' arms, was enough to tell them who this young woman was.

The moment they were up the gangplank, Ranma barked out orders. "You two, raid Fenris' portion of the food locker for some meat, dice it small, then bring it to my room in a bowl."

Beside him Fenris looked a little miffed for a second, pulling in his tongue and baring his fangs but then shook his head and moved over to Daenerys. Daenerys had moved away quickly from the giant wolf the moment that they were

on firm ground but she stilled as the creature snuffled at her and her two eggs. She actually giggled when the creature licked her side of her face then nuzzled one of the eggs, which was already cracking. The drakling inside stilled a little and began to make a cheeping noise of some sort, almost as if it was curious.

"What else will we need?"

That question brought Daenerys' attention back to Ranma, and she frowned, thinking hard. "A brazier of some kind. We'll need to keep them warm once the shell breaks until their first layer of scales begins to harden. After that, all those who are not of Targaryen blood will have to stay away from them. They will attack anyone else who comes near and, though they won't be able to breathe fire yet, they'll still bite. Daily feedings of meat for now, later we will need to change their diet when they start breathing fire, but for right now the meat will do.""

Ranma nodded, looking over at the two sailors who nodded back rapidly before rushing off. With that taken care of, Ranma led the way down into the ship to his room. Opening the door and looking around he frowned, his eyes narrowing.

Seeing Ranma's expression, Domic asked. "Were you expecting someone to be here already? And if so, who?"

"I was, yes, but they snuck aboard. I assume that they can handle themselves and they aren't my main concern right now, just wish I knew what they were up to." That sounded a little callous when he said it was the truth.

He looked back as the egg that had already begun to crack was broken further, and a mewling sound was heard as a small greenish reptilian snout poked out, capped by a horn of bone, which it must have used to break its way out. Daenerys laughed aloud in delight, reaching down to stroke the little snout, which caused it to retreat for a moment before it began to make more mewling noises, either in pleasure at the touch or for food..

Behind them, the door was still open and one of the sailors that had been on guard came in holding a plate full of small chunks of meat.

Daenerys quickly pointed to where she wanted them, going down on her knees next to the plate on the ground, she reached forward to grab a piece with her fingers and gently fed the drakling, holding the piece over the hole it had made in its shell. At first, the baby dragon was wary but the smell of meat got to it quickly and its snout appeared to take a bite of the meal.

Further cracking and more mewling announced that the other dragon had begun to break out of its shell in turn.

The two sailors looked in shock at the dragons and Ranma pushed them both out of the doorway. He turned to Domic. "Lock this after I go. I'll get us under way, then we can look at that shoulder."

Domic nodded wearily, he had lost a bit of blood, and his shoulder was really paining him. But he didn't turn away from the sight of the two draklings struggling out of their eggs to get at the meat in Daenerys' hands, which she had held further away with each bit, urging them to come further out of their shells.. Such a sight hadn't been seen in hundreds of years and the bard in him was ecstatic to be here to witness it.

He quickly found the captain who had been roused by the guards at some point and the man shook his head. "I didn't think you'd do it, lad. I thought for sure you'd simply have killed the two Targaryens. I take it that this one, at least, is peaceable?"

"That remains to be seen but she was running away from the other one." Ranma said seeing no point in not sharing that. "What happened to Princess Arianne and Obara?"

"They left about an hour after you did." The man replied, shrugging. "They watched as we sold off some of the cargo we had in our hold, though I'll tell you now I didn't sell off more than half of my stock. I'll demand recompense when we returned to King's Landing. After that, they went off, I don't care where. Since they snuck aboard my ship, they sure as hell weren't my responsibility."

"I'm sure you'll be paid at some point." Ranma said with a shrug. "Right now, cast off and get us out of here."

The captain scowled. "I don't like leaving in the dark like this. Ships can be banned for that kind of thing in the free cities."

"There are other ports, captain." Ranma said, looking at him now sternly. "And what exactly about what I just said made you think I was giving you a choice?"

The captain glared a little but knew better than to push it. He and his crew were still rather terrified of the Stark heir. The Memory of the battle that had occurred with the Ironborn and the amount of carnage Ranma and Fenris had handed out saw to that. "Alright, but what about the so-called princess and her servant?"

Ranma shrugged again. "Arianne and Obara can handle themselves. They were here for a reason. If they didn't want to stick around and wait for me to return, then it's obvious they had other plans already in mind. What those plans might be I don't know but it's out of my hands now."

The captain, whose name Ranma had never bothered to learn, scowled a little but nodded. With that he will went below again to browse his crew and Ranma moved quickly to the side of the ship facing the port, one katar out and ready, while his other hand held his katana. If they were boarded by the low slung cutters Pentos used for its port guards, the extra range would allow him to strike further down the ship's side rather than wait for the boarders to get onto the ship's deck.

Moments later the crew, roused by their sleep and grumbling about it, came up and got to work. Luckily, the captain hadn't allowed any of them to take shore leave that first day, needing all hands on board for unloading. Now they set to with a will, despite knowing that they were being forced to leave. The story of two dragons had spread among them quickly and not a one of them was willing to see who could be chasing after the Targaryen girl.

The ropes tying the ship to the quay were released quickly. The punters pushed them further out to sea until the sails could catch the wind. Then they began to make their way out of the port, slowly but surely.

Ranma stayed where he was, staring back of the city to make certain they weren't being followed. For an hour, he stayed there as the ship cleared the port. Just as they were exiting the harbor, several guardhouses on the outcroppings of rocks that denoted the entrance to Pentos' natural harbor lit up behind them.

"Too little, too late." Ranma said shaking his head and smiling now. Inwardly though he was wondering what the other Targaryen would do now and what Arianne was up to.

He waited another thirty minutes and then, when it was clear that no one was following them and that the wind was helping them along as much as it could, Ranma went below.

He found Daenerys, one shoulder leaning against Fenris, singing something gently to the draklings. The brazier she had ordered was set nearby and the heat was somewhat oppressive in the room to Ranma's northern sensibilities. Still, he wasn't about to argue as the little dragons probably needed it. Fenris lay still next to her and the little dragons were curled up along his side between him and the Targaryen Princess.

The sight made Ranma pause for a moment for several reasons. First, Fenris never took to people so quickly, becoming comfortable with the girl that close in so short a time. Children yes, like his master Fenris had a soft spot for youngsters. But Daenerys was in no way a child, whatever Ranma and his father had thought initially. She had the body of a young woman, an incredibly beautiful young woman.

Which brought him to the second reason he paused. Daenerys still wore his shirt, though her side seemed to also have some bandages wrapped around it, covering the shallow cut she had there when they first met. The shirt had fallen off the shoulder of the arm she hadn't thrown over Fenris' back. Her bare knees showed where she had crossed them under the bare remnants of her skirt, burned almost to uselessness in the fire, and the bottom of his shirt. Her hair was splayed out over the direwolf's as Daenerys nuzzled into his fur, her eyes half-closed in pleasure of the feeling while she kept on crooning gently to the draklings beside her.. There was something astonishingly primitive about the image yet it was powerful all the same.

Ranma shook that thought out of his head, ignoring how good she looked in his shirt, how it made her look... his. *Yep, courage, self-control, and competence are definite turn-ons for me.*

When he regained control of himself, the singing had stopped. Ranma found Daenerys looking up at him with those violet eyes of hers, though they were still soft at present thanks to the two draklings beside her. "I take it we have made good our escape?" she asked, her voice low.

"We have." Ranma said nodding and talking quietly as well, looking over at where Domic was leaning against the wall nearby. The man had his sword out and looked ready for trouble.

He shook his head no when Ranma looked at him. "Just in case." he said, sheathing his blade. Ranma nodded before calmly removing his sword belt containing his katars setting them on the bed along with his katana. Then he moved around it to sit next to Fenris, placing the direwolf between him and Daenerys.

"I have to thank you for your aid, again." Daenerys said looking at him, though the words came out as if they were painful. "But now that we are safe, I believe you owe us an exclamation as to what your plans for us going forward are."

"You first." Ranma said, smirking a little, causing her eyes to flare in anger but he shook his head. "Calmly, lady." He leaned over to look at the two draklings. One of them, almost as if it had been roused by her anger, was awake now and moving about, looking up at them. "Why don't you explain why you were running first, then I will explain to you what I plan for you and your little dragons."

Daenerys glared at him some more. She had not come this far just to bow willingly to someone else's whims but when she caught his eyes they were deadly serious, filled with a grim purpose whose origin she couldn't guess at present.

. After a moment, she relented. She told him about all that had happened since they had entered the city, about how she had begun to chafe under her brother's control, of how Viserys had slowly changed over time, going from the kind, gentle brother who was always looking out for her to this insane madman who didn't care how many lives he ruined as he trampled his way towards the throne.

"Do not mistake me." Daenerys said earnestly, her yes capturing Ranma's again. "I desire to sit on the Iron Throne as much as my brother. It was the right of our family to do so, whatever my father the Mad King did, or even our oldest brother, Rhaegar. But I will not build a mountain of corpses to get there. "If we cannot rally the people to our cause, then our cause is obviously not just enough."

Ranma nodded, then looked over at Domic. "Is this Viserys mad or simply uncaring and ambitious?"

"I would say is quite a bit closer to mad than merely ambitious. Daenerys wasn't exaggerating. He will literally carve his way through Westeros to earn the throne if he can."

Ranma's eyes narrowed in thought processing what it said about Viserys while also, wondering what the hell Arianne was up to. He hoped that wouldn't turn out as bad as he feared down the line with her near such a man. But even Ranma couldn't have fought an entire city, which was what he would have had to do if they had waited long enough for him to hunt the two missing women down, if he could have found them at all in a foreign city.

"And now it is your turn." Daenerys said firmly. "What do you want from me and what is your price for my freedom?"

"How much has Domic told you about the legends of the North?" Ranma asked, leaning against Fenris.

He stuck his hand over the wolf's side, gently waving his fingers at the drakling. It snapped at his fingers, catching one of them in its jaws, then seemed surprised when its teeth couldn't pierce Ranma's skin.

*Gotta love ki strengthening*, he thought to himself, shaking his head when Daenerys looked a little surprised at that as well. Ranma flicked the little creature with his other finger causing it to let go with a squawk, then stroked its head with the same finger before Daenerys could calm it.

"Precious little." Domic said, having watched the little exchange and shaking his head in surprise. Evidently, the Stark heir had a way with animals that went beyond his giant direwolf. And the fact that the direwolf and the two dragons got along so well was astonishing in and of itself.

"That makes the explanation a little more difficult." Ranma said his free hand scratching at his pigtail for a moment. "Have you heard news of the King Beyond the Wall?"

"Yes." Daenerys said nodding her head. "We were all thinking that it might be enough reason for you to be called home from King's Landing. I take it, by the way, that your courtship with Margaery of House Tyrell didn't go forward?"

For some reason, that thought made her smile. It wasn't simply that Ranma was handsome or that he had helped her. There was this air of solidity about him, coupled with a cheerfulness that she liked, and he was good with her dragons. Indeed, even now, one of his hands continued to play with the cream colored drakling, causing it to make little warbling noises deep in its throat as it tried, with all the tenacity and lack of coordination of a newborn, to pounce on Ranma's fingers.

Ranma ignored that question, not certain exactly where he and Margaery stood. Yes, he knew her family had postponed a formal arrangement and even called her home to halt their 'courtship' but where he and Margaery stood was up in the air. They hadn't been romantically involved but there was a chance for that to occur in future, though that wasn't something he wanted to think about, at present. Not when Daenerys was looking at him with those

enticing violet eyes.

"Historically speaking," Ranma went on slowly, "there have been other threats beyond the Wall, though they have not been seen for ages, literally. I'm certain as a bard that you are familiar with some of the ancient legends?"

For a moment, that line went over Domic's head while Daenerys frowned. "I know of many legends from beyond the Wall, tales that say the forest children might still reside somewhere there, tales that speak of giants and other creatures that have never been seen on this side of the Wall."

"What about White Walkers?" Ranma said, interrupting him, finally just stating it.

Domic's eyes widened. "Th-those are myths." he stammered. "Tales told by fireside, there has not been a single sighting of a White Walker in eight millennia. They are dead and gone!"

"No, they're not, are they?" Daenerys said shaking her head. She was watching Ranma's face and saw something there that worried her. "This King Beyond the Wall, he isn't the only threat is he?"

Ranma nodded grimly. "They're real enough. Though I have never seen one of the White Walkers themselves, I have seen their creatures." He began to describe the skirmish that had occurred with the wolfsworn against the forces of endless winter, how Ranma feared that a true winter was coming and with it the ancient enemy.

"So you see..." he said looking over the side of Fenris to the now sleeping drakling, curled up with its still sleeping sibling. "Whatever the reason, I'm ecstatic that you found these two. After all, dragon-fire was one of the most potent weapons against the forces of winter."

Daenerys nodded thoughtfully. "So in return for your protection against the King and anyone else, I must help you and yours up on the Wall? Is that it?"

"Yes, that's pretty much it." Ranma nodded with a small smile. "Not such a bad deal is it?"

"And my ambitions?" Daenerys asked, looking at him somewhat coldly. She agreed that such an evil needed to be faced, but she still desired to sit on the Iron Throne. "What of them?"

Ranma frowned. "Protecting you from Robert is a long way from helping you overthrow him." He paused, thinking of the message from his father he still kept hidden in his pocket, unopened. He felt that if his father wanted to tell him something, he could tell it to Ranma in person. He knew it was irrational, but a part of him feared what the letter might tell him, merging with the growing concern of what might be happening back in King's Landing while he was away.

"I do not think your name will garner you as much or the sort of support you want nor would I be willing to allow you to try if doing so shattered the unity of the kingdom. We need to stand together against the forces of winter. After that, well, you could always marry the King's son and become Queen? That would get my sister out of the chore, in any event, and would get you close to that torture device you all call a throne." Ranma smirked at that point.

Daenerys actually laughed, shaking her head, sending her silver hair flashing in the light of the brazier. The noise struck Ranma to the quick, like bells sent to tinkling by a wild wind. "Ha, no thank you. I can tell from your face you have a reason to get your sister away from him so why would I wish to take her place?"

She went on more seriously. "But you have to admit that Robert Baratheon set a dangerous precedent with his war against my family? We've heard tell of the battles for influence between House Stark and House Lannister. Your unity might already be fractured."

Sighing, Ranma stood up, moving over to Domic, who had bandaged his arm as best he could on his own. "Again, lady, there is a vast difference between might be and is. We will see what transpires for now, making plans too far ahead is never a good idea. Now, let me see that arm Domic. While I do that you can explain to me, Domic, why you made your part in our meeting into a woman in that damn song and why I have flowing locks after you promised not to use such in any song with me in it!"

At Domic's pained expression, Daenerys again laughed, thinking that regardless of anything else, knowing Ranma would be interesting, at the least.

OOOOOO

"Let her go." Viserys said, smiling faintly as he looked down at the black skinned drakling in his arms, ignoring the apoplectic face of Illyrio for the moment. The man had just informed him that a ship had managed to slip out of the



port before his order to have it closed could reach the harbor.

The creature had bit him at first but Viserys had refused to give in, simply staring the creature down, and it eventually let his finger go lapping at it apologetically before chewing down on the bits of meat that Viserys had ordered prepared for it. Now it was sleeping off its food induced torpor but he couldn't leave it alone, what it represented and what it meant for his plans was simply too important.

"Tell the barbarians whatever you want, that she was stolen away by a rival or even that someone from Westeros came and took her because the Usurper feared their union. We might yet be able to convince him to loan at least some troops that way, especially considering the damage to your mansion makes it look as if that was indeed the case. But that isn't important anymore. With this drakling, with **my** Balerion, we can conquer Westeros, as my ancestors did with the original!"

"Even if your sister has two of the dragons with her?" Illyrio asked, calming down somewhat. Having his mansion burned as it was, losing so many paintings, tapestries, and other priceless items had hammered his control badly. Still, the sight of Viserys with the dragon gave him hope, though the chewing out the Prince had given him for hiding the fact he had the dragon eggs and not told Viserys about them had been unpleasant.

"That is what assassins are for." Viserys said coldly. "The moment she left here, my sister became just another enemy and, without the traitor, those dragons will become wild and uncontrollable, more of a danger to anyone around them than they would be to their enemies." The fact that his sister gotten away with two of the creatures **was** appalling but he could bear the shame for now.

"We are still investigating how they actually escaped from my property. There **is** evidence that she had help. Seven guards were found dead by the wall and, no matter how good he was with a blade, the bard couldn't have done that. Added to damage to my mansion, the deaths among my guardsmen and your Balerion will be enough to offset the anger that Khal Drogo will feel at once more not being presented with his gift. Indeed, your plan on blaming the Usurper has merit." Illyrio said thoughtfully. "Do it well enough and maybe he'll be willing to try to get over his people's fear of the water and still join with us."

"Sir." said a guard, interrupting the two of them from where they had been talking near a table that had been set up by the gateway into the magister's grounds. The mansion itself was still smoking in places, the fire that Daenerys had started in the kitchen and the hallway had spread widely. Illyrio's love of wooden floors and the sheer amount of oil and alcohol that Daenerys had used caused it to spread quickly.

"What is it?" the magister asked looking up at the man.

"There are two women here to see you, they insist on seeing you now, and say they have information you and your guest will want to hear."

"Send them in." the magister said and his eyes widened. He could recognize both came from Dorne but the one in the lead...

The woman in the lead was short but beautiful, with olive skin, large dark eyes, and long, black hair that fell to the middle of her back, seemingly just washed. Her dress, which was made of flowing silks of red and tan, hugged her impressive figure and she wore several pieces of jewelry that looked like they wouldn't have been out of place in his strong room.

The women stared at the little dragon in Viserys' arms, then the first one smiled, licking her lips. She had been dismayed at first to see the damage done to the mansion, which had made her question the wisdom of leaving Ranma to his own devices. Yet, she hadn't been making any headway influencing him. She had hoped to get here before he did, having no clue how fast Ranma could travel via rooftops, but evidently something had happened here anyway, though she didn't know if Ranma was involved.

Now however, seeing Viserys Targaryen holding a young baby dragon in his arms, she knew she had made the correct decision, whatever else had happened. "It looks as if this plan at least has succeeded somewhat. Greetings, Your Highness. I am Princess Arianne of Dorne. I believe we have much to discuss."

OOOOOO

As the ship carrying Ranma and Daenerys made its way back to King's Landing, a message was on its way, a small Raven from the Maester's Citadel marked, strangely enough, like it had come from Winterfell. In Westeros, it was often said that fell news flew on black wings. In this case, that would be an understatement because the events this

message would set in motion would shake the entire world to its core.

End chapter

And now, as I said, bad things have begun to happen. I deeply regretted Tommen's death, but with the way Joffrey is, he would not allow even his younger brother to take that which he sees as his by right away from him, and would not turn from any act to keep it. Before you ask, yes it might well have happened this way even if Ranma was still around. After all, he didn't eat all his meals with Tommen.

Sorry to everyone who wanted Daenerys to have her own adventures, though I will tell you that, obviously, Ranma's plans for Daenerys and her dragons won't really occur the way he wants them to. Essos and its people will still figure in the background, but now the action heats up in Westeros.

I could have kept going, I have a few scenes for what happens next in king's landing already written, but this was the only place that felt like a real chapter ending, rather than a huge cliff hanger.

Oh, and some people may think I am overdoing the whole 'women using their wiles' thing, remember both Westeros and Essos are strongly patriarchal in nature. Women need to use any tool they can to get their way or protect themselves. It just isn't a tactic that works well for that purpose on Ranma.

And for those who think I am painting Cersei in too kind a light, wait until next chapter, where she proves that she is still the queen bitch.

## \*Chapter 8\*: Chapter 8

I do not own Ranma or ASolaF. Damn pity, one would have a better female lead, the other would be done by now. Again, never gets old.

OH, a reviewer says he only finds the Ranma sections of this story interesting, sorry bud, but you are going to hate this chapter.

My thanks go out to Byakugan789 for being there to answer some of my questions and give me his opinion as well as for editing.

For those of you wondering, the next chapter of ATP will be out next week, but my muse was kicking me in the back of the head to get this chapter done, and some of the scenes in that did not come out the way they needed to.

Want to give a shout-out to **serpentguy**, for his story *Nine Minutes*. Was in a mood for One Piece, but the anime is going almost as slow as DBZ (just make a filler arc people, come on) and went back and reread it. It is so rare to find a good, lengthy One Piece story, especially one that doesn't get bogged down in East Blue, that isn't yaoi (far too fucking much of that in this genre!) Not my normal style, but the characters are well done, and Robin/Luffy is done perfectly. If anyone else knows a story that changes so much, and has Luffy/any girl but Hancock, that is written as well that is current, I would love to see it.

Now on with this oh so bloody show.

### Chapter 8 How swiftly Comes the Avalanche

Daenerys woke up when the light shining through the small porthole set into the side of the room hit her face. She smiled, stretching luxuriantly for a moment, then winced as the wound in her side twanged, causing her to remember the events of the night before. Ignoring her injury she sat up quickly in the bed in Ranma's room, looking around wildly.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the two draklings. The cream colored one, whom Daenerys thought she might call Sunfyre, after one of the most gorgeous dragons to ever live, was curled up on a pillow right by her head. It was awake and snuffling at her hair, but still seemed a somewhat torpid. Fenris was laid out next to the bed with the other drakling, the green scaled one, still asleep on his back.

Once certain her little ones were safe, Daenerys looked down at the bed, frowning a little wondering how she had been moved. She remembered falling asleep against the direwolf's side the evening before after talking with Domic and Ranma for a time until the last of the adrenaline left her and she slept the sleep of the exhausted. With that thought Daenerys lifted the sheets to look at her body, breathing a sigh of relief again at seeing she was still clothed in the overlarge shirt Ranma had given her.

With the important matters out of the way, Daenerys could concentrate on how she was actually feeling. *I feel good, by the gods that was one of my best nights rest ever! Is that because I was so tired, or that I feel safe now for some reason?*

She frowned however as she noticed two large stew bowls piled up with the first one from the night before. A soft voice spoke up from near the door, answering her unspoken query. "After we put you to bed the two little ones woke up hungry once each. Kind of reminded me of when my younger siblings were babies. All they did was sleep, eat, and well, you know."

Ranma had set himself up right in the small entranceway by the doorway. It was cramped, but he had slept in worse conditions, and this way no one could enter the room without first waking him up. Domic was curled up with a few spare blankets in a hammock hung rather haphazardly on the back wall. He was still asleep, while Ranma had woken up quickly when he heard Daenerys moving around. Now he stood up, cracking his neck explosively before he smiled at her.

The Targaryen princess smiled back at him, somewhat whimsically. "I don't have any experience with children so I wouldn't know, but going from my readings about them that it is normal for my little ones." She laughed as the cream colored one crawled up into her lap. Thankfully she wasn't getting any sense of it being hungry at present, merely inquisitive, exploring it's environment. "Were you ever put in charge of your siblings when they were younger?"

"Oh yes, several times, especially little Arya. You'd like her I think. She's a wild girl, much more at home with a blade

in her hand then a needle or paintbrush." Ranma moved over to the bed, patting Fenris on the head in passing as he explained the deal he had made so many years ago with his mother about Arya, causing Daenerys to laugh at how stubborn the girl was. He went on more seriously. "I know even with all you shared about him, it could not have been easy to leave your older brother."

"It was actually much easier than you might think to take that last step. I think it was simply the culmination of things, too many negative feelings and conflict, too much abuse. He wasn't Viserys my brother anymore, the years of having to fend for ourselves and his burning ambition changed him, and not for the better." Daenerys sighed faintly.

Ranma nodded then looked down at the green scaled dragon, which had woken up and was now looking at the space between Fenris' back and the bed as if calculating the distance. Ranma helped it along, picking it up underneath its belly when it tried to jump, placing it on the foot of the bed. The drakling made a halfhearted attempt to bite him, but once again Ranma's ki toughening technique was more than up to the task of stopping its teeth from penetrating, something the little creature realized after only a few seconds of useless chewing. "Do you have any plans on how to train these little ones? And have you thought up names?"

"This one is Sunfyre." Daenerys replied, rubbing the head of the cream colored drakling who trilled a little under her caress. She had read that dragons often acted out or were capricious, but right now, she didn't see it. "And I think that the green one I'll name Rhaegon." She watched Ranma closely when she said this, but Ranma merely smiled.

"That might bother other people lady, but I have no issue with you showing respect for your brother like that. Until he kidnapped Lyanna there hadn't been even a hint of Rhaegar falling to the Targaryen madness. I have heard people saying he was a fine man, and a fine knight."

Daenerys smiled at that then frowned as his response highlighted something she needed to do. "I have to apologize for my attitude last night Lord Stark." she said formally. "I realize that without you I would never have escaped, and I was remarkably suspicious despite that. Yet even so, I cannot get over my fear over what will happen to me when we arrived in King's Landing."

"Nothing will happen to you milady," Ranma said simply smiling a little. "And I didn't take it personally. I didn't exactly catch you at yer best, y'know?"

That actually won a small chuckle from Daenerys, though she also flushed slightly remembering how she had been practically naked when Ranma first arrived. Not noticing her flushed cheeks, Ranma went on more seriously. "I won't let you out of my sight until the King **guarantees** your safety, and even then I doubt I'll let you go far without at least some of my family's armstrongs with you. Frankly I don't want us to spend much time in King's Landing at all. Just enough time to check in with my father, tell the King what we can about your brother, the magister and their plans, then move on to White Harbor."

That caused Daenerys's eyes to narrow. "You are truly worried about what might be happening on the Wall, aren't you? I do not know much about these White Walkers, but if they are the same as in the old legends, would they not need to wait for Winter to truly begin before launching any assault?"

"That's true, but they can act through their undead agents before that. Besides, we can train the little ones in safety in the North, without having to watch every shadow for strangers armed with nasty toys. And I'm worried about what might be happening in Westeros while I'm gone milady, not just on the Wall. You told me that you had heard about the power struggle between my family and the lions, well that barely scratches the surface. I won't tell you everything, but suffice it to say that my leaving King's Landing to find you was good for you Daenerys, but it might be just as bad for the family members I left behind there."

"And you think your presence could have that much effect? You are a good warrior Ranma Stark, but that good?" Here Daenerys was fishing for information. She had seen how Ranma dispatched the magister's guards, and he certainly seemed to have an amazing set of physical skills, but was that the entirety, or was that just scratching the surface?

"My presence might have kept the political confrontations from boiling over into physical ones at least." Ranma said with a shrug. "I expect that you will see more of my abilities as we go on, so you won't have to fish for information, Danny." He grinned at her, and she shook her head wryly, raising a finger like a Braavosi water dancer signaling a touch.

There was a moment of silence as they both wondered where to take the conversation. Before either could decide the draklings began to make noises, and Daenerys realized that they were hungry again.

Ranma laughed. "Definitely like little babies, though they make more noise than most of my siblings. Rickon was a little noisemaker though, always whining and wailing unless we were paying attention to him, or crawling around and eating things he shouldn't. Though that could be laid at Bran's feet too." He moved over to grab up the bowls from the draklings earlier feedings. "I'll be right back, wake Dmeric up and lock the door behind me would you?"

"You don't trust the crewmen?" Daenerys asked, her eyes narrowing.

"They're not beholden to my family or Lord Manderly. This ship was chosen 'cause it was going in the right direction and the Master of Whispers had previous dealings with the captain. Not a comforting thought, especially since I was attacked on our first night out. Fenris," Ranma nodded his head over to the giant direwolf "dealt with them, so I don't know what was behind it, but still. And besides..." Here Ranma looked a little uncomfortable as he went on. "They're sailors and they've been away at sea for the past few weeks, despite our little stop in Pentos."

Daenerys flushed a little when she got that implication but nodded firmly. When Ranma left closing the door behind him Daenerys, wincing as her injury was disturbed by the movement, got out of bed.

She moved over to Dmeric and woke him up, before moving over to the doorway to lock it. Dmeric winced in turn, his injured shoulder paining him severely despite the work Ranma had done on it the evening before. Still, he held his sword in his ready hand just in case.

Now that they were alone Daenerys asked him. "Can we trust this Ranma Stark? I realize he's helped us, and I **think** I can trust his word, but how much control of over our fates will he really have when we arrive in King's landing? Surely his father would side with the King?"

"Not about your welfare Lady." Dmeric answered promptly. "If Ranma realizes what is going on in the far North, then his father surely does as well, and that young man was correct, dragon fire was one of the best weapons against the forces of winter, when they could be caught in the open at any rate. I could wish that more information of the White Walker's had survived, but I can't remember anything but they liked to attack at night."

He went on in less grim tones as he watched Daenerys stroke the drakling's heads with gentle fingers. "Of course your little babes will have to age until their scales can keep their warmth inside before we take them to the Wall, but Ranma will understand that as well as we will."

"We haven't heard a hint of this from any of our spies, have we?" Daenerys asked, still looking for problems, though she was rapidly coming to the opinion that Ranma had played it as straight as he could with her. "Why wouldn't the Starks tell the king about this?"

"Proof." Dmeric shrugged. "Robert doesn't even believe in the Seven really. From what I remember he only believes what he can see or touch, and if they didn't have hard evidence then the Lannisters at least would never be willing to send men up to aid along the wall. And even now, I doubt any of the other nations will send anyone to combat the King Beyond the Wall. Not with Robert's position on the throne so tenuous, they'll want to secure their own positions first."

He smiled thinly. "If the King really did try to send assassins after you, I don't doubt that his relationship with the Lord Stark has already taken a major blow. Lord Stark would never condone such a thing nor will he condone any attack on you while you are under his House's protection."

Daenerys nodded, but was really of two minds about that. She wanted to be in a position to secure her own protection, but until her dragons grew up, and possibly not even then, that was impossible. Still, it was better than being at her brother's mercy, or having to marry some Dothraki barbarian from the plains. *And Ranma's a rather handsome fellow* said a small, oft ignored, portion of her mind.

She shrugged that thought off quickly. Ranma's looks was not what she was interested in, it was whether or not he really could protect her from her enemies in Westeros that mattered.

But that was part of the problem, she realized. She wanted to like Ranma. For some reason, be it his smile or his general manner Ranma was simply a likable fellow, and Daenerys hadn't really dealt with likable fellows other than Dmeric for quite some time. All of her instincts were screaming that there had to be something underneath that, yet she could detect no hint of it.

Daenerys decided to put it aside for now. The voyage to and from Westeros usually took two and a half weeks, depending on weather, so she had plenty of time to get to know Ranma, and to decide if he really could back up his claims. What Daenerys could **do** if she decided he couldn't however was a depressingly short list, nigh on empty

really.

At her request Domicer exited the room, standing guard outside while she got dressed. Thankfully Fenris was able to watch the younglings as she did, and they were busy crawling around the room under his watchful eye. She wondered idly if there had been interactions between dragons and direwolves before that were this amicable, then simply enjoyed watching her little ones crawl around.

Their little wings seemed to be giving them issues, but they would work it out in time she was sure. *Their ancestors have been doing it for millennia after all*, she thought then frowned a little. *Where did the magister find their eggs anyway? I doubt they were from my family, so where'd the eggs come from?*

Her eyes close in pain as she remembered having to leave the third egg behind. No doubt her brother had already begun bonding with the dragon within. *That will cause trouble in the future, I do not doubt. Though I wonder how they will get on together. My brother doesn't exactly have a caring personality, or much patience...*

She shook that thought off, then picked up the knife that Domicer had left in the room for her, one of several from his collection. It was a stiletto, a thin blade about as long as her two fists put together with an equally small handle. She wondered where she should put it, then frowned looking at the remains of her skirt.

Daenerys was measuring the knife against her inner thigh, wondering if she should put it there when voice from behind her said "That is an idiotic place for a knife of that size. You'd never get at it quick enough if you wear a skirt, and you can't exactly hide it there if you wear leggings, unless they're really baggy, and you'd still be unable to get to it quick."

Daenerys turned quickly, cursing her beating heart which was pounding in her chest at the sudden shock, while the two dragons looked up from where they had been playing. To her chagrin however they were not responding to her sudden moment of distress, but the smell of the meat that Ranma, who was the one who had spoken, was holding in a large stew bowl.

He set it down in front of the little dragons, then turned to her with a smirk. "You should have remembered to lock the door after Domicer stepped out. I have some leggings if you wish to wear those instead of that skirt lady, I'm afraid it looks rather on its last legs."

Daenerys scowled a little realizing he was mocking her, but after a moment the scowl disappeared when she realized he wasn't doing it maliciously. "Where would you put the knife then? And yes, I think leggings would be best."

"That's not the kind of dagger you want to use as a holdout, it's too large, though the blade looks a good choice. It could be used even against someone in chain mail and could penetrate boiled leather easily enough if you're strong enough." Ranma said moving over to his sea chest. He pulled out a spare set of leggings tossing them over to Daenerys. "We'll probably have to take them in at the waist, but for now they'll do."

Daenerys held them up to her legs critically. "Length too. I am a bit shorter than you after all." Actually she was about two feet shorter, she was short for a woman and Ranma was somewhat tall for a man.

She looked up at a flash of white and reflexively caught the shirt Ranma just threw at her. "That's actually clean, I bet the shirt you're wearing still has the smell of smoke on it."

He looked over the draklings as they were trying to tip over the stew pot to get at the meat inside, smiling faintly. "I'll wait outside, knock on the door when you're done."

He came back in a moment later when she had finished, and showed her how to wear the knife all along her side, hidden slightly under the shirt but not so much as to be a true holdout dagger. Then he reached for his own belt buckle and pulled out from behind it a very tiny punch dagger almost palm sized but very sharp looking.

When Ranma passed it over to her, Daenerys noticed there was a very small loop at the end of the blade for her fingers, showing it was supposed to be held by two of her fingers rather than held in her hand,. "This is what a real holdout dagger should be like, small, very sharp, easy to hide. You can have this one. I think every lady should have one really, though where to put it on when you're wearing a dress without a belt, that I'll leave up to you."

Ranma smirked. "I even got my sister Sansa to agree to wear one, though I don't know if she still is. I hope she is, but..." shrugged.

I take it your other sister Arya didn't have to be talked into it? Did she complain it was too small?" Daenerys quipped.

"Yes actually." Ranma laughed, helping her to tuck the dagger under the belt buckle. The belt was now cinched tight as it could go, and the leggings were very still loose on Daenerys, while the shirt was quite tight. Something Ranma did not notice at all... "If Arya had her way she probably would clank whenever she moved."

Daenerys laughed again, and Ranma looked up at her face from where he had been finishing with her belt, only just now realizing how close their faces were. From Daenerys's startled expression she had just realized it too, and for a moment blue and purple eyes stared at one another from less than a few inches. Ranma moved back quickly then proceeded to tell Daenerys a story about Arya from when she began her training.

Shaking her head momentarily to get rid of that moment Daenerys moved over to the drakling. She gathered Sunfyre into her lap, reaching forward to pick out one of the pieces of meat from the pot, holding it up above his head with her other hand. Rhaegon pulled himself into her lap, making Daenerys grateful she had put on the leggings already.

Finishing his tale, Ranma looked at the two draklings, who were now eagerly taking the meat from both of Daenerys' hands. "Speaking of training, what are you going to do with those two?"

"I read every book I could get my hands on about dragons when I was younger, they were part of my heritage after all." Daenerys said flicking Rhaegon on the nose when it tried to take a bite out of the chunk she was holding out for Sunfyre. "None of that." she scolded. The suitably cowed drakling subsided, waiting its turn. "They are supposed to become as intelligent as animals can be later on, but we have to start imprinting with them now hence why I'm handling them like this."

Ranma hummed thoughtfully scratching at his ponytail for a moment. "Would you care for some advice?" He nodded over to Fenris who was watching the proceedings with an amused air, if Daenerys was guessing his expression correctly. The direwolf had an almost human ability to get his opinions across even without words, and a very wide range of expressions.

"I don't think there's much parallel there other than both species being predators." Daenerys said frowning for a moment as she turned her head to look at the dire wolf. "Exactly how intelligent is Fenris?"

Fenris huffed irritably, never liking being spoken about as if he wasn't there though he understood the upside to that as well. Feeling his irritation through their link, Ranma smirked. "Quite a bit more intelligent than most people think. Can I ask you to try something?"

Daenerys's eyebrows rose and she nodded her head slowly.

"Close your eyes, and..." Ranma pause thinking of how to explain this to someone who hadn't heard old Nan's ghost stories. "Think of one of the dragons, imagine it in your mind, then... sort of see if you can feel what it's feeling..."

Daenerys opened her eyes to look at him quizzically. "What exactly am I trying to do here?"

"You'll understand if you can get it, I'll explain after."

"I'll hold you to that." Daenerys said feeling rather fully should the moment. She could get some impressions of the dragons, but surely that was simply her projecting onto them, not a reality.

Still, Daenerys closed her eyes and did as requested. She concentrated on the Dragon she had named after her brother, Rhaegon, since he seemed to be a little more inquisitive than the other one. She got some feelings of hunger, muted somewhat now, and something else...

"Anticipation?" She said aloud looking over to the drakling who had rounded Fenris and was now about to leap onto the wolf's tale. Fenris however was well aware of the drakling's intention, and moved his tail quickly out of the way before flicking it back to smack the drakling in the face.

Rhaegon let out a squawk, then a huff of air as he tried to pounce again. Now Daenerys was getting feelings of enjoyment and pleasure. With a startled oath, she pulled her consciousness away. "Wh-what is going on?" she asked, stammering.

*None of the books I read said anything about being able to feel a dragon's emotions!* A few written by members of her own House had hinted at being able to understand their dragons, but there was a vast difference between that and being able to feel their emotions.

"That's what I was wondering." Ranma said nodding. "Have you ever heard of warging?" When she answered in the negative he explained what a warg was then said "I had wondered since I'd heard about the dragons of your family if

that was one of their secrets. From what I remember from my history from old Valyria they couldn't use their dragons as well as your family could, and there were several riders that controlled their dragons like I'd expect a warg to be able to in the Dance of the Dragons war."

During his explanation Daenerys had gotten over her shock and was now on to more practical matters. "So this will help me train them quite a lot I would assume, how intelligent can they become with this connection between us?"

Ranma shrugged. "I don't know. Fenris is obviously much more intelligent than most of his breed, no offense Fenris." he said looking over the wolf who looked only a little mollified at that before he put his head down again to stare at where Rhaegon was still trying to pounce on his tail. Hunters these two were not, but they were young yet and could learn. "Whether that will be the case for dragons you'll have to discover, but I don't see any reason why they couldn't become just as intelligent in time."

"Again you have helped me Ranma Stark, thank you." Daenerys said smiling up at him happily. "Do you have any specific ideas for their training?"

"Well," Ranma laughed as Sunfyre scrambled up Daenerys's side to perch on one of her shoulders, hitting her in the face with a furred wing in the process. "First, we'll want to find a leather jerkin for you rather than my silk shirt. And I'd try to not let them get into the habit of doing that. Eventually they'll be much too large, and you don't want them trying it after they can nearly crush you under their weight."

He looked out through the porthole at the sun which was high in the sky by this point. "Let's go above, your draklings might like a chance to explore a larger area, and being cooped up in here can't be good for them or you. You still need some sun." He knelt down reaching out to touch the little mark on her above one eye that her brother had left her with a gentle finger. "You could use some sun too, though it won't do anything for that, I'm sorry to say. Pity I couldn't stay long enough to introduce your brother to my boot."

"I'd have liked to see that too." Daenerys murmured, shivering slightly under his touch. When he pulled back she grasped his hand and was pulled to her feet with Sunfyre still on her shoulder. Rhaegon clambered up on Fenris' back before the giant wolf stood up, following his master and the Dragon Lady.

The princess squinted as they came out onto the deck, noticing with amusement that most of the work around the deck had stopped as they came up, and nearly every sailor in sight was staring at her and her dragons. Domic had followed them and noticing the same thing smiled faintly. "The shock value of my little ones is quite immense." she quipped, nodding over at Ranma. "They might eventually beat out your direwolf in that area."

"In a few years maybe." Ranma laughed, leading them along the deck. They moved to the back of the ship, where Sunfyre scrambled down from Daenerys's shoulder then down her leg to peer out through the railings down and the ocean.

"He won't try to jump will he?" Daenerys asked reaching forward for the little drakling.

"Call it milady," Ranma said touching her shoulder gently. "It's a perfect time to try out your ability to connect with them. Warn them away from the edge, send to them feelings of danger connected with the railing."

Daenerys looked over at him and Ranma smiled encouragingly. With a deep breath Daenerys reached out through her connection to the draklings, warning them, trying to tell them that the edge of the railing was dangerous. To her shock it seemed to work as both of them backed away slightly though they also seemed fascinated by the moving water far below.

Or Sunfyre did at any rate. Rhaegon lost interest after a few moments, and went back to Fenris. Realizing what the cub wanted, Fenris lazily began to move one of his front paws around. The drakling tried to pounce on it, a seeming smile on his tiny reptilian face as he made happy sounding warbling noises.

Daenerys laughed gaily, looking at both of them and pushing out a wave of affection, that was the only way she could describe it, towards the two draklings who both looked up at her before going back to what they had been doing. "I always hated reading about how dragons had to be chained down even when they were young. Growing up I realized it was simple fancy to think the chains weren't needed, but look! No chains necessary now!" Daenerys laughed again shaking her head.

She looked up however at Ranma who sat across from her leaning against Fenris's side as she was the railing, a sudden fear filling her. "Do you think you could reach out to them?"



"Maybe." Ranma said with a shrug. "I won't try without your permission of course. And I doubt I could get as much out of them as you could. They imprinted on you after all, and I already have Fenris."

"Well technically, they imprinted on me and Fenris." Daenerys laughed a relieved.

"How does it feel to be a mommy Fenris?" Ranma asked amused.

Daenerys laughed again when Fenris smacked him in the head with his fluffy tail. He turned back to Daenerys. "Now, in terms of specific training..."

That conversation went on for a while, the two of them exchanging ideas, with Daenerys gobbling up every idea she could about training from Ranma, though some of the specific training exercises wouldn't work. Yet by the end of the conversation Daenerys had a very good idea how she would be training her draklings.

From there the conversation segued into amusing moments from Ranma's own training with Fenris, as well as his own personal training and childhood. Daenerys replied with her own stories, of when she was younger and later on. When her stories turned darker Ranma replied with his own, telling Daenerys about when he met Domic from his own point of view. They sat there throughout the rest of the day, simply getting to know one another, not even noticing the passage of time until the dragons began to whine once more for their dinner.

OOOOOO

In King's Landing Ranma's father sighed faintly, putting his signature on yet another piece of paper the king really should have been taking care of. But given their relationship at present, Eddard couldn't really say that he was unsurprised that Robert had removed himself still further from the actual running of the kingdom. After Tyene's execution Robert and Eddard had once more fallen into frosty neutrality rather than the easy friendship they had once enjoyed.

Ned was firmly of the opinion that someone else had killed Tommen, that Tyene had no motive whatsoever to do it, and that she should not have been executed so quickly. He understood why the Queen had pushed for it, it was obvious a mother's grief had destroyed the queen's common sense. But Robert should've been able to keep his emotional distance. Finding who was really behind the plot was more important than persecuting the red herring, as Ned thought Tyene had been.

That didn't even take into consideration of how Dorne was going to react once they heard. Prince Doran might not be willing to do anything for the murder, and that was how those in Dorne would see it, of a bastard girl-child. Oberyn, the girl's father, was the leader of their armies, and if he reacted badly, the results could be another war even if Doran tried to do nothing.

But Robert didn't want to hear it, and Tyene had been put to death. Compounding matters further, after Tommen's death Robert had fallen into even worse drinking and whoring habits than before. Now he was barely in the keep at all for one day of every seven, spending his time hunting and whoring, away from responsibility and duty and trying to mitigate the damage the execution would do to their relationship with Dorne once Prince Doran received word of it. This had put the final nail in the coffin of Ned and Robert's friendship.

While their reactions differed, both royals had retreated entirely from the running of the kingdom, which, much as Ned wanted to say otherwise, was more surprising in the queen than the king. Cersei had slipped into a deep depression. She no longer took part in the Small Council, a pity considering that when Cersei spoke she had some good ideas. Nor did she take part in the court itself any longer, retreating entirely from her public persona. Cersei wore the black of mourning even now a week and a half later, with only a circlet of red and gold brocade to denote her family allegiance.

That dress had actually been made for Cersei by Sansa, who also wore more somber clothing these days. The two of them had become somewhat close since Tommen's death, with the queen almost leaning on Sansa as a friend in her time of grief. And to Ned's disgust, Joffrey and Sansa had become even closer. In fact he'd had to speak to Sansa rather sharply a few times about being seen with Joffrey without a chaperone other than one of the Kingsguard.

Myrcella too was grieving her younger brother's death. She had practically moved into the tower, bunking in Ranma's room. Yet for some reason Ned thought there might be more to it than merely wanting to be in a place where she had only happy memories of her brother like the Tower. No, there was something else there but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Still, Ned was happy to add her to the tower's security, which he had tightened after Tommen's death, no servants

save those brought down from Winterfell were allowed in anymore, not even under guard. The Tower's foodstuffs were also under 24/7 security.

In the court, reactions from both the death of Tyene and murder of Tommen were extremely varied, though none of them were good for Eddard or his people. There was a portion of the court that was as sad as Ned and the two royals, having seen the possibility of Tommen being named as heir over Joffrey as an extremely good thing in the long run. Now they were very worried, but not enough to join forces with the Starks. Many of them had simply left the city entirely, which weakened House Stark's position in King's Landing.

Others in the court seemed to be of the opinion that the poison had been meant for Joffrey, though where that rumor came from Ned didn't know, much like the idea he was an ineffective Hand. This group seemed to think that it was a prelude to open war pitting the Targaryens and their Dornish allies against the rest of Westeros, an idea that had no basis in reality as far as Ned could see. But that didn't seem to matter much to the courtiers who believed it. Worse, all of them felt that Eddard was simply unwilling to do what needed to be done to protect the peace of the realm.

There was a third faction, small but vitriolic in assaulting Eddard for allowing Tyene access to the Red Keep, pointing the finger at him saying it had been simply part of a plot to gain him the throne. This group had no evidence or even logic on their side, yet that didn't seem to matter to them.

A fourth faction, the queen's, had rallied around her in her grief, and hatred of the king for how he was 'handling' his own grief made them almost rabidly anti-Baratheon. Joffrey was often connected to this faction, yet had come off as more of a moderating influence between all the different cliques, the boy showing himself in as good a light as he could. This wasn't all that good for those who knew him, but many of the courtiers were unable to look beyond his public persona to see if there was any depth there.

Renly had lost much of his own backers to the first two camps, and now was almost as isolated as Ned, and Renly knew it. Loras' recent arrival with thirty armstrongs had been a godsend for him, bolstering his security force by half again.

Eddard sighed, stretching his muscles thinking hard, wondering who really had been behind Tommen's murder, and what their next moves would be. *If they had wanted to disorganize the court further, they should have followed up with something other than these rumors. Rumors will die down, and grief will fade, their window of opportunity to capitalize on Tommen's death is disappearing. Unless it was really to put someone close to Joffrey in order to influence him, as the queen thought, Robert's belief this was done to somehow help Dorne's princess to marry Joffrey is so much hot air. But who could it be?*

*Enough for now,* Eddard thought, standing up from his desk. *Time to get some exercise.*

OOOOOOO

Unbeknownst to Eddard, Petyr, Varys and Pycelle were the sources of many of his present problems. Varys had decided the Starks no longer represented long term stability in the kingdom and had subtly spread around the idea that Ned should be held accountable for what had occurred to Tommen. Not because he was connected to the actual murder, that would never stick given how everyone knew how honorable Lord Stark was and he had no clear motive. But Eddard could be painted as too trusting to be an effective Hand because he had allowed Tyene, a mistress of poisons, to have access to the keep.

For his part, Pycelle was fanning the flames Eddard's campaign against corruption had brought him, while also keeping the court faction that wanted to pin him as the mind behind Tommen's death boiling nicely. That was difficult since anyone with half a brain could see it was simply untrue. Still, he had gathered eleven other noble houses to the Lannister cause, adding another hundred and fifty men and fifteen knights to their forces, which would be useful when the conflict became open warfare.

Outside the court, Petyr was readying his mercenaries. That was difficult, considering how spread out through the city they were, and how many contacts Brynden had made in the city. The clandestine warfare had heated up in the back alleys, with Petyr's, Brynden's, House Lannister's and agents of the Master of Whispers ambushing one another nightly. Bodies were beginning to be found even in the richer districts.

Surprising Pycelle, Varys and Petyr, Ned had done a good enough job in clearing out the corruption of the Gold Cloaks that many of them had begun to actually work to keep the peace rather than keeping the smallfolk down. They were keeping the violence from boiling over into the daytime, but everyone with a working brain could tell that someone was moving against the Starks. No one could prove it yet, but it was there and everyone was walking on tenterhooks.

Alayaya was no exception to this rule. She rarely left her mother's brothel now, even to meet her friends. Instead she asked them to come see her, not wanting to be out on the streets. She had heard a rumor that someone had realized she was passing information on to the Hand, and with the city the way it was right now that was almost a certain death sentence unless you had men to protect you, which she didn't.

Today however she had been forced to head out, accompanied by one of the brothel's guards. One of her friends had some information she wanted to pass on, and the importance of that information had forced Alayaya out to meet with her when the friend couldn't get away from work. This way was saying she was a veritable slave to her pimp, but at least the man in question treated her reasonably well despite not letting her go anywhere without him.

The information was worth it though. It turned out that the whore in question worked in a whorehouse where two suspicious men with Lannisport accents frequented. One of them had a very expensive crossbow that he never let out of his sight, and was now wearing the colors of Master Pyrcelle. The other had begun to show up wearing the tabard of a gold cloak. The men had no obvious connection, but they always made time to talk after doing their business with the house, and always arrived at nearly the same time.

Dixie, Alayaya's friend, had gone even further. She was able to give the Summer Islands girl a description of the one who was now working with the Grand Master. This made the trip to see her a very profitable one, yet very dangerous as Alayaya found out on the way back to her brother's establishment.

The black woman had been walking along, her guard at her side when she looked up, frowning as she noticed that the guard had stopped. Looking forward Alayaya saw two men step out of an alleyway, barring their path, both wielding heavy cudgels, the crowd flowing naturally around them. She backed away quickly putting two houses between them when she realized they were looking at her over the heads of several other people, while all around them the crowd began to fade away quickly.

She looked up over at her guard, one of the six bouncers that her mother employed, only to see him backing away his hands held up non-threateningly.

Before Alayaya could process this sudden betrayal, two more men appeared behind her, gleams of steel in their hands. She looked around wildly, trying to see a way out of this. The courtesan was about to bolt towards a nearby alleyway, not really having any hope of reaching it before she was caught when there was a shout from the end of the street. "Ho there!"

The men turned, seeing seven men in Riverrun colors hurrying towards them, swords out. One of the men with knives reached for Alayaya even so, but she ducked underneath his arm, racing towards the newcomers. The two knife wilders tried to catch up to her, but six more men from Riverrun came out of another alleyway nearby cutting them off and cutting them down before they could retreat.

The bouncer and the two men with cudgels gave one look at this reversal of fortune and legged it away through the nearest alleyways. The men of Riverrun did not pursue.

Alayaya gasped, going to her knees as the nearness of her escape hit her in front of the men from Riverrun. "Thank you all! If you hadn't arrived when you did I..."

"Lord Blackfish sent us um, lady." said the one hesitating on the 'lady' part there. He knew Alayaya's profession after all. But still the information she had passed on had been of immense value, and Brynden wasn't one to let those who helped him and his family die if he could help it. "We received word from one of our other agents that you were going to be attacked. I'm afraid it might not be wise for you to return to your mother's... establishment.."

"Seeing they bought one of our bouncers, I agree. I'll send her a message, if that is alright, but where will do you think I should go instead?"

"We have orders to take you to the Hand's Tower lady, you can work as a servant there to pay your way for now."

Alayaya frowned, not having much training in that area but she supposed she could cook at least, or wait on one of the other ladies. That wouldn't take much training after all, since she knew about fashion at least and could sew very well. But it would remove her from most of her own contacts throughout the city, and from where she learned most of her information at her mother's whorehouse. *Still, Alayaya thought philosophically, I'll be safe there, and maybe I can get to the bottom of a minor mystery of my own. Who exactly is the Rock Hurler?*

Alayaya found herself being escorted directly to the Tower in the Red Keep, not even pausing in the outer areas of the keep. She was ushered immediately up through the castle to what she was told was the family area.

There she didn't find Lord Stark or even Lord Tully waiting for her, but a young blonde-haired girl who looked like she had been crying hard for many days pouring over a book. "Are you all right?" she asked immediately looking at the young girl. Crying was something all whores did on many occasions, and they were always helpful to one another in times of distress, the good ones at least.

Myrcella looked up from her book startled by the unknown voice invading this safe area, and frowned as she saw the black woman and the clothing she was wearing. The princess easily recognized what this woman was, and her presence in the Tower angered her. Yet the expression on the black woman's face was merely concerned, so she answered the question calmly enough. "I'm well I suppose, simply dealing with my grief at my brother's passing if you must know."

Across from her Alayaya gasped, finally realizing who this young girl was and kicking herself mentally. *The clothing should've given you a clue you idiot.* She curtsied quickly, showing all the poise and control that her mother had drilled into her as one of her highest earners. "I apologize for not recognizing you at once your grace, you have my sincere condolences about the death of your younger brother."

"Thank you." Merry said rather stiffly, looking at her then up at the men from Winterfell who had escorted her up the Tower. "Might I ask why she is here?"

They exchanged glances but Alayaya answered first. "I'm one of the Hand's informers in the city. Unfortunately, someone else found out about me, and I only escaped with my life thanks to Lord Blackfish sending some of his men to help me."

"I'm just glad they got there in time." said Brynden, coming out from the Hands office with Eddard. "The information you've passed on to us as always been good. I only regret the fact they found you out will prevent you from passing along more."

"I was able to find out something right before the attack came my Lord." Alayaya said quickly, curtsying deeply to both men then glanced over at Myrcella. Ned understood the glance and waved her into the office.

Behind them Myrcella stood staring at the closed door with a scowl on her face. "If you keep on scowling like that your face will stick in that position you know." Brynden said smiling faintly at the young girl. Though at 12, and having had her first cycle a few weeks ago, she was now technically a woman, able to be wed. Still, to Brynden at least she was just a young girl.

Myrcella huffed a little, but didn't bother to take any umbrage at the older man's familiarity. He was much like Ranma in that area, the more he knew someone the more familiar he was with them. "I can't say I approve of her profession." she said coldly.

"Nor should you." Brynden said smiling faintly. "I imagine that your father being the way he is that reaction is even more understandable. However you shouldn't hold her profession against her. Alayaya's mother was a whore before becoming the mistress of her own whorehouse, you could say Alayaya was born into it. And with what little interaction with her I've had, I've discovered that there is a very gentle, true soul underneath that exterior."

Myrcella huffed again but nodded. "I'll try not to hold it against her."

"Are you returning to the holdfast tonight milady?" Brynden asked, changing the subject, watching Myrcella's face closely.

Myrcella shook her head violently. "No, I would rather stay here. Am I... am I imposing?"

"Not to me." Brynden said looking at her with that keen gaze of his, causing Myrcella to look away. "I'm just curious. You're here even more often than Sansa these days, and many times when she is not here to spend time with you."

"I feel safer here." Myrcella replied shortly, hoping Brynden would simply drop the subject. It wasn't as if she could prove her beliefs after all.

"I can understand that, but why would you feel not safe in the holdfast? According to your mother at least the poisoner has already been found, and I know that Grandmaster Pyrcelle has ordered his acolytes to okay every dish the comes out of the kitchens."

"I don't have an opinion on my mother's belief in Tyene's guilt, and even if she's right, the mind behind it is still out there. Who knows what else they might be able to do, if poison is no longer a weapon they can use." Myrcella said getting up quickly. "Now if you'll excuse me Lord Tully, I wish to go see if Sansa is free."

By free she meant no longer waiting on Joffrey, but that wasn't something Brynden would call her on. He exchanged glances with Ser Oakheart who had remained in the corner since Myrcella had arrived earlier that afternoon. The Kingsguard member returned Brenden's glance blandly, not giving any hint of his own thoughts as was proper. He bowed his head slightly been moved to followed Merry down the stairs.

With a sigh, Brynden moved to join Ned in his office.

OOOOOOO

Unfortunately for Myrcella, Sansa was still with Joffrey in one of the sitting areas of the holdfast working on a painting as he told her about some of the royal family's holdings in the crownlands. Even more unfortunately for the golden haired princess, she couldn't then bow back out graciously when Sansa asked her to join them, not having a readymade excuse. She was forced to stay and listen to Sansa simper at her brother for the next hour. *Really, I do love Sansa, but it's as if being around Joffrey destroys her ability to think clearly.*

Her own problem with her brother of course wasn't based on gushy feelings. She watched him constantly, looking for any sign of his vicious streak coming out, but with Sansa around there was no sign of it. Yet even being in his presence like this was making that moment when she saw his smile burn in her mind. For the first time in her life she was feeling the sort of Baratheon fury that her father had shown a time or two, or perhaps her mother's lioness like rage. So when Sansa excused herself to prepare for lunch, with septa Mordane following, Myrcella couldn't stop herself from blurting out. "You killed our brother didn't you?"

Joffrey looked at Myrcella in surprise. "I have no idea what you're talking about, dear sister."

"I saw that smirk on your face when Tommy was lying there, dying." Myrcella said, finding courage somewhere inside to confront her tormenter, her fists shaking in fury. "You were **happy!** You somehow knew that he was going to be named heir over you, and you couldn't stand it, could you!"

That touched a nerve and Joffrey's mask fell away as if it had never been. "I am the heir!" he shouted, no shrieked, standing up and stalking over to her. "The crown is **mine!** Mine by right! I am the eldest, it falls to me! Tommy had no right to it!"

"And so you poisoned him." Myrcella growled, sounding like the lion of her mother's family banner, standing up as well.

"Ah, but there's no proof of that, Myrcella." Said Joffrey now close enough. His hand lashed out, catching Myrcella by the throat and almost lifting her off the floor. "And I would keep that close to your heart if I were you." He breathed pulling her close so he could whisper in her ear. Merry tried to fight back, but she was no Tommy, she hadn't trained and lacked the strength to push him away. "If I can kill one sibling, what makes you think I would balk at two?"

Myrcella spat in his eye, rage still overriding her fear despite the hand around her throat.

Her older brother raised his free hand to wipe away the spit from his eye, then raised it again in a fist.

A knock on the door behind him however halted that, and the door opened to reveal Ser Oakheart. Joffrey quickly moved away from his sister. "Such accusations," he said coolly now. "Are dangerous, you'd best to remember that." With a final sneer at his sister, Joffrey stalked out.

OOOOOOO

"I disagree," Ranma said, smiling slightly across at Daenerys while she tossed a small chunk of wood rounded to look like a ball toward the two draklings, then commanded Sunfyre mentally to go and get it before passing it to Rhaegon. "I think your ancestor's decision to create the position of the Hand was one of the things that weakened the royal family. It created an almost separate power structure. While technically answering to the king, the Hand truly wielded more power when the king wasn't strong enough to take it back."

"That's nonsense." Daenerys scoffed, waving one hand. "All power resides in the King, that's the entire point of a monarchy. The position of Hand was simply there to well..." she blushed. "Shovel the shit."

"Power **might** come from the king, but power is not the same as responsibility. One of the things that has bothered me the most since coming south was how little work the King actually did. I watched my father going gray from the moment we set foot in King's Landing. And if the king it is not responsible for anything, what kind of King is he really? How many poor Kings have there been, because they didn't have any understanding of power meaning great

responsibility?"

Daenerys paused before replying, smiling at Rhaegon who had just trotted up with the little ball Domeric had made them. The draklings loved the games that she had developed for them, and they were becoming better and better at responding to her mental commands. For more serious ones she still had to verbally command them however.

For instance, she had to stop them from attacking one of the sailors who had rather stupidly come into the room to stare at them. Or her, his babblings afterwards were not exactly coherent. They responded best to Valyrian commands of course, though the reasoning behind that wasn't one she understood, since they certainly couldn't have ever heard the language before. But it was good from her perspective considering she couldn't accidentally give them a command in common conversation while around them.

That would be... bad. Despite the fact that Ranma seemed immune to their bites, the dragons showed all of the normal irritation at non-Targaryen Dynasty members that always marked the breed. They had stopped trying to bite Ranma, but Domeric still had to be wary around them. Yet even so, Sunfyre and Rhaegon were much more docile than young dragons normally were, at least according to the books Daenerys had read. Not once had Daenerys had any inclination to chain them up, which had been of course the norm for millennia.

After throwing the ball again, this time over to Fenris to bat around for the two youngsters, she turned her attention back to her and Ranma's conversation, frowning thoughtfully. "I'll concede that the Hand concept was flawed. It needed to have severe checks on its power, especially since the Hand often came from powerful families on their own. The Crownlands alone can't raise an army the equal of even the Stormlands, and its economy isn't as rich as Westerlands, nor as robust as the Reach."

She paused thoughtfully, looking at the two draklings. "I think that was a major issue after the dragons disappeared, without them my family didn't have enough power in themselves, which forced them to woo already existing power structures. Still, even taking away physical force, the king definitely needs to have a set of duties that only he, or she" She smiled, thinly, yet whimsically, making Ranma's lips twitch in turn. "Can perform, certain powers that only the king can use."

"Okay," Ranma said agreeably, "Like what?"

"The power to make war for certain. The power to make new laws is a possibility, so long as they affect all of Westeros rather than groups of individuals or different nations within it. The powers of the central government **needs** to be larger than each of the disparate parts, or perhaps all the Lord's Paramount tied into the power of the whole, rather than just one or two through blood and honor. I am uncertain how that could be done right now, but it's something to think about."

Ranma nodded thoughtfully. This discussion had started when Ranma described the work his father had been doing as Hand, and Daenerys had simply said that much of that was unimportant work that the king didn't need to spend time dealing with, which Ranma had disagreed with. His arguments had carried the day for the most, but Daenerys had argued him down on several points. This made Ranma realize that someone was forcing his father to do work that one of the other small council member's should've been doing.

For now there was nothing he could do about that, so he simply concentrated on the current discussion. "I understand your point about needing to centralize more power and how the dragon's disappearance had damaged the power structure. For the rest though, you're talking about sitting down and creating some kind of charter. I don't think that's ever actually been done, not in Westeros anyway. That would take a lot of work."

"Have I ever said or done anything over the past few days to indicate that I am scared of hard work?" Daenerys asked, smacking him lightly on the shoulder with a smile.

It was a week and a half since they had left three city behind them, and the two young people had grown close over that time, bonding over the draklings' training, and simply being two young people with no one but themselves to talk to. Domeric spent most of his time either watching the dragons with them, or sleeping. His shoulder wound had almost gone bad, saved only because Fenris had noticed the smell. Ranma cleaned it out, but Domeric was still weak from the procedure, though he would eventually regain full use of that arm.

Unfortunately, the weather had been against them. They were only just now reaching what the captain, an experienced man who had plied this route for most of his life, could tell was the halfway point between Pentos and the start of the Blackwater Bay. They had been becalmed three times, and hit heavy storms twice. Several of the sailors had been muttering about it. A few of them had even mentioned that it was because they had the Targaryen princess aboard, that the Seven weren't in favor of her returning to Westeros.

Ranma's presence stopped them from even attempting to do anything about it, but their fellow crewmen would have stopped them in any event. Besides the draklings, Daenerys possessed the ability to draw others to her, charisma on a level few could match, and a caring nature that shown through to everyone who interacted with her. While Ranma had not been in the right mind for this entire mission to bother, she had charmed nearly the entire crew, turning them all into Targaryen loyalists.

To one side Domic sat watching the two young people, a faint smile on his face. He wondered if the two of them realized how obvious their attraction was to anyone who saw them. It wasn't just lust, he could tell that simply by the amount of time they spent talking rather than simply looking out of the corners of their eyes at one another and sighing like star-crossed lovers from some of his songs. No, their attraction was built on how alike they were in many ways rather than anything physical. *Though*, he laughed to himself quietly as Daenerys flushed watching Ranma stretch, his shirt riding up to reveal a chiseled stomach. *The physical obviously doesn't hurt.*

Domic was worried about the future however. He was worried what about what would happen when they returned to King's Landing, he knew it would not go as well as Ranma hoped. Oh, Ranma would certainly keep his word, but how much could he do in the face of royal displeasure? It was an area Domic was deeply concerned about. But right now, as he watched Daenerys laughing while Ranma used one of his hands to wrestle with Rhaegon, while the other drakling looked on from his seat on Fenris' back, Domic couldn't hold onto his concerns. *With these two allied to one another, they might just be able to do anything...*

OOOOOO

Five days after Alayaya's rescue Ned sat once again in his chair in his office, rolling a small message tube in his fingers. Part of him had been anticipating what it could contain for weeks, the rest of him was dreading it. "Thank you Adam. Could you find a messenger to send to Brynden, I want to speak to him immediately. Are my daughter and the princess in the tower at present?"

"I believe so my Lord, they are down in the dining hall with Alayaya working on some tapestry or other." Ser Willowtree shrugged, smiling slightly at his lord's use of his first name. He doubted very many lords would know let alone be willing to use their guardsmen's first names, but the Starks had always been closer to their men than most.

Ned smiled faintly despite his present concerns. Alayaya had fit in well in the tower, joining Jeyne in waiting on his daughter and Myrcella when she was in the tower. Alayaya's mother had protested the girl being in the tower rather than working for her, but it was only a token one. She knew that if the brothel was attacked she could not protect her daughter, and it would be disloyal to her other girls to even try.

Knowing what his wife would do him if she ever found out, Ned had refused to pay for the girl's services from his own pocket as if she were still working as a courtesan, instead putting her on the tower's payroll as an actual servant. She had some problem with a few of the guards, but Eddard had made it known that she was no longer a 'working woman', and that if she wanted to sleep with someone it was now her choice.

Half an hour after Willowtree left Brynden arrived. He was wearing the armor of a common Riverrun man-at-arms, and was wearing a cloak with a hood on his back. He also seemed to be somewhat soot-stained as he came in and when he dropped the cloak on to a nearby chair it puffed slightly as the ash covering it dissipated in the air.

"There was a fire in the city, a very suspicious fire one that almost spread to the Mountain Honey. Thankfully we were able to stop it. We still lost four men though, one informer and three of my men from Riverrun after the fire began. Someone thought it a good idea to hurl bricks at us when we began to fight the fire. We caught about ten of them and the crowd tore them to pieces. This 'game' is becoming increasingly deadly." Brynden growled.

Ned frowned a little, but really didn't have much of a problem with that. Yes it would've been better if they had gone to trial, where he could have tried to get them to confess to who was giving them orders. But if they had been caught in the act of attacking someone who was putting out a fire in the city, they would've been tortured beforehand by the Gold cloaks in any event unless he put his own men to guard them and there was no way he was going to spread his forces even more thinly. A fear of out of control fires was the one thing that every person living in King's Landing had in common.

"I see." He said simply, before holding up the message. "This arrived a few hours ago, so this conflict might be about to get even worse."

Brynden moved swiftly back to the door, opening it to find Sir Jory already taking position there. He nodded at the man before returning closing and locking the door behind him. "I take it that's not from Winterfell, it's a reply to your message that you sent with Lord Mallister? You took a risk there, I hope it paid off."

"I trust Jason enough not to let his curiosity get the better of him." Ned replied dryly. "And I assume that its presence here and wearing the mark of Winterfell rather than the Citadel is a sign that it has, for better or worse."

Brynden pulled up a chair as Ned opened the container at last, pulling out the message which was written in an unfamiliar hand. Yet the writing was small and very detailed, citing births and some other information to back up the writer's answer. That answer was exactly what Ned had long feared. "Baratheon colors are almost always dominant when they marry other lines. Four times Lannister and Baratheon have married, and in over a dozen children not one has been golden haired. The seed is strong indeed." Ned murmured, remembering what the last words of John Aryn had been according to Robert. "This coupled with all of Robert's bastards looking so much like him, you know what this means."

"I would not have thought it of the Queen." Brynden replied honestly. "That there is little love between her and the king is obvious, but to actually break her own marriage vows, despite the way he has? To pass off her own bastards as legitimate? This has the potential to rip Westeros apart."

He cocked his head, looking at Ned. "If Tommen was still alive, what would you do?"

Ned winced. "You do not ask a simple question. The boy had potential whoever his real father might have been, and who knows, he could have been the first trueborn without Baratheon features..." He said before falling silent.

The fact was Eddard really didn't know what he would've done. This had the potential plunge Westeros into civil war again. Would he have felt duty force his hand anyway, even if Tommen had been named heir, or would he have kept silent, knowing Tommen would make a good king and the tremendous amount of damage to the country coming out about it would have done. "And even now it might well be disastrous, especially to Myrcella."

He said that last aloud, and it was Brynden's turn to wince. While he hadn't become nearly as close to the girl as Ranma, both the older men had come to like the young princess, seeing in her many of the good qualities Cersei possessed, with none of the bad. Of course she was young yet, she could develop those bad qualities, but there was no sight of them yet. "I do not envy you having to tell her," he said honestly. "Would you be open to suggestions?"

"Of course." Ned replied looking a little lost. Despite his concerns about Joffrey, he hadn't truly anticipated that all three of the queen's children might not be legitimate. *Stop that* he ordered himself sternly. *They are illegitimate. The records do not lie, nor does the fact that Robert's bastards all have the same features as he does, while none of Cersei's children have anything physically to show they are related to him. Just because the truth is unpalatable does not change it.*

"I suggest that you consult with Renly. He might have some good ideas, and certainly would help to break it to the king in such a way that he will believe it more than coming from just you." The fact Ned and Robert were no longer close was well known. Robert's desire to send an assassin after the young Targaryen girl, his agreeing to force Ranma to go instead, his refusal to do the work of a king, the travesty of justice that was Tyene's death, it had all added up. "We should also prepare our forces for open combat."

Ned glanced at him in surprise and Brynden shook his head. "Think about it man! Whatever else once we confront her, Cersei will no longer be the Queen! Robert will have no choice but to set her aside with cause, something that neither she nor the other Lannister supporters in the city may be willing to tolerate, even discounting Tywin's eventual reaction. I don't have any idea how she will react, if we guarantee her children's safety Cersei might actually concede gracefully, I don't know."

The Blackfish wouldn't have bet on that before actually coming to the city and interacting with Cersei, but one thing that had he had come to respect about her was that Cersei cared deeply for her children. If proof was needed the grief she had shown since Tommen's passing was more than proof enough.

"You and I both know we wouldn't be able to guarantee any such thing." Ned said harshly. "Robert's temper is chancy at the best of times, this will throw him over the edge and you know it. Moreover, the law will be on his side, adultery is a hanging offense at the noble level, at the royal..." Ned shook his head.

"Possibly, but we could try. And I notice you're not saying no about preparing our troops for battle?"

"No that just makes good sense. I'll have a word with Jory this very afternoon and devise some emergency plans, in particular for the children, some we'll be adding to their daily routine. In particular I want them to be out of the Red Keep at least once daily. On the martial side, have Edmure start to gather the Riverrun men that are scattered throughout the city, and I will pass on a message to the captain of the *Fish's Scales*. As far as we know no one knows about him and his men just yet, they can be our hidden blade in case of conflict."



Brynden nodded grimly, and left to begin the process.

Ned was about to stand up and follow him but he stopped to smile slightly at his daughter and Myrcella who were playing some kind of board game using both chess pieces and checker pieces, while Alayaya walked them through the rules. The sight stabbed him through the heart, knowing that come what may Myrcella at least would be deeply affected by the coming days. *No longer a princess, a trueborn, or a Baratheon, what will be left for you, child?*

OOOOOO

Ned found Renly in his solar sitting and chatting with Loras while they shared a bottle of wine and some little delicacies of some kind while Renly made notes on a parchment scroll. The Northern Lord Paramount had been stopped at the door by one of the men from High Garden, which had allowed Renly and Loras to move apart from their embrace quickly rearranging themselves to look as if they had simply been talking.

Renly waved one hand airily. "Lord Stark, to what do I owe the honor? If you're here to ask for that survey of merchant houses from the Stormlands that are still using outdated letters of accreditation, I'm nearly done it. Give me another day and..."

"I am not here about that." Ned said grimly then flicked his gaze to Loras. "I would speak with you alone, Ser Renly."

"I have no secrets from Loras, whatever you want to say you may say in front of him." Renly replied still not taking Ned seriously.

"Even if it about something that constitutes treason to the crown?" Ned said softly.

That finally woke Renly up, and he nodded at Loras. "Guard the door, and see that we are not disturbed." The handsome knight nodded sending a surreptitious wink his lover's way as he went.

That nearly caused Renly to laugh aloud, but he refrained, seeing Ned's expression. The full on Stone Face of the Starks was on show at present, those dark eyes boring into Renly's, causing him to shiver a little. He gestured at the seat across from him and said formally. "What is this about Lord Stark?"

Anyone else might've come to the point slowly in a roundabout manner. But Eddard was a Northerner, who preferred blunt speech, so he simply came to the heart of the matter quickly.

He first went into what Jon Arryn's last words were, then his and Robert's growing concern about Joffrey, about how they were days from declaring Tommen the heir before he was killed. He told Renly about his investigation into Jon's death, the evidence Ned had found pointing to how Jon had been researching the House Baratheon and Robert's bastards in the city and elsewhere, all of whom shared the same dark hair and facial structure of Robert.

Renly began to see where this was going, and he gnawed on one fingernail worriedly. Part of Renly wanted to speak up and stop Eddard from continuing, but he couldn't get out the words before Lord Stark finally finished by summarizing the missive he had received, and the confirmation that in all the former marriages between the Baratheons and the Lannisters, not one child had been born with the golden hair of the lions rather than the brown hair of the stags.

"So you see, the Queen has broken her marriage vows, and has passed three bastards as legitimate children of the crown." Ned finished. "A treasonous act, and one that we must address."

Renly rubbed both of his hands across his face. "This is a nightmare. "What do you intend to do Lord Stark?"

"I intend to tell the King of course." Eddard replied as if it was the simplest thing in the world. "If you would go with me to offset Robert's and my current estrangement, if both of us present this plus the evidence, Robert will have to take it seriously. Then we will move against Cersei with an ultimatum: if she steps aside, both she and her children will not be harmed. They will be removed from the royal family of course, but they will all be allowed to return to Casterly Rock."

"She'll never go for it!" Renly exclaimed looking askance at the northern Lord. "How can you be that naïve?"

"Not naïve." Ned said shaking his head. "Cersei loves her children, it's one of her best qualities. To ensure their continued health she may step aside, and with Robert confronting her, she will lose a large amount of her power base. Nor is it as if I do not have other plans in place just in case she doesn't."

Renly paused for a moment then nodded. "She might," he conceded. The woman's grief since Tommen's death had

been something to see. It was obvious to all that Cersei cared deeply for her children. "And if we guarantee that the truth of the matter will not come out, we can say that she was raped and refused to name her rapist for some reason or something, that will save her from further issue. We can even say that Tommen was a natural born, that will save further face for her."

Ned frowned at the duplicitous idea, but nodded. He was already feeling guilty about what this would do to Myrcella, he would not besmirch Tommen's memory as well. "Let Tommen be known as a new true born heir then," he said smiling faintly. "We owe the lad's memory that much considering that it might've been Robert and I being ready to name him heir that got Tommy killed."

"Of course," Renly said moving on. "That means that Robert will need a new queen quickly. One that brings a sufficient power to bolster the throne when the Lannisters withdraw their support."

"And I suppose you have a suggestion? We should also recall Lord Stannis. As the eldest of the two of you he is Robert's heir until Robert begets a true born child."

"That would be a nightmare." Renly retorted coldly. "My middle brother is a hard, cold man Lord Stark, he's not changed overmuch last time you and he spoke, only becoming more demanding and set in his ways, more taciturn and unfeeling. If he was named heir and something happened to Robert before he could beget a child, it would be a disaster. No, the moment the Queen is removed, I will send for Margaery Tyrell. House Tyrell and the power of The Reach will more than make up the loss of Lannister support. With them on our side, Lord Lannister will have no choice but to accept his daughter's removal."

"You realize you are speaking of my son's possible fiancée?" Ned replied coolly.

"Margaery was recalled, and that relationship never made official." Renly said calmly. "And I have no doubts that Lord Tyrell will jump at the chance to put a queen's crown on his daughter's head. I'm sorry if you think your son had feelings for her, but this is politics at its most basic form."

"Which is why my gorge is rising right now." Ned said, his voice still wintry. "Very well, if you think that is a good idea, then we will do so, but for now we need to concentrate on current events rather than the future, we need to make plans and ready our men as much as we can without being obvious about it, just in case. Robert isn't in the city right now, we can send a message to him, but I don't doubt any messenger we send will be ignored."

"Truly my brother does love his little pleasures." Renly said, a smile on his face despite Ned's disapproving gaze. "You're right there, we'll have to wait until Robert returns, and we can use the time to our advantage."

Lord Stark was suddenly very tired of this southern lord, King's Landing, the 'game' of politics, all of it. *All I wish, he thought to himself sadly, is to return home to my lady wife and my children, to spend my days overseeing my land with Cat at my side and my family around me. Is that too much to ask?*

He shook that thought off quickly, the stern demands of duty settling around his shoulders like a mountain. "Very well, the moment Robert returns we will front him together. Agreed?"

"Agreed. Renly said nodding his head formally. "I will gather what supporters I have, and tell them to be ready, will you do the same?"

"I have already begun so." With that Ned bowed and left, leaving Renly to call Loras back in.

OOOOOOO

In a hidden alcove set directly under Renly's apartments, Petyr moved his ear away from the small hole he had been listening at. He replaced the piece of rock that normally obscured it from view in the far corner, nearly covered by the rug Renly had brought in to liven up the suite. The sound had still carried through thankfully. The keep was riddled with such small alcoves, and he, and Varys, that miserable gelding, knew most of them, though Petyr thought he might know more than the eunuch.

While Petyr no longer had even a single agent inside the Hand's Tower, that didn't mean he couldn't post people to note who came and went from the Tower. One of his watchers among the staff had warned him that Lord Stark was heading towards Renly's apartment, and Petyr had gotten there just in time to listen in on what the two were saying.

Petyr sighed faintly, smiling viciously. At last the conflicts he had envisioned seemed about to commence. "And so it begins. I think the Queen should be warned that someone is on to her, though of course I won't do it myself. I will instead pass this on to the grandmaster, he can pass it on to her in turn, couched however he will. But how to position

myself to protect sweet Sansa is the real question. A pity that Ned proved to be so untrusting of me, yet I can still position myself to protect the girl, and then be rewarded later, when Joffrey is forced to set her aside."

Over the past few months, Petyr's hatred of Lord Stark and his entire house had not abated, indeed it had deepened. Every time he heard about Cat's monthly messages to her husband, saw the love he and Ranma bore her, had been a dagger in his heart. Yet at the same time, he had seen Sansa, sweet, unsullied Sansa, so like her mother it was astonishing, move around the Keep her manner and bearing a delight to watch. If Catelyn was so happy to bed with wolves, then she was not the woman Petyr had loved for so long. Her daughter however, was everything Catelyn had been in her youth, yet untainted by the touch of the northern barbarians, so Petyr's obsession with Catelyn had slowly begun to change to Sansa. The thought of the young girl, so innocent and so ripe, caused his smile to widen. Petyr moved off through the hidden passageways of the Red Keep, whistling a jaunty tune.

O O O O O O O

Clenching her teeth, Cersei took a moment to compose herself before she nodded her head thankfully to Pycelle. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Maester Pycelle," she said her voice barely a whisper as her heart pounded. The time had come, and she found that she wasn't nearly as ready for it as she had hoped to be in her own mind.

*So many plans can no longer work, she thought to herself, so many ideas and hopes. I had hoped to possibly defend myself and Joffrey alone from this accusation, I even had the scapegoat ready and waiting for when Stark approached me. But with Tommen dead...* That thought once again stopped all others, and she had to force her grief down and away.

The Queen was a Lannister in all things, she loved fiercely, dearly and possessively. Burying one of her children was the hardest thing she had ever done, made worse by the memory of that old-wise woman's prophecy about her. Yet the promised younger, more beautiful Queen hadn't appeared to overthrow her, unless Margaery had really been that Queen, but that made no sense.

*Enough, she thought shaking her head out of that thought. With my little cub dead and without his growing 'Baratheon' attributes to offset things, I can no longer assume I can protect myself or my children from this accusation without violence. That changes my plans dramatically, but I can still deal with it.*

She reached over to a table, pulling writing tools toward her before looking up at the Grandmaster. "Send a servant for my brother, I believe he is still training at this time of day. Then send a runner in, I want to send a message to my cousin..."

Jaime arrived first, his tunic over one shoulder as he wiped the sweat from his body. He smirked, hoping his sister had sent for him to take advantage of the king being out of the city, but the look in her eyes killed that idea, and he sobered somewhat. "Is there a problem sister dear?"

Cersei explained what was going on, and then what they would need to do to protect themselves and their children. Ned still hadn't found any evidence to suggest Jaime was the father of Cersei's children, but he didn't have to, the idea they were illegitimate alone would be enough to see Cersei executed and her children disgraced utterly. Jaime sighed, then shrugged his shoulders, and agreed to do whatever he had to protect his sister.

O O O O O O O

"Can I ask you a question?" Daenerys asked, watching as the two draklings were roughhousing on an open area of the deck marked out by several small crates. She sat on one, dangling her feet below her into the play area, and half of her mind was making certain that the two of them didn't injure one another accidentally. But such playing was necessary for any young predator. Whatever they looked like now, however ungainly they sometimes seem to be, dragons were predators and they needed this.

"You could always ask, I reserve the right to not answer though." Ranma said laughing lightly as he looked up from where he was hauling in a net that the crew had flung over the side. They were trying to augment their food supplies since they had been becalmed again and couldn't make any headway. Several dozen wriggling fish indicated that the trawl net had actually worked this time, unlike the first three times they had tried this.

Daenerys smiled, leaning back slightly as she enjoyed the sun on her face, then nodded politely at several of the seamen who moved by her touching their forelocks respectfully toward her. "How did you get so good? I mean I've seen you work out with Domic, and he was known as a decent swordsman, one of the best in the city, but you handle him like he's well..." she glanced at Domic apologetically "a bumbling child."

The bard waved his hand airily. "I don't take offense. After all, I saw him in action up close and personal years before, and it's obvious he only has gotten better since. Still she's right, your skills are astonishing. How did you come by them?"

Ranma was silent for a moment as he continued to haul in the net doing alone what would take ten men to do normally. Daenerys watched him frowning slightly despite the fact he was shirtless at present, giving her a magnificent view of his chest. She had gotten to know Ranma well over the past few weeks, so much so that she could read him quite easily. Right now she could tell he was carefully thinking what he wanted to say. But Daenerys was patient, she knew eventually Ranma would bring her into his confidence, it would just take time for him to get used to the idea, as it had her.

"I have been training since I was around three." he said after a moment. "And by training I mean real training, not just playing or trying to swing a sword or anything like that. Leg exercises, muscle exercises, endurance exercises, then actual training later."

Again Daenerys frowned slightly, knowing that wasn't even a quarter of the answer. Ranma really was hiding something there, but she hadn't really asked the question to probe his secrets. "How long would it take you to train me? I know I won't ever be as good as you, but could you at least train me well enough to defend myself against someone well, normal?" she quipped, a smile on her face.

Ranma paused in his work to look at her head cocked to one side. He wasn't about to question her desire to be trained, he felt everyone should have some training, and had always been rather irritated with Sansa that she refused any such. It would be a vast relief to him if Daenerys could handle herself in at least a one-on-one situation, such as an assassin or someone trying to assault her.

He looked over her body, not sexually, simply trying to figure out how good a fighter she could be with her body type and what sort. After a moment he shrugged. "I could teach you some tricks I suppose, and of course I can teach you exercises to get your strength and endurance up. But really you're a little too old to become as good as you could be."

"No offense," he hastened to say at her upraised eyebrow. "But to get the most out of my training you really do need to start young or at least with a lot of martial training already under your belt... Speed exercises would be your best bet. You don't have the body type to really build up heavy muscles, and it will take months maybe even a year before you build up enough strength to match even a normal warrior. Still, we can do something. I'd certainly feel better if you knew how to protect yourself. But it will take away from time training with the draklings," he warned.

That caused Daenerys to pause in her response. *Priorities* she thought to herself, *my bonding with my babes is going exceptionally well, but is that because of how much time I'm putting into it, or because of my warging with them?*

In the end however she shook her head. "That'll be okay I suppose. My draklings won't be up to actually protecting me from much for at least a year, until then I might have to protect myself at times."

"And you'll have me and Domic of course." Ranma said smiling slightly.

Daenerys nodded her head at them both, but then smiled eagerly. "So when do we begin?"

OOOOOO

Stannis stared across the dining table at the woman that the small folk had begun to call the Red Witch. It certainly fit her clothing, and that hair. The Tully women were supposed to all be auburn-haired beauties, or at least Catelyn was, her younger sister never amounted to much in the looks department. But Catelyn couldn't hold a candle either in looks or in sheer redness of their hair to Melisandre. Her body was one that could stand up even to Cersei in beauty, and her face, when it wasn't twisted into a sneer or alight with religious fervor, was among the most gorgeous he had ever seen.

Yet all of that was simply the trappings, it didn't matter to him at all. What did matter was what she could do, but right now Stannis was doubting even that. "What did you just say?"

"I have seen it in the fires." Melisandre said sternly. She didn't like repeating yourself. "The Dragon Queen is approaching on a ship from Essos. She must be captured and sacrificed, her blood will give us powers beyond your imagining."

Not reacting to her tone, Stannis calmly poured himself some wine. At this point Melisandre had proven that she did have certain powers, but not enough to make Stannis take her word for everything, and certainly not enough for him

to convert yet to the religion of R'hllor. "Precisely why is she there, and why should I stop her? House Targaryen cannot call upon enough men to matter in the coming struggle alone. All Stormborn has is a name, and there are very few even in Dorne despite their posturing, that will go to war for such."

"She comes bearing two dragons, guarded by a Wolf who stands like a man. He brings her to King's Landing, and from thence he wishes to take her up to the North." That Wolf had often appeared in her scrying, and she knew he was a prominent figure in the future.

Both him and the Dragon Queen now, who had at first been obscured to her sight was now even as prominent as the Wolf, a power rising to shape the future. Yet the power of her visions had been growing of late, and now she was able to see her at last, and knew how important she was to the future. Their alliance would stave off the True Enemy, and would have an effect on the coming war against the rest of the unbelievers.

But neither was Azor Ahai, and as such all of their efforts would fail. It was predestined that only the Chosen of R'hllor could stand against the forces of winter, could lay claim to the throne of swords. And that was Lord Stannis Baratheon of Dragonstone.

How else to explain who much more powerful her spells were these days? No longer did she need to augment her magics to appear more spectacular. Her fires were hotter, her visions clearer, she could now control her shadows to a degree she had never even dreamed. Her ability to dominate those around her was far higher as well. Lady Florent, Stannis' wife, was now nearly a mindless puppet, as was her daughter, and several others in the court, though Stannis, as Azor Ahai, was seemingly immune to it.

Stannis frowned wishing; not for the first time, that he could get up to date news on what was going on in King's landing, but he had few agents there. He had lost many of them when he retreated to Dragonstone after helping Jon Aryn discover Cersei's perfidy. The ones he still had could only pass messages over land, and even then rarely, the five navy galleys ostensibly under his command stationed there unable to leave their posts save under orders of the king. Stannis was lucky to get a single message from them every month.

He had heard what had occurred in the tourney. Stannis had actually smiled with grudging respect at the Mountain's death. But he hadn't heard yet that Ranna Stark had been sent on a mission to find the two Targaryen siblings so was at a loss as to explain what was going on there.

Still, the wolf was easy to connect to House Stark, and if agents of that house had somehow captured or coerced the Targaryen girl to return with them it could strengthen the Stark position. *Yet what can I do about it? As long as my brother is sitting on the throne, my ability to act is limited at best, lest I appear to be raising arms against the crown. No one will rally to me then, I have to wait. Still, I might be able to do something.*

"I can send a lone ship out into the bay to see if we can find this ship of yours, but if it isn't marked in some manner, finding one ship out there is a difficult proposition at best, Melisandre. The bay is large even at the nearest point with Dragonstone." Stannis was an accomplished naval commander, and knew how easy it was to hide a single ship out in the vastness of the ocean. Even in Blackwater Bay it was extremely tough to find a single ship, especially if it was unmarked.

"Send me," Melisandre replied, leaning forward. "I can deliver the Dragon Queen to you, and I can **deal** with the Wolf. That one will never join you, will never see your right to rule, and the older Wolf will be dead shortly." That, Melisandre wasn't actually certain about, but she knew for a fact that the younger Wolf would take power from the old one. If the old one died before that she couldn't see, her visions of late were becoming more and more disjointed even as they became clearer to actually see, but her belief in them was unchanging.

Most seers distrusted their visions, simply because most were self-fulfilling. Melisandre trusted hers wholeheartedly, she saw them as proof of her devotion to R'hllor, and as such never questioned them. It was only her interpretation that was faulty, not the visions themselves, for she was human and thus fallible despite her faith. Only in proving her faith by burning his enemies would she retain R'hllor's favor.

But she didn't have enough influence over him yet to convince Stannis to just let her go. "No," Stannis said coldly. "You have convinced me your magic is real, you have convinced me that your visions are accurate at times, but you have not convinced me that I am this chosen champion. You promised to do so, and you cannot do that if I simply let you go off on this errand. Besides as I said, finding a ship would be much tougher unless I send the entire fleet out, which I can't do unless we have some proof for my captains to see. And even if this Dragon Queen, the Stormborn, is aboard, if she's being returned to King's Landing as a prisoner there is little I can do to lawfully detain it."

"Your brother will be dead within the week." Melisandre said smiling, her eyes alight. "The hidden fang of the lion will

bring down the stag as the stag hunts the boar. Even now the wolves and lions circle one another waiting to strike."

Stannis looked at her sharply, not trusting the curious timing of that statement but all he saw in Melisandre's face was sincere belief. "Very well, I will send a ship to apprehend this Queen and to kill the Wolf you see with her. But I still will not send you lady. Again. prove I am this chosen one of yours, and I will convert my faith to that of your God."

Melisandre smiled victoriously, even though she would've preferred to go with Stannis's ship. Still, it should be sufficient. An unfamiliar feeling went through her at that, but she ignored it, not understanding what it was. It was a tiny shiver of doubt, something Melisandre had never felt before.

Instead she simply stood, smiling thinly. "Then let us go to the Hall of the Seven, and I will show you my power and the power of my God."

OOOOOOO

"We've startled a boar out my lord!" said the huntsman, grinning up at the King where he perched on his horse. He wore Lannister colors, but the news made Roberts customary scowl at those colors disappear. "The boar is at least sixty stone my Lord! The largest I've ever seen in this area of the Kingswood!"

"HA!" the King slurred. He had been drinking steadily since waking up that morning, since this was the last day of his hunting expedition that he could get away with before Ned, damn his honorable heart, sent runners out to drag him back by force if necessary. Their relationship wasn't so solid now that Robert could ignore that. In point of fact he was deathly afraid that Ned was going to desert him and head back to Winterfell any day now.

But dammit, he was the king! He could do what he wanted! And his grief over Tommen's death was real, making his bad habits even worse. Moreover, and in a sign of understanding that would surprise most, Robert knew he couldn't be around Cersei in her grief. Soon enough the blame game would start, which neither of them would win, both of them accusing the other of having done something or not done something that led to Tommen's death.

"My Lord." Ser Barristan said from where he rode behind the king, looking at the other man worriedly. "Perhaps we should let someone else take the glory of this one? After all, I thought you wanted to take a stag this trip."

Robert belched then bellowed, "Nonsense! We've had no sport yet on this trip, I'll be damned if I let anyone else bring the first game we've seen down! My spear boy!" He shouted looking contemptuously over at another Lannister, only this one was his squire, apparently. Cersei had foisted her cousin off on him, and the king had agreed. It wasn't worth it, it wasn't as if he was doing all that much knightly crap these days after all. The boy was useful for lugging his gear, mostly his drink and weapons along, anyway.

The mealy mouthed boy nodded, holding out a spear.

Robert took the spear from him, almost missing the shaft of it he was so drunk. For just a moment the thought occurred to Robert that maybe Barristan had been insinuating he was too drunk to do this, but then he shook it off.

"Now, let's go find that boar!" he roared, spurring his horse forward into the woods. Behind him the other in the king's hunting party followed. None of them spotted the look on Lancel Lannister's face. For just a moment his face showed a mix of apprehension, delight, fear and anticipation.

OOOOOOO

Ranma frowned, standing next to the captain as they both watched a sail coming nearer over the horizon. Blackwater Bay was despite its size still a bay, so it wasn't that unusual, especially near the entrance like they were now, to see another sail. But this one seemed to be coming towards them, which was unusual. "Your orders Sir?" the captain asked looking at Ranma.

"Keep going." Ranma replied, frowning. "Add more sail or whatever the term is, do it slowly so this guy doesn't realize that were tryin' to run away from him. But we have an appointment in King's Landing, and we're late enough as it is."

The trip to this point had taken three and a half weeks, far more time then had taken Ranma to get to Pentos in the first place. Going to Pentos the weather had helped them every day on their journey, coming back, well, if Ranma was a superstitious sort he would've thought that the gods were against his returning. He knew for a fact however that at least one group of gods didn't have any reason to do that, so put it down to bad luck.

The captain nodded, though added a clarifier. "That's a galley out there, even from here I can tell that by the shape of their sails. If they're willing to put themselves under oars for long enough though, they'll catch us anyway."

"Just make them work for it captain," Ranma said, still frowning. "I have no idea what these guys want, but I doubt it's good."

The ship kept going, with their pursuer still following them, closing the distance slowly. He was being much too persistent for Ranma's peace of mind. Several hours after the approaching ship had been sighted, Ranma was once again standing next to the captain. "How long until we can see what colors he's flying?"

"It'll about another three hours I think, unless we slow down to let him catch us sooner."

"No, keep going for now." Ranma ordered. "I'm going to go below for a moment." Entering his room he found Daenerys and Domico both looking anxious.

Daenerys had both dragons on her shoulders, tense and ready. It was a martial picture, but it didn't match the reality at all. In a fight the little dragons would be a major distraction, not an aid. If they could control their little spurts of flame maybe, but they couldn't, not yet. And while they were strong for their size, that wasn't saying much, and they couldn't exactly bite through chain mail or anything like that. Still it showed willing at least.

Domico on the other hand was a slightly more serious proposition. His shoulder had almost healed, but it hadn't been on his dominant arm in any case, and he had honed his skills through sparring with Ranma many times over the past few weeks once he recovered. He also wore Ranma's armor. It didn't fit well, he was a bit, well more than a bit broader in the waist than Ranma, and slightly thinner in the shoulders, but it was still armor.

"Still following us." Ranma reported shrugging his shoulders. He looked over at Fenris, who stood up at his silent command padding over to the doorway. Ranma pulled out his katana, and the belt with his katars on it. "We'll try to talk our way out of this whatever it is, but if we can't you two need to stay here." He sighed faintly. "Fenris and I have done this dance before, don't worry."

Daenerys winced. She and Ranma had talked once about the battle with the Ironborn that Ranma had before arriving in the free city, and she knew that he was actually quite guilty about that one sided slaughter. She thought it was ridiculous, the Ironborn had been the attackers after all, but Ranma likened it to battling so many children. The Ironborn just hadn't really had a chance, and so many deaths had weighed on his mind.

"I hope it does not come to that." She said, moving over to him and touching his arm gently after he finished up buckling on his belt.

Ranma nodded, taking her hand in his squeezing it lightly before exiting the room. Daenerys watched him go, worry in her eyes, and then looked over at Domico who shrugged. "If anyone can see us through this, that young man can."

That did not make Daenerys any less worried. When she heard the shouting being outside, she steeled herself, then marched out, pushing Domico's arm aside when he tried to stop her. Even if Rhaegon and Sunfyre weren't ready to fight, there was still something she could do.

Ranma moved back up onto the deck, taking up position by the wheel next to the captain staring at the oncoming ship.

The captain now was nervously pulling at his beard. "They're the Royal Navy colors, though the marks underneath the flag indicates its out of Dragonstone. That means it might be answering personally to Lord Stannis, Master of Ships."

Ranma frowned at that, unable to think up a reason why a Royal navy ship would be approaching them, unless it was just bad luck and this was some random inspection or something. He asked the captain if that could be what this was, but the captain shook his head at that, looking astonished at the very idea.

At that, Ranma shrugged. "I have no idea what this ship captain wants, but we're for damn sure not answerable to him or to Lord Stannis of Dragonstone. Unless they come on orders of the King I'm not going to let them board."

"Are you sure you can stop them?" the captain said. "I'm not going to order the crew to fight them, this isn't like the Ironborn, these are actual royal authorities. I could be banned from the ports of the Bay for not obeying them."

"I'll try not to let that happen." Ranma said with a sigh.

Soon enough the boat was close enough, and a man with a blow horn at the front shouted. "Heave to and prepare to boarded!"

Ranma cupped his hands, needing no foghorn. "On whose authority!"

"Lord Stannis Baratheon, the lord of Dragonstone and Master of Ships!"

"I am Ranma Stark, heir to House Stark." Ranma bellowed back frowning as the ship kept coming closer, now making to pull alongside, the oarsmen in view now. "And I'm returning from a task for the king to King's Landing! Unless you've got royal authority we won't heave to and if you try to board us you'll be delaying a royal mission!"

The man was silent for a moment, before shouting back. "I have my orders! If you will not heave to and prepare for inspection, then I will be forced to board you."

By this point the ship was close enough, and Ranma looked over at Fenris for a second, sending orders down their link before launching himself into the air. The men aboard the galley gasped as he cleared over four dozen yards of open water in a leap that none of them would ever have imagined possible.

One man, a youngster who had been fiddling with his bow and arrow nervous about what could be his first battle hastily raised it and fired before anyone else could stop him.

Ranma saw the arrow coming. Swiftly raising a hand he smacked it to one side using the momentum of that to flip himself in midair, still moving forward. The move however had dampened enough of his forward momentum forcing him to land lightly on the stern railing of the ship.

He stared down at the men gathered to board the merchant vessel, while behind him Fenris made the same leap to land on his four feet heavily in front of him to one side. Ranma stared around at them all, his eyes narrowed. "Who is in charge here?"

The captain quickly forced his way through his troops to stand in front of Ranma. He was an experienced man, who had served with Ser Davos Seaworth at one point. The onion knight had been a good teacher, and he was a fair captain and decent leader. He had also met Lord Stark during the Ironborn rebellion, and could recognize the features of the family in Ranma, so nodded his head cordially, but firmly. "Lord Stark, as I said I am under orders. Could you have your captain heave to please?"

"Captain, I'm under orders from the King himself. Last time I checked Lord Stannis is **his** Master of Ships, not the other way around." Ranma said looking sternly at the man.

"There are rumors that the King is dead Sir. Your orders then would fall to the heir who is Lord Stannis."

"Joffrey, is the heir." *Much as I loathe the little prick.* "Why is Stannis declaring himself the heir, and where did this rumor of the king's death come from?" Ranma asked quizzically.

"Joffrey's not legitimate, Lord Stannis has proof of that, though I haven't heard it myself, and the rumors have been flying for days. Sir please, I am to return to Dragonstone with the Stormborn."

Ranma's eyes narrowed. *How the hell did Stannis learn that Daenerys is aboard? I'm getting that 'I'm dealing with magic feeling', damn haven't felt that in this lifetime outside of dealin' with the White Walkers. No way would Stannis work with them though, so who?*

He shook that thought off, hands twitching as he stared hard at the man. "Until I return to King's Landing with my charge, I don't recognize Lord Stannis's authority over me." Ranma said formally his eyes narrowing. "So if you want to board my ship, you're going to have to do it by force in which case we might as well start the party right here."

His hand flashed faster than any of the men around him could follow. One hand his hand was empty, the next his katana's point was pressed against the captain's jugular. "Are we going to have trouble captain?"

Ranma didn't really like doing this. The captain was just doing his job, and if Stannis had proof that Joffrey was illegitimate, that changed things immensely. But the King being dead was just a rumor apparently, so in his mind Ranma was in the right here. And there was the fact Stannis shouldn't have known he had Daenerys aboard at all, which made himself suspicious

And he would've hesitated even if he wasn't to turn Daenerys over to Lord Stannis. Ranma had given his word that he would've been protected, and he would see to it that she was. The fact that he had come to like the girl, even possibly in a romantic way, was wrapped up in that of course.

The man gulped, blustering. "I have over two hundred men aboard!"



"Yeah, but that's not the point, the point is pressing into your throat right now." Ranma chuckled grimly, the katana not moving even as the men behind the captain began to reach for their own weapons. "Let's face facts captain, I'm in the right here. As far as I know, the King is still alive, you haven't given me any proof of his death, there has been no official notification that came in to Dragonstone about it or you'd have said that. It's only Stannis's word about that, and that Joffrey is illegitimate, as much as I'd like to believe that. Until I return to King's Landing, my authority supersedes yours."

The man gulped again, feeling the tip of the odd looking sword against his throat. "I-I can understand your position Lord Stark, I will let your ship go."

"I'm glad we could be reasonable." Ranma said, sheathing his blade. Fenris however remained ready for anything, and if the people watching him thought Ranma was relaxed they weren't looking close enough.

So when he stood back and the captain jumped back, shouting "Get him!" Those were the last he would ever speak. Ranma's sword was again out and slicing forward as he jumped after the man, slicing his stomach open despite his cuirass.

The katana whipped back into a guard position. Ranma waited a bare second, hoping that the crew, with their captain so easily dispatched, would grow some common sense. But they didn't since normal common sense, which Ranma didn't actually understand, would dictate that one man would have no chance against a full crew, whatever the size of his wolf.

Instead after a second of horror the nearest men charged at him. Ranma sighed, then charged in turn, one hand holding a katar while his right hand held his katana. Right before the first men could reach him, he leaped up, grabbing a hanging rope from one of the sails, flinging himself into the center of the boarding party rather than the front.

His weapons flashed out, katana cutting into the shoulder of one man while his katar punched through another man's helmet to slice his head open. Three more men died in similar manner as Ranma remained in the air, using their spear shafts and heads as springboards. It confused the men around him, allowing him to move above them, killing as he went with relative ease.

This was a deliberate choice of style on Ranma's part. He hoped that doing so would demoralize his enemies, forcing them to think about surrendering, which would let him win without actually killing them all.

Unable to take to the air like Ranma, Fenris barreled forward, glowing with his own life energy. Swords, spears, axes even a warhammer shattered against his fur. One of the things that he had been training on hardest was his chi-strengthening. He still couldn't use it for long, but he could use it for much longer than before.

Fenris' flashed his jaws downward, ripping a man's arm off, before twisting his head to one side, biting into another man's chest, ripping him in half. His legs lashed out, sending men flying. Men began to scream "Monster!" and pull back.

Arrows began to land among them, and Ranma took a second out of his leap between one man's head and the next to see that the crew of the merchant vessel were lining the side, firing arrows into the crew of the navy galley. Though she was out of sight, he also heard a female voice shouting "Concentrate fire on the rowers!"

Over a dozen men went down from the sudden arrow hail. But the crew hadn't replaced the arrows lost against the Ironborn, so they only had a few arrows each, and their accuracy hadn't gone up either. Still at this point they could hardly miss.

Better however, it gave Ranma an idea. With a thought, he sent Fenris at the rowers as well, not to kill the rowers particularly, but to destroy the actual paddles. Ranma took the other side, smashing aside men now, not actually killing many, simply bashing them aside to get at the oar. The two juggernauts shattered every oar they saw, only actually killing one out of four men trying to fight them now.

Aboard the merchant caravel Daenerys realized what Ranma was doing, with delight. *He's not trying to kill the crew, Ranma's going to destroy their ability to come after us!* She quickly turned, grabbing up a bow and staring across at Domic. "Fire arrows, can we make them quickly?"

"I don't know, why?" Domic asked, wincing as he tried to fire a bow. He missed, he wasn't an archer, and he decided to let that lie. Yet he couldn't quite turn away from the action on the other boat, watching Ranma bound around, dance almost in midair as he went. *I feel another song coming on. The 'Dancing Wolf' or perhaps 'the Flying*

*Wolf, no, those sound too much like mummers acts, something to think about when I have leisure.*

"Keep up man! Find some fire arrows or make them, then aim at the sails!" Daenerys said, slapping his good shoulder to get his attention.

Back on the navy galley, Ranma had finished destroying the oars on his side. Fenris was nearly done, but he had gotten snarled up in several nets, slowing him down enough that the crew of the ship had been able to fully circle him, though they weren't having much luck in actually hurting him just yet.

Instead, the men manning the nets were being thrown around like ninepins smashing their fellow armymen around, killing several before they too died and let go of their hold on the nets. Fenris then rushed forward, grabbing the net in his teeth, tearing it asunder easily, his teeth glowing blue for just an instant.

Ranma arrived at that point, having just jumped over several dozen armymen, smashing feet first into a man aiming a spear at his Fenris' back. Katana and katar flashed cutting and chopping into heads and shoulders. Again he remained in the air, using their arms, heads and even the edge of their thrust up blades to balance himself as he went, a feat that was both utterly astonishing to everyone who watched, and demoralizing to the crew he was currently fighting.

Fenris roared out of the last vestiges of the nets, once again looking nicked around the edges, but nothing life threatening or even anything that would later leave a scar. He was having a more difficult time of it than his bonded, yet he had finished the destruction of the oars on his side of the galley.

Glancing up as he heard a 'fwoosh' sound, Ranma saw several makeshift fire arrows hitting the canvas of the sail above him. The crew had kept the sail open even as they added oars to close the distance to the caravel, since the wind was helping them along, but now it came back to bite them.

More of the fire arrows missed than hit, they weren't prepared ones, so their ability to actually fly was limited to say the least, but enough hit both the rigging and the navy galley to incite panic among the crew. More than half of them threw down their weapons at that point, rushing down into the hold to grab up buckets of sand and water to put out the fires they could.

"Ranma, come on!" Daenerys shouted, gesturing for him to hurry with one hand, while the other was keeping a firm hold on Rhaegon who was trying to flap off her shoulder, the sight of the fires exciting him. Sunfyre was much more sedate, simply watching everything from her other shoulder.

Ranma could see her point. The captain of the caravel had pulled some of his crew away from the side of the ship and they were now making full sail, getting away from the naval cutter now that it didn't have sail or oars.

At his mental command, Fenris leaped toward him through the tumult of the deck, and a second later both of them leaped toward the retreating caravel. Ranma quickly sheathed his weapons midair, and was barely able to grab onto the back railing of the ship with his outstretched hands. That was enough for him though, and he flipped himself up over the railing, before grabbing up a long line of rope, tossing it over the side to where Fenris had hit the water of the bay.

Fenris grabbed the rope, holding it tight in his jaws but not cutting it and Ranma began to heave him out of the water. The direwolf's paws scrambled at the back of the ship for a second, but Ranma was able to heave him aboard quickly.

"We won!" Someone in the crew shouted, and there was a rousing cheer, mixed with cries of "Stark" and more than one shouted "Stormborn!" There was a lot of back slapping and general joviality before the captain regained control with a single bellow. The rest of the crew went to work quickly under his glower.

Daenerys walked through the crew toward Ranma meeting him halfway, with Fenris padding behind him, shaking himself every other step. Water, Fenris decided, was fine in moderation, but the humans could keep this 'sea' thing.

"I thought I told you to stay in your room." Ranma asked, making it more of an ironical statement than a question. He was smiling, shaking his head at her as she walked up to him.

"Hah! And where would you be if I had meekly obeyed you now, hmm?" Daenerys scoffed, looking him over for wounds then reaching out to scratch Fenris's head. On her shoulder Rhaegon had settled down again, watching both humans avidly, while Sunfyre fluttered the few feet down to land on Fenris' damp back. Her silver hair blew in the wind, her violet eyes were alight with delight at the fact her plan had worked, as well as Ranma's survival.

Despite the battle he had just fought, despite the fact she still wore his shirt and leggings, Ranma thought he had never seen a more beautiful sight in his life. He shook his head slightly, reaching out with one hand to push a bit of her hair back behind her ear. "You took a major risk, and those men on that ship know you're here now. But thank you, all the same."

*And for more than figuring out how to stop the ship from being able to board us without my having to kill them all, He thought, more sternly than the moment would match. I'm a lord's son, I can't just rush in, I need to remember the overall battle as well.*

Daenerys blushed at his touch, and their eyes locked for a moment. For a moment there on the deck everything else disappeared, and it was just the two of them staring into one another's eyes, seeing the growing feelings there.

The moment could not last, and thankfully for both of them Sunfyre took that moment to start making the little snarl noises that indicated he was feeling hungry. Rhaegon immediately followed suit, surprisingly followed by Fenris. Using his life energy took a lot out of the direwolf, and he had no patience for the silly two-legs mating rituals.

Ranma laughed softly, the moment was broken and the two young people turned their attention to their animals before heading down into the ship. Behind them, the naval galley floundered where it was, the fires out, but no way to move after them or back to port. Ranma took a moment to glance back at the galley, worry crossing his features for a moment as to what this attack meant, and what he would find in King's Landing.

He shook his head, getting rid of the thought for now, but it would return many times over the coming days. Even so, and even after reading the notes his father had given him with his worries, at that point not confirmed concerns about Joffrey, his fears would not match the reality.

OOOOOOO

"What do you mean my brother is dead?" Renly asked coldly, a flicker of fear going through him.

"The, the kings dead my Lord, gored by a boar while on the hunt!" The beast took him right through his stomach when his spear broke." The man stammered. He was a Baratheon man, loyal to Renly as Lord Paramount of the Stormlands, and he had raced ahead of the returning hunting party to bring him the news, though he wasn't the only one.

"This changes everything," Renly muttered, rubbing at his forehead. He felt some grief at his brothers passing, but right now he needed to concentrate on his own welfare. With the king dead, there was no way the Lannisters would back down, it would come to open combat now. "How many men can we call upon?" He asked looking over at Loras.

The handsome Knight of Roses frowned thoughtfully, before shrugging. "Not many. The forty men I brought with me from High Garden, the hundred guardsmen in Baratheon colors here in the Red Keep, that's about it. We could nominally call on a few of the Lords and their retainers from court, but their loyalty would be suspect at best. Of course there's Lord Stark's forces, he's got a little under a hundred and twenty personally, and another hundred or so supporters."

"And the Lannister forces in the keep alone outnumber them four to one..." That actually wasn't the case with the ones who were dressed in Lannister colors, but their supporters in the court had always outnumbered the Wolf supporters, and the remaining supporters of the king, those that hadn't been sent out with Ser Thoros, had shrunk even more after Tommen's death. That had only become apparent to Renly in the past few days unfortunately, or he might've called in more men from the Stormlands to offset it, but it was too late now.

Renly began to pace about, thinking hard. *If I know Ned he will move to have himself named as regent until Stannis can be sent for, at that point things will go bad quickly. As far as most people know Joffrey is still Robert's heir, and now it will be simply the Cersei's word against Ned's, without the King there to decide one way or another. The Queen will respond, calling up her troops if need be, and Ned won't back off, even though we're so badly outnumbered, stupid, stubborn fool! And if I'm here when it happens, the Queen will have me killed as well. She'll have to suspect that I know the truth at least about her children, and even if she doesn't, Stannis and I both represent a threat to them and her control.*

"Prepare the horses." He said abruptly turning to Loras. "For all of us, your men and mine. We're getting out of here."

Loras frowned, not liking running from a fight, but knew that this fight was lost. The numbers were simply against him and he knew that Renly's life was in danger if Cersei suspected he knew the truth about her son. "I'll see to it."

If he had known that Lord Stark had more forces on hand than anyone suspected, he might well have tried to convince Renly to stay, but he didn't. A fact that would have an impact both in the short term and in the long term.

OOOOOOO

Petyr and Varys entered the king's council room, with eagerness and trepidation respectively hidden under their habitual control. Sitting at the head of the table, Cersei looked at the two 'neutral' members of the small council with scant favor, wondering what plans the two of them had going for them, wondering what they would do when she laid out what was going to happen, and how far she could trust them. *Or for how long, belike.*

She looked over to Jaime, who had just closed the door and now stood next to it, smiling thinly, one hand on his sword hilt. Several other armed men from different houses loyal to House Lannister for various reasons were also there, awaiting instructions.

He nodded at his sister, and Cersei began. "You have heard that the king is dead, gored by a boar on his latest hunting expedition. It has come to our attention that Lord Stark means to name himself regent, and then to send for Lord Stannis. His reasoning for this act does not matter, this cannot be born, and is an act of treason against the crown. As such, he will be arrested, jailed and tried, before being given the choice of taking the black or execution. Now, I have to ask where you two will stand."

Jaime deliberately smacked his pommel against the stone wall behind him, smirking. Both men looked over their shoulders at him, then at one another with even less favor than the Queen had given them both.

The Master of Coin however was smirking internally. He had expected this summons, and was ready. "I am loyal to the crown your highness, and would more than willing to put myself at your services. Indeed, I have certain forces of my own in the city, that will aid you if need be. I also have connections with the gold cloaks, and know people who are angry enough at being passed over for higher positions in them that they will back you if you guarantee to remove Lord Stark's appointments there."

"Very well." Queen said. "You will retain your post as Master of Coin, your forces will be added to ours. We will discuss remuneration for your aid after Lord Stark has been dealt with." The Queen looked over at the master of whippers, one eyebrow raised.

The eunuch sighed. This wasn't the way he wanted things to go, and he could see it going even worse than he feared all too easily, but right now he didn't have a choice. "I am on the side of the crown of course Your Majesty, and on the side of peace and long term stability. Lord Stark's decision to set aside Prince Joffrey would set a very bad precedent long-term, and Lord Stannis would be a nightmare as a king. I have no martial forces to add to yours, but I will not make issue with your moving against Lord Stark."

"Good. Lord Stark is presently in the city, I want him arrested and brought to the keep immediately. You Baelish, will take command of a force of gold cloaks from their garrison here in the Red Keep to do this."

Looking over at her brother Cersei went on, ignoring Petyr's protests with royal disdain. Forcing him to act openly like this with her family would burn any bridges he might think he could use to save himself if things went sour somehow. "Jaime, you will take command of our forces and gather up the men from Riverrun that are in the city. They represent a large amount of Lord Stark's forces. With them out of the way he won't have enough men to win this. Designate someone else to take command of the forces here in the keep to besiege the tower."

Jamie nodded grimly, tapping one finger on his sword hilt, anticipation rising within him,

In contrast Cersei was a bundle of nerves inside. She had tried desperately to keep open conflict from occurring, knowing it was so chancy, and while she had faith in her brother as a swordsman, she didn't know how well he would fare in directing a battle in the city. Nor did she know how Ranma would react when he returned. That he would return was something Cersei was certain of. It was as simple as night following day to her, but now the die was cast, and to save herself and her children there was nothing Cersei would not do.

Petyr frowned heavily, trying to think of something he could say to dissuade the queen from forcing him to do this, but looking at her cold, watchful expression, he realized what she was doing. *It would appear as if Cersei is more subtle than I had thought, damn it. I will need to remember this lesson in the future. For now however, I am stuck with this, and will need to make the most of it.*

Nodding her head mentally as Petyr stopped protesting, Cersei turned to look over at Ser Detmer Gaunt, of House Gaunt. House Gaunt was an almost eternally poverty stricken minor Crownlands, who Cersei had been loaning

money to for some years. "Take as many men as you need, you know what to do."

Detmer bowed, then left without another word, while Petyr frowned slightly, discerning the man's task with ease. He knew Detmer as a man large of shoulders and small of morals, which coupled with Cersei pouring money into his coffers made the man a blade she could use for dark deeds. *If I have to guess, the number of royal bastards in this city is going to fall drastically soon.* Petyr was proven correct in this guess the next day. But for now, he had his mind on other things.

Several hours later, as Cersei waited for news with all the calm she could muster, until she was told that her daughter was missing.

OOOOOOO

When the news reached him about his friend's death Ned was meeting with Brynden in the Mountain Honey once more. After Tyene's death he had taken to eating as many meals as possible out of the castle, more wary about poisons than assassins, which only increased after Alayaya helped them find the crossbowmen.

He was listening Brynden describe several places in the city where the mercenaries of unknown allegiance they had initially learned about from Alayaya were gathering when a runner from the Dragon Gate.

Hearing the news about Robert, Ned frowned angrily, sad yet also very worried. Their friendship had become so strained lately that the sadness he felt could not override his worry about the coming days.

For a moment Eddard wondered if this had been the awaited second attack from whoever had killed Tommy, or if the Queen had gotten wind somehow of what was going to happen when Robert returned. *Still*, he mused, *I owe it to young Merry and to Tommen's memory to at least try to deal gently with Cersei if I can. But that does not mean I need to be an idiot about it.*

He turned to Brynden. "Gather the men, I'll want our forces ready for open conflict within the hour. Send in a runner before you go, I wish to send a message to captain Woolfield."

"We won't be able to bring his men into the keep," Brynden warned. "Not unless you're willing to openly declare your regency immediately. The Lannisters and their supporters wouldn't allow us access if we came back with that large a force."

"I wouldn't bring them into the Red Keep in any event, the Lannister forces and those loyal to them would still outnumber us. No, we'll rally at the main Gold Cloak barracks. They have the men we'll need if this goes wrong, if we can trust them."

"Your work with them **has** been very good." Brynden admitted. "I think you could trust nearly all the new recruits frankly, the older hands will go the way the money pays them to. Who will you send to rally them while our own forces get ready?"

"Edmure, give him ten Riverrun men and tell him to go. He can speak with authority as heir of the Riverlands as well as my representative." Ned replied crisply, staring at the map laid out between them, nodding his head at the plan he had come up with. It would be a gamble, but if they ran into opposition, but it might work.

"Are you planning to confront the Queen?" Brynden asked softly his face showing his opinion on the matter easily.

"I owe it to young Merry and to the memory of Tommen to at least try." Ned said harshly. Plans made, he stood up picking up Ice, House Stark's Valyrian greatsword, from where it lay on the edge the table. "Honor demands it."

"Honor demands you stay alive!" Brynden said angrily, standing up himself and reaching forward to poke Ned in the chest over his armor. "Cersei is used to being Queen, if you remove Joffrey from power, if you name Stannis as heir, even if nothing else happens, the Queen will lose that power, and she won't stand for that."

"I still have to try."

"And if we return to the keep and find it closed to us already?"

"Then we will retreat to meet up with Edmure, and with the gold cloaks aid take the keep." Ned replied grimly. "I cannot in good conscience let the men and servants in the Tower there to be butchered at the Lannister's leisure."

The two men nodded, and over the next hour gathered their men from around the city, as well as interrupting Edmure

in his playtime. The heir to the Riverlands had taken to visiting a different brothel every week. He had been helpful despite this penchant for the ladies in leading the training of the gold cloak recruits, those men who had joined up after Eddard had begun to clean up the city watch.

All told by the time Ned was ready to return to the Red keep he had seventy men with him. They were a mix of Riverrun and Winterfell men, but all of them were veterans, and all of them were loyal. Ser Jory led the Winterfell contingent, while Brynden led the Riverrun men.

Unfortunately the queen had her own plans. Their march was interrupted when a band of gold cloaks and shabby mercenaries came down the street towards them, about a hundred men all told. At their head rode Petyr, wearing the tabs of a Gold Cloak commander.

All around them the smallfolk began to scurry indoors or run away through the alleyways of the city, fearing what was about to happen though not yet knowing the cause. Others stopped as soon as they were off the main street, watching from corners or windows to see what was going to happen.

"What is the meaning of this?" Ned growled, pushing his way to the front of his men. Why do you block my way back to the Tower, Baelish?"

Petyr sighed faintly, keeping his real thoughts off his face with the ease of a lifetime spent in court of one sort or another. *Damn it, I wish Cersei hadn't insisted I do this, I am not one for open warfare of any stripe, let alone this close to the front. Still, I was hardly in a position to refuse.*

"Lord Stark." He said aloud, voice carrying to the watching crowd as well as to his own man and those following Lord Stark. "I am to apprehend you on charge of treason, to be brought before the Queen Regent. You have been found guilty of sowing sedition against the crown, of allying yourself with foreign influences, and plotting to take the crown yourself."

Eddard's eyes narrowed, and he loosened Ice in its sheath at his side. "You know," he said almost conversationally. "I never did trust you Littlefinger, I knew after hearing the details of what happened between my brother and you that I could never trust you, and everything Brynden or I have seen since coming to this pestilential city has proven that. Now here you are, betraying the crown and the law, all so you can bend over and kiss the golden ass of the Lannisters."

A wild, fey feeling had surged through Ned Stark. Now that open conflict was inevitable a part of him was eager for it to begin. His time in the world of politics had frayed his self-control even if he hadn't realized it before this, and Ned was eager to deal with something simple and easy to understand for a change. "I am going to march up to the Red Keep, and I am going to arrest the Queen." he said coolly. "If she had gone quietly, I would've been willing to prevent her dirty laundry from airing, but she has made her choice, and so have you. If you wish to stop me Petyr come ahead and try!"

"And what of your daughter? Or the lives of your retainers in the Tower of the Hand?" Petyr asked softly, still trying to play the part of a loyal man doing an odious task. "What of them?"

Petyr had expected that threat to completely disarm Ned, but instead Ned laughed harshly, his eyes hard and cold, knowing he might be consigning his people in the tower to death, but unwilling to be swayed away from his duty. Moreover, his daughter and perhaps the princess as well would be somewhere in the city now. He and his men had set that up well in advance, taking both of them out into the city once a day after Ned had received the news from the Citadel.

"The keep is ready for a siege, and has been for several days. And my daughter is none of your concern. I say again Petyr, either disperse your men, join me, or try to follow the queen's commands." Ned replied grimly.

Petyr sighed faintly then moved back through the column waving the men forward.

But Brynden and the men of House Stark hadn't been idle. Though they didn't have many archers with them, those they did had strung their bows while hiding behind their fellows. Now they raced forward past them, aiming down the street quickly loosing their arrows into the front column of Petyr's men from barely four house lengths away.

The first two ranks with Petyr were all on horse, but all this did was make them even easier targets for the archers, despite their desperate attempt to close the two house lengths between them and the archers. The first rank of them went down, mostly with horses shot out from under them and the second rank crashed into the downed men and horses, further tangling the column. The front four ranks of Petyr's forces didn't have time to reorganize themselves

before the Northerners and Riverlanders hit them like a hammer.

Ned led the charge, his cloak opening to show plate armor covering his chest and leggings, with a helmet on his head now which he had pulled on while the archers fired. Ice flashed out, cutting a gold cloak down before driving into a mercenary's chest, the steel of the blade easily punching through the other man's boiled leather armor. A backhanded sweep sliced into a mounted man's leg before he could lower his shield to block it, and that man screamed, falling off his sorely wounded horse, who bounded away.

Behind him Brynden speared another man, before cutting down a fourth while the street began to run red with blood. At the back of his column Petyr's eyes widened, backing away quickly, turning tail and leaving his men there. There on the streets of King's Landing, the battle for the crown began.

OOOOOO

Unfortunately for Ned, he had not reckoned on his daughter's willful nature coupled with the depth of her infatuation with Joffrey. She had indeed been scheduled to leave the keep with Alayaya and Myrcella that afternoon but had refused to go, saying she wanted to spend lunch with Joffrey. The men Ned had left behind had been unable to come up with a reason to force her to go, since Ned had been careful to not even hint to his daughter the real reasons behind these daily excursions. They had still tried but Sansa had put her foot down, and ordered them all to leave her alone. They had however rung out of her that she would return to the Tower once the meal ended.

So it was that Alayaya, Myrcella, Ser Oakheart and their guards went into the city alone, none of them knowing the real reason behind these excursions. But Sansa was back in the tower when the Lannister men came calling mid-afternoon. Worse, thanks to Petyr's connivance and his own forces, the Lannisters had been able to concentrate their forces in the Red Keep on the tower of the Hand.

Ser Willowtree cursed as the door to the Tower was caved in by a hammer blow from a small battering ram. They hadn't expected that, really they hadn't expected the Lannisters to be willing to pay in lives what it would take to assault the tower rather than starve them out if it came to an open battle, but evidently the Lannisters had decided they had enough men to win through.

"Pull back!" he ordered, gesturing to his man, around forty men from Riverrun and every man from Winterfell that hadn't been with Ned. About sixty swords, but the Lannisters alone had over four hundred men in the Red Keep. He knew they were going to go down, it only was left to see how hard they went.

"I could wish I had gotten the servants out at least." He mused as he gripped his sword, racing after his men up the stairs to take position on the next landing, jumping over the first of many barricades of various sizes. "Or that Sansa had not proven so foolish! Stupid girl, she's going to get herself killed, and I can't do a damn thing about it!" While he had heard about secret passages in the Red Keep as a whole, the Tower didn't have any to the best of his knowledge, which was a pity, since he would have jumped at the chance of using them to get his lady out of here.

He barked a laugh, causing the men around him to look at him quizzically but he waved them off smirking through his beard. *Ha, if I'm busy wishing for things, might as well wish that more of us were trained archers, or there were more of us at all!* He only had about 15 men trained his archers, they would harvest a horrible toll if he could protect them, but...

Willowtree's thoughts broke off abruptly as the first of the Lannister men came up the stairs.

"Gut the Northerners!" the lead man roared, before falling back down the stairs, an arrow through his eye.

Willowtree nodded at the archer who stepped back promptly, pulling out another arrow from his quiver. "Good shot."

"Only fair" the man replied. "At this range I could hardly miss, now could I?"

That death seemed to dishearten the Lannister men for a few seconds, but then they came on all at once with a roar. Bowstrings twanged again from both sides, though the Lannister men couldn't shoot over their own troops or the barricade at the top of the stairs very well, while the men from Riverrun and Winterfell had moved through their own men for a moment. Ten men died under their arrows before they had to retreat backwards, and they took a position on the staircase leading upwards getting just enough headroom to shoot over their own men.

Ser Willowtree's sword bit into a man's chest, then he was nearly pushed off his feet by another man behind that one. There were more behind him and more racing into the tower.

"Die hard boys!" He yelled aloud, bringing his sword up into the gut of the second man before kicking him off into the

body of a third while he brought his shield up to slam into the face of another man who had taken out the man standing in line next to him. "Die **hard!** Take as many of the gold fuckers with you as you can!"

OOOOOOO

Up in the tower Sansa shivered, staring around in horror. She had heard the outcry from several minutes ago, calling on the men from Winterfell to surrender, that her father was a traitor, but she couldn't understand it! The thought of anyone, **anyone!** Calling her father a **traitor** was beyond her understanding. It was as if they were simply talking a different language, or asking the sun to not shine. Her father was the most honorable man in the world! Why would anyone think he was a traitor?

But the Lannister men seemed to think so. She shivered, hearing the sound of combat echoing from far below. She clutched Jeyne's hand tightly, her friend doing the same to hers. Jeyne's face was just as white and terrified as Sansa's. Across from them sat septa Mordane, who had pulled out a long, wickedly sharp looking curved dagger from somewhere.

Royer Overton was an older man who had served in Winterfell for as long as Sansa could remember. Normally his jolly face and warm smile was a source of comfort, but now his face was grim as he stood by the top of the staircase leading into the suites at the top of the tower with two other men, the last line of defense for their lord's daughter. "I wish you had gone with the Princess, milady. We'll do our best, but..."

"I wish I had gone with them too Royer." Sansa said, her voice cracking.

Beside her Lady paced, growling continuously as the sound of battle reached her sensitive ears. Normally Lady gave off an almost dainty, pampered air, but that was in abeyance now, and she sharply reminded Sansa and Royer's men of Fenris just now, despite being barely a third the other direwolf's size. She was clearly ready to fight for her mistress, a sight that heartened the Northerners, though not enough to make them think that they would survive this.

OOOOOOO

Edmure was not well-pleased by the summons that pulled him out of the brothel he was currently 'assessing', until he actually read the message, that is. Then his irritation faded quickly, replaced by seriousness as he pulled on his sword belt. Pulling on his leggings Edmure mentally went over a map of the city, or at least the portions he had personally explored. *I am about a good fifteen minutes jog I think from the nearest gold cloaks barracks. But isn't that one of the smaller stations, should I go for one of the gate posts, or try for the Red Keep's garrison?*

He thought about it a moment as he pulled on his boots (priorities after all), then shook his head. *Mud Gate and Dragon Gate are both under our control for the most part, we haven't weeded out all of the less desirables there, but we've done the majority of the job, and the men in command are Eddard's appointees. My brother-in-law has done a magnificent job there I have to admit, never thought I'd say it. But the gold cloaks in the Red Keep are too close to the Lannisters. So do I go where I can rally the troops easily, or where our men might need some stiffening?*

By the time he pulled on his boots he had the answer and there were reports of open fighting having already begun in the city. Striding out of the brothel Edmure nodded to the ten men waiting for him. "You two," he ordered, looking at two men he knew used to have running contests back in Riverrun. "Split off and head to the gold cloak garrisons at Mud and Dragon Gate. Tell them that the Hand has evidence of treason by the Queen."

The full perfidy of the woman wouldn't be believed so quickly, but the Hand's supporters had been primed for something like this from the Lannisters or the vice faction for a while. "Tell the commanders to ignore any orders coming out of the palace, or from anyone but **me**. I'll be heading to the Garrison on the Street of the Sisters, then back to them with the garrison there."

That was the largest garrison of gold cloaks anywhere in the city, fully five-hundred men were stationed there at all times to keep the peace in the richer districts around it, centered around the Great Septa of Baelor the Street of Steel and other rich streets. With them plus the Mud gate and Dragon gate garrisons, each of which comprised another two-hundred men, Edmure would have nearly half of the gold cloaks in the city under his command, then would move on to each of the other garrisons one at a time to add them to his number.

*So long as my uncle and brother-in-law can keep from being skewered long enough, I can bring in the forces to end this in our favor.* With that he strode off quickly breaking out into a trot with the eight men that remained behind him.

He arrived in the Street of the Sisters quickly, running through that entrance to the garrison before the two guards always on duty outside could stop him, breathing deeply but easily. He was in decent shape, his father had never had



anything to say to him about not training his body, just what else he used his body for. "You." he said pointing at a random gold cloak. "Take me to your commander."

Two minutes later he stood in front of Allar Deem, the current gold cloak commander. He was a supporter of the old commander, Janos Slynt, who had been sent to the Wall several weeks ago along with the consignment of death row inmates, and several hundred containers of alchemists fire and seven alchemists. Ned hadn't been able to remove him from command however, because they hadn't been able to pin anything on him, unlike Slynt.

Despite this Edmure didn't trust Deem, and kept one hand on the hilt of his sword as he explained the situation. "So I'm commanding you to prepare your men to march out, we're going to rally the gold cloaks, and then we're going to arrest the Queen."

Allar Deem nodded gravely. "Very well, I'll get the orders out right now." he nodded to two men nearby, who ran out the door while Allar stood up, pouring himself a glass of wine from a very expensive looking decanter. "Would you join me in a glass to celebrate our impending victory?"

Edmure shook his head, everyone in the Tower had become very leery of taking anything from anyone they didn't trust, most particularly food or drink. "I'll drink to our victory after we've actually won."

"Suit yourself." Allar replied, gulping back the extremely expensive wine like it was so much swill. He then put it down, and made for the door with Edmure following them.

"I'm glad you responding so promptly." Edmure said, watching the other man closely.

Allar Deem slowed, smiling thinly. "I must say I was ready for something like this for a while, and I know what side of the bread my butter is on."

Edmure frowned at that, but couldn't put his finger on what about that statement was setting off warning bells in his mind. Soon they had exited out into the training yard of the garrison, where the garrison had gathered, armed and ready.

Yet Edmure saw something else that stopped him cold, his hand whipping it to his sword. He turned, his blade out and seeking Allar's throat, but he had already dodged away to the left after locking the door into the garrison's interior behind him. "Traitor!"

"That would be you, actually, I have a royal proclamation stating that as fact." Jaime Lannister said smiling thinly from where he had been leaning against the wall of the training area, with twenty Lannister armsmen around him. Without further warning he darted forward, trying to close with Edmure but Edmure backed away quickly, and the men behind him pulled out their own weapons and circled around protecting them from all sides.

From several yards away, Allar Deem smiled thinly drawing his own sword. It didn't look nearly as well cared for as Jaime's, but it was still sharp enough. "I told you I knew which side of the bread my butter was on, I even told you that I had been ready for something like this for a while. Did you really think I would follow the Hand over the Queen?"

Edmure looked wildly around for an escape route, but instead he noticed a lot of frowning faces on the gathered garrison, which suddenly gave him an idea. "Men of King's Landing!" he bellowed, pointing his sword past one of his guard's shoulders at Jaime Bannister. "That man and his sister have committed treason against the crown, Prince Joffrey **isn't legitimate!** The Queen hasn't given birth to a legitimate heir to the throne!"

Jaime scowled, racing forward with his armsmen behind him.

But Edmure backed away, letting his men do the fighting as he appealed to the watching gold cloaks. "Will you allow that to stand?! Will you allow the family that sacked King's Landing, that have betrayed not one but two Kings to retain their power?! Will you let things go back to the way they were before Lord Stark began his crusade here the city? Do you like being reviled by the very people you are supposed to protect? Or will you make a stand, and began to win back the honor that those cloaks on your back should show?! Stand with us!" he bellowed.

Then Edmure was forced to defend himself from Jaime, who had cut two of his men down with ease. Edmure backed away, he was only a decent swordsman, but he was quick and light on his feet and he was able to duck aside for now, using the larger melee around them to keep his distance from the Kingslayer.

Many of the gold cloaks looked at one another, and several dozen of them raised their weapons. Two were struck down by their fellows, who were quite happy for things to go back the way they were, but a surprising amount of the others took this as a sign to pull out their own weapons and begin to fight one another. This pitted new recruits

against old hands, Lannister followers against house Stark supporters, in the smallest, and one of the bloodiest civil wars in history.

Soon enough the melee became general. As packed as they were in the training area, several hundred died in the next twenty minutes. While this was going on Edmure continued to evade Jaime, trying desperately to get away, using the crowd of gold cloaks as obstacle. The last of his men wasn't so lucky. He went down to join his fellows, struck in the back by someone wielding a mace.

Edmure didn't make it to the set of double-doors leading out into the city. Jaime forced his way through the melee to the other man trapping Edmure against the wall. Jaime smashed Edmure's sword aside with his own before bringing the flat of it around slamming into the side of Edmure's head. Even wearing a helmet that blow concussed Edmure, sending him boneless to the ground.

"Damn it." Jaime muttered. "I didn't expect Edmure to think that fast on his feet." He looked around growling angrily before grabbing Deem with one arm. "Get your men under control damn you!"

Allar Deem now looked a little frightened by the violence all around him, but nodded his head, more frightened of the Kingslayer. He started to bellow commands, slowly bringing order back with the help of the Lannister supporters killing any of the Stark supporters inside. Three dozen of them however clumped together either by design or chance were able to win through to the exit of the Garrison and out into the streets, rushing to spread the word about what had happened.

Jaime shook his head Looking around, seeing dozens, hundreds of dead bodies everywhere. The garrison training field had become an abattoir in the past half-hour as the gold cloaks turned on one another with a savagery he had seldom seen before. "Damn Deem, he should've been able to control his men better. There goes any chance of winning this quickly..."

OOOOOOO

it was no secret that there were several dozen men in the Tower of the Hand among the armsmen and servants that had become infatuated with Alayaya and not the kind of infatuation where they would like to buy her affections, but would actually like to win them. Mattimeo was one of these, and he was one of the least 'experienced' as well. He became tongue-tied and there was a perpetual flush on his face whenever the former courtesan was around him. So this assignment as leader of the princess's bodyguard as she went into the city had been sort of a mixed blessing.

Alayaya thought it cute, but Mattimeo wasn't nearly as confident as she liked her men to be, nor quite frankly as intelligent. She wouldn't have minded laying with him, he was a decent looking young lad, but she was making a efforts to leave that world behind, and so did never did anything that encouraged or discouraged him. Made fun of him lightly, yes, but that was at all in good fun.

"I don't know, while red might be the color of your mother's family Myrcella, I'm just not certain it will favor your complexion in the future." She murmured holding up a dress against her body, deliberately not looking at either of Arys Oakheart or Mattimeo who were standing behind her at just that moment, no doubt imagining the rather short and low-cut silk dress on her.

*Really whoever thought celibacy was a good idea for a fighting force was an idiot, she thought to herself looking at Oakheart's expression in the large, very expensive mirror this shop boasted. She could easily see where his eyes were concentrating, the same place they did every time she gave him the opportunity. I know I have, what did that one rather crude but sweet client from several months back put it, an 'ass that could launch a thousand ships', but still, this is a little too much.*

"The Queen might be naturally pale, but you already are slightly more tanned than she is, that could become permanent in the future. We need to find something that mixes Lannister red or gold with Baratheon black or yellow in such a way that it matches your own complexion."

"That sounds more like something Joffrey would want to wear, I'd rather wear something completely unrelated to either family if I can get away with it, making political statements in what clothing I wear gets old over time." Myrcella replied, smiling politely at one of the dressmakers who were measuring her, who smiled back. She'd recently begun a growth spurt, and had actually begun to develop a real chest! She hoped it would continue to do so, and that by the time Ranma returned, which Myrcella had no doubt he would, she would look the part of a young lady rather than a young girl.

Still, a man working in this establishment had struck her as bizarre when they arrived, but Wade was apparently an

up and coming couturier in the city, and 'as bent as a banana' according to a few of the guards, whatever that meant. Still, he didn't seem to look at her as anything more than a breathing mannequin, which was actually reassuring to the young princess.

"I wish Sansa had decided to join us, I love these little trips, this is so much more fun than staying in the keep." Her lessons had been rather boring of late, and there was the fact that she didn't want to be anywhere near Joffrey, which meant she couldn't be around her mother either.

*Joffrey is playing the dutiful son so **very** well these days, she thought to herself rage and grief warring in her mind. If only mother could see it, but no one will believe me, no one will believe what I've seen in him, what he admitted to me.* That thought was foremost in her mind practically every day, she wanted to confide in someone, but who? *I need Ranma back dammit, he'd know what to do!*

That was a familiar refrain, but at the present moment there was nothing she could do about that except worry, and she actually had come to enjoy being around Alayaya. The former courtesan had a truly wicked sense of humor, and no man was safe from her pointed comments, yet she was also kind and gentle, and performed her duties as handmaiden admirably. She also had a sense of fashion that even Sansa respected despite the Stark girl's misgiving about her low-class birth, and was a very good seamstress as well.

She spent a nice time with Alayaya trying on various dresses, ordering several sets to be delivered to the Red Keep later that day. When they exited the shop however Mattimeo stopped, frowning and looking around as did Ser Oakheart and Mattimeo's four men squad. Myrcella looked up at Arys quizzically. "Is something wrong?"

In the distance some town crier was shouting. "The King is dead! The King is dead! The Queen Regent declares martial law! Lord Stark and all his men are considered traitors!"

The man from Winterfell looked at one another in shock, wondering if this was possibly why the princess and Sansa had been encouraged to leave the Red Keep on a daily basis. They had all been told to expect something the past few days, and what to do in case anything should actually occur while guarding Sansa and the princess, but the King's death? That came at them out of left field.

*Damnit*, Mattimeo thought. He wasn't an officer, nor was he a knight so he hadn't been let in on the fact that Ned had evidence that the Queen had committed treason, or that he might be moving against her soon. Ned had hoped to handle it quietly as possible, simply removing the Queen and her children in a manner that would save face, so hadn't told many people about the evidence against Cersei so as to keep the rumors down. But Robert's death had thrown those plans out the water.

"What is this about?" said Oakheart, his sword in his hand and pointing at Mattimeo as he glared around at the other armymen. "Is this why Sansa and the Princess have been going out every day, so you can get them away from the Red Keep?"

Mattimeo held up his hands. Yes that had been the reason, but it was only supposed to be a preventive measure, so he didn't see the point of saying so right now. "Hold on, we have no idea what's going on, but do you honestly think that Lord Stark would commit treason?"

"Of course not!" Myrcella said sharply getting between the two men and staring her bodyguard down. "Put up your sword Ser Oakheart, these are good men, and Lord Stark has been nothing but gentle and honest since the day I met him. The idea of anyone accusing him of treason is simply idiotic!"

"Even if it's your own mother doing it as that crier said?" asked the knight looking down at her sternly, but Myrcella could tell that he was wavering. More than a Kingsguard, Oakheart had become **her** guard, only very rarely spelled during the day by Sir Moore or her uncle Jaime, and Myrcella fondly imagined that she had a greater connection to him than any of the other Kingsguard had to any of their royal charges.

"I don't think my mother would do that, I can't say that someone couldn't do it in her voice however. But regardless we need to deal with our own situation. Do you think we should head back to the Red Keep? If Lord Stark is being accused of treason there might be open fighting there, should we find someplace else?" Myrcella asked, trying to think of what to do in as mature a manner as possible.

A sudden shout at the end of the street caught all of their attention, causing Oakheart to turn away from Mattimeo though he still held his sword in his hand. Several men had gathered at the end of the street shouting at one another, arguing about what was going on while the women and children hustled inside all around them. The small folk of King's Landing had all too much experience in what could happen in the wake of a king's death.

"Hah! Fancy anyone believing that Lord Stark would commit treason! He's a rock, the honor of the Starks has been trusted for centuries even here in the South! Hasn't he done enough to prove himself in this city? No, it has to be a Lannister plot!

"I hear there's open fighting over on The Winding Way, and Gold Cloaks were seen fleeing from their own garrison near the High Sept of Baelor. It'll spread, mark my words." Said another man. "The king's dead, that means scum of all sort will be coming out of the woodwork."

Ser Oakheart sheathed his sword shaking his head. "We need to get the Princess back to the keep, I don't know what orders you have in case of emergency, but that is the only thing I will willingly do."

Mattimeo frowned, then shrugged. "We can try, but if we can't, we'll need to think of another plan". If Sansa was there, he would have simply taken command and forced them to follow the actual strategy they had been ordered to, which was to make their way down to the docks, but she wasn't. And there was a chance, no matter how slim, that they could get back to keep and find that everything was over by the time they got there. Plus Oakheart was sort of a friend, and Mattimeo didn't want to fight him, not if he could help it.

They barely made two blocks before they ran into a large gang of smallfolk, breaking windows and attacking a small band of five gold cloaks. "Down with the Lannister, no more burning! Not again!"

Before the group could back away and try another route they were spotted. "Look!" one of the rioters shouted pointing at them. "It's one of the royals, the little Lannister bitch! Get her!"

"Shit!" Matt muttered pulling out his sword and pulling his shield off his back. "Your highness, Alayaya, get behind us!" He looked around pointing it towards an alleyway. "Thomas, check if that has another exit, move backwards but don't run, not yet."

The man so named ran over to the alleyway while the rioters surged towards them. One of Mattimeo's other men raised his crossbow. Clifton Snow was a bastard from near the border between Cerwyn and Stark lands, and had a decent eye for anything long range, be it a thrown spear, sling, or bow. The crossbow had cost a month's pay, an expense to be sure, but he wanted to see if a crossbow was any better than a bow.

Clifton's first bolt took the foremost rioter in the neck, throwing the man backwards in a welter of blood. His fellows roared in anger and came on even faster.

The armsmen fell back, and the others readied themselves while behind them Myrcella clung to Alayaya, frightened by the look in the oncoming man's eyes. Something about it reminded her of Ser Trent, only far worse, and there were so many of them...

Thomas came back shouting. "It's got another exit, over here!"

"Good, Clifton at the back with me and Arys, everyone else in front, the ladies in between, move!" Mattimeo turned quickly pushing Myrcella and Alayaya towards the other man.

They barely entered the alley way in front of the first of the rioters, who came on, their targets still in sight. Thus began an interminable hour of simply running away, the armsmen always placing themselves between the two girls and their pursuers as they raced through the jumble of alleyways that was the majority of the city. They killed several rioters when they caught up a few times, and eventually were able to throw the whole band off the scent.

Finally Mattimeo called a halt, pulling up level with Myrcella and Alayaya, who was surprisingly fast on her feet. "Do you know where we are?" he asked, gasping. He wore boiled leather armor as all of his men, so the run hadn't been that strenuous for them, no, his gasping was more because Alayaya had sweat quite a bit, and her clothing was now sticking to her body like a second skin in some places.

Oakheart however was gasping because he was already tired. He was clad in the uniform of a White Cloak, which was medium plate armor. Still he was in good enough shape and would recover quickly if given the opportunity.

Alayaya looked around, before ducking to the side through a small cut made between two houses that looked as if they had fallen into one another from the second floor down. She moved through it, then around two buildings before getting back to a main street she recognized. She looked around then raced back. "We nearly went in a full circle, we're near to the main market district, well away from a straight line route to the Red Keep."

Mattimeo cursed. "Not good, those rioters might be anti-Lannister, but I bet that most will be more looters than anything else. The merchant district will attract them like a lodestone attracts iron."

He tried to imagine a mental map of the city, without much success alas. He hadn't made any attempts to explore it, not being one of the men who reveled in the pleasures available here. "Do you think you can lead us to the wharfs?"

"We need to get back to the Red Keep." Arys said sternly. Having caught his breath, he was now eyeing Mattimeo and the others suspiciously. "The wharf will take us well out of our way. Why do you want to go there anyway?"

"I was thinking we could appeal to one of the Navy cutters there for sanctuary while all this blows over. Let's face it, we don't have enough men here to forge our way back to the keep if rioters like that are everywhere." Mattimeo lied glibly.

Oakheart frowned but eventually nodded.

"That's actually a good idea." he said nodding his head in apology for his tone.

"Alayaya?" Mattimeo asked looking back at Summer Island girl.

"Yes I can, it won't be easy, we'll be moving through an area that's almost as bad as Flea Bottom in its own way, but we can do it."

"Lead the way." said Oakheart, nodding his head over to Myrcella who nodded as well. She had taken to running in the mornings as exercise, so this hadn't actually been that difficult for her just yet. It would, however, get much worse in the next few hours.

OOOOOO

Ned watched the runner go sprinting off through the city with mixed feelings. He hoped the runner made it, but at the present moment he couldn't quite say that he had much expectation of that. Still, captain Woolfield was a good man, and would no doubt be ready for anything, so his plan, his desperate gamble, had a chance of working.

With the Queen preempting him like this, and with no word coming back from Edmure about the gold cloaks Ned had been forced to assume that the gold cloaks at the very most were no longer a factor for either side. That meant he would have to rely on his own forces, including the men about the *Fish's Scales*. *Still, if the Lannisters don't know about them and I've never seen any sign that they do, those men will come as a nasty shock to them and might well win the day.*

He finished cleaning Ice from the ichor of the latest battle and looked up at Brynden. "Ready to move out?"

The older man nodded, looking at the men around them. They haven't lost any in that initial clash, something that Brynden put down to their training and the fact that the Winterfell men had led the way. Some of them were very damn good warriors, certainly far better than gold cloaks of the run-of-the-mill mercs at any rate. *Training with my nephew seemingly has paid quite a few dividends.* He mused, nodding his head over at the squad leader who was in charge of the five men who were leading the way at present. "Move out."

The group made their way through the city, sticking to alleyways for the most part, forcing their enemies to hunt them.

Soon however one of the squads on their back trail sent a runner up to where Ned and Brynden were in the loose column. "Sir, we've sighted several dozen mercenaries trying to close with us from the side. But our squad leader has found a place where we might be able to ambush them, should we do that or just try to outrun them?"

Ned didn't hesitate. "All squad leaders are to act as they can offensively. I have no idea where we are or the layout of the city so I'm going to have to trust your eyes and ears." He said formally looking around at the men around him at present all of whom smiled and passed the word along.

Five minutes later they had assembled about half their men, hiding behind several broken down carts in what looked like an area that had just begun to be used for refuse. Over three dozen men wearing the makeshift armor and the lean, hungry look of down on their luck mercenaries raced through.

With Brynden and Ser Jory sitting on him Ned was forced to back away from the ambush site, so again he had to leave it to his men to decide when to spring the trap. Jory timed it perfectly, leaping up over one of the down carts to slice a man's back open, shouting "Now, up and at them!"

The men surged up and over the carts, coming in close and cutting the mercenaries down before many could even raise their weapons. It was almost too easy how quickly they went down, but that was what surprise did for an

attacker when a properly executed trap was sprung.

Afterwards Ned looked down at the bodies nodding grimly. *We'll need to kill as many of these men as we can, and the city is made for the small ambushes.* He looked over at Brendan. "We need to keep moving in a circular fashion towards the wharfs, but I want us to kill as many of these men as possible, while we do it, so if any squad leader finds incoming enemies or a place to set up an ambush, we will take advantage of it."

"We'll start lose our own men soon." Brynden warned.

Ned's face was carved from stone, matching his voice. "I know."

OOOOOOO

Willowtree grunted, his sword almost getting stuck in his opponent's chest for a moment before he was able to wrench it out. His arms felt like lead. Despite all the exercise they had been doing and despite before the fact that they had been able to rotate their troops thanks to the relatively narrow confines of the tower's stairwell, he and most of his men were near to exhaustion right now.

On the other side of the scale, they were taking a bloody toll on the Lannister forces. Willowtree estimated that he had lost about half his men so far, and they had accounted for at least four times that many attackers possibly as much as five. The narrow confines of the tower, the better training of the defenders, the fact that they had fallen back into prepared positions (makeshift barricades and small firetraps) it had all added up.

"And it's not going to be enough." he said to himself sighing resignedly. *Maybe if our full complement had been here, we could've held out at the bottom, but the moment they pushed us to the third floor there were other stairwells up for the next two.* Willowtree had lost maybe a third of his dead when they were forced to retreat to another position on the sixth floor, which only had a single stairwell leading up. That continued for the rest of the Tower, thankfully, so they would be able to bleed the bastards even worse from now on.

Yet even so, while this wasn't their last line of defense they no longer had access to the kitchens or the larder, though they had managed to herd most of the servants ahead of them. If the Lannisters only held where they were, they could starve the Northerners out. *Of course, he thought to himself shaking his head, they don't seem to have the patience for that. And they've still got more than enough men to finish us off.*

He looked up as he felt a hand on his shoulder and found his friend, Lucas Lake staring at him. Lucas Lake had been his friend nearly since the moment he joined Lord Stark's guard, the fourth son of that family, which held lands along the western border of House Umber. He was a large man, who was habitually silent, but he spoke up now. "You've done your best. All we can do is our duty."

"I know, I just wish that Sansa wasn't here! If not, we might have possibly tried to break out get to the horses and out of the keep entire."

"We would have been cut down in the open if we tried. Besides, I doubt we..." Lucas broke off as more Lannister men pounded up the steps towards them.

OOOOOOO

Out in the city after that initial clash, the battle had begun to be one of ambush and movement rather than the grinding warfare that was occurring up in the tower.

Jaime was a decent tactician, and had devised his initial tactics well. His first attack had captured Edmure killing his Riverrun guardsmen and though he hadn't intended it, killing many of the gold cloak recruits who would have responded to the Hand's request for aid. It also cut off Ned from any attempt to advance on the keep lest he be encircled. He now controlled the keep and many of the high-class areas of the city, at least in name.

That however was as far as his grasp of strategy and tactics could take him. Jaime had never commanded a battle in a city before this, and as anyone would tell you, city fighting was among the bloodiest and worst fighting that anyone could see. Numbers tended to be mitigated in the war of small alleyways, hidden doorways and shanty houses of the poorer districts.

Worse, he couldn't pin Ned down. Eddard and Brynden were moving through the city rather than trying to stop in any one area, and they were doing it better than Jaime's forces. This problem was made worse by two things. The first was that his troops didn't have the same level of organization that Ned's did, though he only had a vague idea of how badly he was outmatched there.

Like the Winterfell and Hornwood men Daryn had led in the ambush the wildlings sprang on him, the men of Lord Stark's personal guard had been organized into five-man squads, with each looking towards a squad leader who relayed commands and kept order. They all worked together smoothly, with very little need after a few hours to even check in with Eddard. This had led to several of his squads being mousetrapped, boxed into alleyways that didn't allow them to use their superior numbers by much smaller groups of Northerners.

Eddard had taken it further. As they were moving through a city if one group or another saw either that they were about to walk into an ambush or a place to set an ambush, Ned had given them leeway to do so, so long as they checked in first.

Coupled with their individual training which Ranma had seen to over the past few months this made the Northerners and their allies equal to any force three times their size. None of the Riverrun men were as good as Ser Jory and the contingent from Winterfell that had trained with Ranma back home as often as they could, but they were better than the normal run of armsmen. Eddard He was using the men from Riverrun as runners and extra shock troops feeding them into any battle where he needed them, leaving the scouting and most of the combat to his Winterfell armsmen.

The second problem was even worse than that however.

In large areas of the city there were roving gangs of smallfolk, many of whom were simple looters using this chaos as an opportunity for profit. But many were not, instead they were looking for anyone with a Lannister uniform or anyone else. They couldn't battle larger groups of troops, not in a straight fight anyway, but they could harass, throwing bricks or anything that came to hand, and had picked off dozens, possibly hundreds of his men, disappearing in the chaos of the city.

It hadn't even been twenty years since the city had been sacked by Jaime's father and his forces when they turned on Mad King Aerys. There were places still bore the marks of that battle, and there were thousands of families in the city that had lost people to the swords of the Lannisters. Normally the smallfolk would be too downtrodden to act against the Lannisters, especially since they were connected to the king, who despite being a drunkard was well thought of by most of the smallfolk, who credited him with getting rid of the Mad King. Now however, these people rose up to back the Hand who had done so much in the city to cut back on the noble's abuse of power in the city.

The entire city was embroiled in chaos now. There were very few safe zones, and Jaime was close to losing the bubble entirely, losing control of the flow of the battle. The navy crews had all pulled up oars and moved away, retaining the neutrality that was their calling card without the Master of Ships or the King around to command their loyalty.

And the gold cloaks were no help at all to either side. While Jaime had shut down the largest gold cloak garrison in the city, the rest were in the midst of a civil war of their own. Those who backed the anticorruption reforms of Lord Stark were fighting desperately against the old hands who wanted everything to go back to the way they had been.

Surprisingly in the rank-and-file the ones backing Lord Stark outnumbered those who wanted the old order to return, but they were not as well led or organized. That battle was seesawing back and forth in nearly every garrison, and was very bloody, with a lot of old and new scores being settled.

In the Mud Gate however, Jaime had been forced to send the men from this garrison under Deem to combat the men there. Jacelyn Bywater was an honorable man who had long hated the amount of corruption in the gold cloak ranks, a veteran who had earned his knighthood from Robert in the Greyjoy rebellion. He had command of the Mud Gate, and nearly the entire garrison would have gone over to the Starks if Jaime hadn't boxed them in with Deem's men. That battle was probably the bloodiest in the city right now.

Jaime had no idea how it would go, but he felt his family's supporters had the edge overall. Along with sending Deem to the Mud Gate he had sent Gundar Pyle, Lord of the minor House of Pyle in the Crownlands, with two knights and twenty armsmen to aid his side in the other garrisons, moving from one to another, adding the men in each to his ready forces.

He rubbed his face angrily. "Dammit, this isn't the kind of fight I'm built for." He had warned his sister this might happen if they didn't wait until Lord Stark had returned to the keep. Yet Cersei had feared Stark's ability to rally the Gold Cloaks, a fear that had been justified apparently. That left the single largest (numerically speaking) force in the city out of it. Though the second largest seemed to be following his orders, though its presence hadn't been something he even had a hint of before the battle began.

"And that's something we're going to talk about later, Baelish, you little snake." Jaime murmured to himself, looking at

a map of the city.

It was a decent map, at least it marked out all the major roads and quite a few of the alleyways in the upper sections of the city, but it was nowhere near complete. On it was marked where his patrols had run into issues with the smallfolk, as well as where they had reported clashes with the men under Lord Stark. There were also several marks where mercenaries who, according to them, answered to the Master of Coin had joined in even without his first ordering them.

*I don't know how Lord Stark is doing it, keeping control of his troops as well as he is and still moving through the city! But Petyr having such a large force on hand in the city is dangerous as hell, he must have had at least a thousand men all told! Not very good mercenaries for the most part, but a thousand is still a thousand. Though thankfully, that number has shrunk badly over the last few hours.*

Jaime smirked at that. He had been pushing the mercenaries into the battle every time he could, and their losses had been much worse in those of his own men or the Lannister supporters outside of the gold cloak barracks, which again Jaime looked at as an expendable resource.

*Of course, our losses taking the Tower will probably make up for that.* Jaime thought sardonically looking over to where the Red Keep loomed above his command post on the Street of Sisters. *I do not envy our men trying to pry the Starks out of there.*

He growled angrily, pushing away from the table as he stood up abruptly. "Enough, I'm not doing anyone any good here! You!" he growled looking over at one of the men who had been bringing in reports. "Where was the latest sighting of Lord Stark?"

After being told the answer, Jaime left with a band of fifty Lannister men, heading in an attempt to try and circle around Ned's position. He just missed a messenger coming down from his sister about her missing daughter.

OOOOOO

The battle for the tower was over. Ser Willowtree knew it, and that knowledge was bitter in his mouth despite the fact he had seen it coming even before the battle was joined. Now only Adam, Lucas and four others remained alive outside Royer and his men on the top floor. Nine men were all that stood between the daughter of their sworn Lord and the blades of the Lannisters.

It was a bitter thought, made worse by knowing that the servants of the Tower that they had been protecting had probably been slaughtered by this point as they were forced to retreat to stay between the attackers and the top floor. He had personally seen several of them, including Vayon Poole, the majordomo, cut down.

The old man took his killer with him though with a massive meat knife he had taken from somewhere, slamming it into the soldier's neck even as the man's sword took Vayon in the guts. That had filled Willowtree with pride, but the screams of the maids had nearly overridden his self-control. He had lost five men at that point who had raced down to battle the reavers, and been surrounding and slaughtered in the Hand's council room.

"But we cost them." Lucas said, as if reading his mind. "We cost them sore, Adam Willowtree and no man could have asked for better."

A younger Riverrun man standing nearby scowled irritably, twanging the bowstring of a bow he had picked up along the way. "I just wish that bastard Joffrey had worked up enough courage to come forward! I'd only need one shot!"

They had seen the crown prince a time or two as the battle went on coming forward to harangue his troops, though it was possible he had been there all along, or even ordered the all-out assault in the first place. He never came near to the front, but made certain that everyone could see that he was there and 'taking part'.

"Tough luck on that lad," growled another man, a grizzled veteran from Riverrun. He was holding one arm awkwardly, and was bleeding from somewhere underneath his chain mail, but then again all of them were dealing with various injuries. "That little waste of shit doesn't have the courage to actually join the fight. He might break a nail or something."

That caused a rough round of laughter among the others, and the younger man smiled. "I just wish I was going to be around to see Lord Stark storming up here."

Adam said nothing while the others agreed with that, he had his own ideas about what was going on in the city at large. He had taken the time during one of the lulls in the action to look out a window and had seen fires in the city.



Whatever had happened it was clear that their Lord was busy. No help was going to arrive to save the day.

He turned as the noise from the staircase leading down signaled that the Lannister men were coming up again. The survivors of the battle up to this point had become veterans of storming up staircases into defended positions. They came in groups of seven men with space between each group.

The first seven men ran up in step wearing plate armor heavy helmets and with shields above their heads to protect against blows from the top of the stairs. Their job was not to kill the defenders, but to push or hack away at the makeshift barricade at the top of the stairs. Four of the seven men died doing it, but they hacked the large table that was the centerpiece of the barricade into chunks, letting the next wave of attackers hack at the barricade or the defenders on the other side. This method had worked before, though as always losses among the first groups of attackers was heavy.

Adam found himself pushed back by the rush of Lannister men, barreling the remains of the barricade backwards so they could clear the staircase. He saw that interspersed with the swordsmen were others, who were now wielding truncheons. Even while he ran one through with his sword, that sight caused Adam to frown.

To his left a truncheon slammed Lucas to the floor with an overhand blow to the head which dented his helmet and sent his man senseless to the ground. *They're trying to capture us now!* Adam realized with a start. *But why the sudden change?* For some reason he knew it wasn't a good sign.

He twisted quickly, trying to evade a sword thrust toward his stomach. It skittered along his chain mail leaving a bruise to add to his collection but not penetrating. Around him the last of his men fell unconscious or dead he didn't know. But the Northern knight fought on, killing two more Lannister men before a whirling piece of wood slammed into his face knocking him senseless to the floor. The last he saw was the same man raising his club again to bring it crashing down on his head.

OOOOOO

The sound of combat had gotten closer and closer as the day wore on, and Royer had ordered the girls into Ranma's room, along with Lady. The direwolf hadn't wanted to go, but Sansa had convinced her, tears in her eyes at the knowledge of how many men, men she had known all her life, were dying.

Royer and his men stood by the staircase, waiting grimly. They knew that the battle below was over, and they knew that meant Ser Willowtree and all the others were dead. But they were determined to do their duty as best they could.

The barricade here was less impressive than most, the furniture of the family suites having gone to earlier barricades. Because of this and there only being four defenders, the initial rush was almost able to clear them away on its own, but not quite. More Lannister men fell, with Royer talking the first man's head clean off, but the damage was already done. The men of Winterfell found themselves losing ground almost immediately.

Royer and his men were fresh, determined and well trained, and they wreaked a bloody toll on the exhausted attackers. But the Lannister armsmen still outnumbered them five to one. Once out of the staircase's confinement, the battle ended quickly, with each man isolated, then cut down or knocked out.

Royer had lost his helmet, but he had a thick head, and shook off the blow of one man's truncheon to take his arm off at the elbow in return. The pommel of his blade then hammered into the face of another man, before he found himself tackled a third. He brought the side of his shield down on that man's neck right below his helmet, breaking it, but he still lost his feet under the man's rush.

He kicked out, trying to take a man in the knees, throwing the dead man's body off him at the same time, but a blade snaked in, taking him in his side and punching through his chain mail there. Royer flailed his blade, catching a man on the leg, causing enough damage to cripple him, while around him, his men went down, dead or comatose. A second later, another blade caught him in the face, and Royer knew no more.

When the last defender fell, there was a sudden moment of silence as the survivors of the assault looked at one another, all of them weary nearly to the point of collapse. One of them, a knight of House Lannister, rubbed blood from his face wearily, shaking his head in bemused wonder. "If this is victory, Seven save us from losing." He had no idea how many men they had lost in this battle, but he didn't doubt they had lost possibly two-thirds of the men they had started with.

Another man in Lannister colors snarled. "I thought the princess and the Stark bitch and their little whore were supposed to be here. Where are they?"

A third man wordlessly pointed to the closed and presumably bolted door leading into one of the bedrooms. All of the men there looked at one another, as if debating who would open the door. After a moment one of them, the youngest there who was a little more hotheaded than the others, strode forward. Setting his shoulder against the door he slammed his body into it.

Unlike the doors further down the Tower, the ones in the Hand's quarters had never been intended to stop someone forcing their way in. It only took him five body slams to smash the door open. That however was when things went wrong for the young armsman.

The moment the door had been forced partially open, Lady, worked into a frenzy from the sounds of battle the smell of blood in the air and her bonded's fear, pounced. Her jaws latched onto the young man's throat, tearing it out as she bore him to earth. Not lingering on her kill she jumped away, taking another man by the leg and mauling it badly before she had to fall back from the sword points of several others.

"Just kill the unnatural thing already!" shouted one man, waving his sword back and forth to ward off Lady when she turned her head to keep him in sight.

"NO!" Sansa shouted, rushing out and trying to get to her pet, leaving Jeyne behind. "Don't kill her!"

"Why the hell should we listen to the daughter of a traitor like you, you little wolf bitch!" said one of the men, reaching forward to grab her.

"You take that back!" Sansa snarled. Suddenly her anger at all this overrode her fear, and she lashed out, catching the unwary man with a kick to the crotch that sent him gasping to his knees.

Septa Mordane surprisingly joined the battle too, moving quickly with her curved dagger to plunge it into the side of an armsman who had turned to grab Sansa. She was killed almost instantly though by another man running her through with his sword. At the same time another man grabbed Sansa from behind, raising his truncheon to pummel her to the ground.

He in turn was borne to the ground by Lady, her jaws searching for his throat. But the direwolf wasn't able to get away fast enough to avoid a sword thrust into her side. She snarled in agony, turning quickly enough to catch the swordsman's arm, biting it clear off at the elbow, but another sword came down on her neck, cutting deeply into it. Her spine severed by that blow Lady collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

"NO!" Sansa yelled in anguish, rushing forward, again, only to be grabbed by another man and flung to the floor.

Jeyne now tried to run forward to help her friend, but found herself grabbed similarly by two men. "Hah, at least we can end the battle on a high note!" One of them laughed, then began to tear off her dress, causing her to scream.

"That's enough!" shouted a voice behind them, more shrill than commanding, but it was a voice all of the men there knew. Joffrey strode up the stairs with Ser Trant, Ser Moore and Ser Blount. The young man's eyes were alight with something Sansa could not make out, but his gaze was stern as he looked at the men who had ahold of her.

"Whatever her father has done, Lady Sansa is still my fiancé, and Jeyne is her handmaiden, you would all do best to remember that."

The men all grumbled a little, but let the two girls go. "I am sorry about all this," Joffrey said looking at his bride-to-be. "You are looking well, despite this unpleasantness." He looked over at the wolf, hiding his delight in the beast's death easily. "I am sorry I was not in time to save Lady."

The words brought Sansa some comfort, though for some reason Sansa felt uneasy in Joffrey's presence for the first time. She stared at Lady's corpse, the direwolf still in its death throes, feeling as if something inside her had died with the wolf.

She didn't resist when Joffrey pulled her to her feet then into a hug, kissing her cheek. "Don't worry." He murmured. "We'll get to the bottom of this, whatever your father has done has nothing to do with you."

Sansa pulled back sharply, those words shocking her out of her grief, but she couldn't escape his arms where they encircled her waist. "Surely you don't believe my father could betray the King!"

"The evidence is damning, but again do not worry, you at least will be safe." He caressed her side gently, moving one hand up her skirt to touch her breast and she squeaked pulling back again, her eyes wide and horrified. "Your highness, this is hardly the time or place..."

The grip around her became tighter and Joffrey pulled Sansa close. "You're in no position to argue milady." Joffrey said harshly, his mask slipping fully for the first time in Sansa's presence.

Joffrey knew he held all the cards now. Ranma wasn't in the city, Lord Stark was, but his uncle would deal with him, and he was **KING!** Finally, he could act on his desires without fear of even his mother censuring him.

His arm tightened around her and he leaned in for a kiss while Sansa tried to lean backwards away from him, her eyes widening in horror while he pawed at her chest. The act and the fact there were so many men around, all of them grinning obscenely, terrified her.

Thankfully for Sansa, a welcome voice interrupted proceedings. "Your highness, you shouldn't come so near the front of a battle without the full guard around you." Ser Barristan stood near the staircase, looking around sadly at the blood and gore splattered everywhere.

He nodded coolly to the Prince. "I was sent to find you and see if princess Myrcella was here. The queen has been unable to find her."

Joffrey scowled a little, but Sansa used the opportunity to escape from his arms, hurrying over to the knight. "The Princess and Ser Oakheart went with a few men from Winterfell into the city early this afternoon. I believe they were going to go to the dress makers, and the jewelers today."

Barristan and several of the older men paled, but the Kingsguard Commander nodded. "Very well, I will deliver you to the queen milady, that was the other half of my orders. Then myself and Ser Moore will head into the city to find the princess."

Sansa nodded, noticing out of the corner of her eye the scowl on Joffrey's face at the mention of Myrcella. She decided then that her father and Ranma had been right about him, too late to do anything but lament her stupidity.

OOOOOOO

Ned groaned tiredly, Ice point first in the dirt of the alleyway, cracking his neck and rubbing one of his shoulders. While Ned hadn't taken part in a lot of the fighting after that initial clash, he was no longer a young man. These constant small actions were beginning to tell, both on him and worse on his men.

He looked up trying to figure out where they were. Noticing it was nearly full night now Eddard shook his head, the compression of combat astonishing him anew. "How close are we to the port?"

"Maybe ten blocks or so." Brynden replied from next to him, looking around wearily. He too was leaning on his sword, and he was older than Eddard. "This better work, we're down to about forty men I think." He scowled angrily. They had started the day with about seventy, and the fact that only lost thirty was amazing, but still hard to take.

"I know." Ned shook her head. "I didn't expect the Lannisters to be able to call upon that many of the other nobles in the city, or for there to be so many mercenaries."

"My fault there." Brynden scowled, his eyes flashing with anger. "I thought I'd found most of them but I don't think I even found half. They've paid for it, though."

The mercenaries had lost possibly as much as five-hundred men in bits and pieces throughout the day battling the Stark forces, and the smallfolk, who Brynden had witnessed attacking them as well. The Lannister supporters had fared little better, under attack from the smallfolk and unable to bring their numbers to bear against Eddard's men. His men were also organized, disciplined and trained beyond the forces they had been fighting.

*Of course, we've only been facing Crownlands men and lords, along with the mercenaries. Petyr's men have been doing a lot of the dying, which I bet is deliberate on Jaime's part, I doubt Ser Barristan would be willing to command this action, so it must be the Kingslayer. But his use of their supporters and the mercenaries freed up his family's men to assault the Tower. Our men there are probably already dead, curse it! But Sansa and the other children are out of there at least.* Ned thought grimly.

That worry had been niggling at the back of his mind for several hours now, but there was nothing he could do about it. All he could do was carry on, and hope his new plan worked like he hoped it would.

Both men looked up as a runner came towards them. "My Lord, we've spotted a large Lannister force moving towards us, about a hundred and fifty men all told. They're wearing various colors, but have fifty Lannister men at their core."

That caused both older men to wince, but Ned nodded again. "Squad leaders to me!" He called in a loud voice, made hoarse by bellowing commands over the clamor of battle.

It took about twenty minutes for his officers to arrive from out of the maze of alleyways in the darkening gloom of the city. This section of the city was poorly lit at night at the best of times, but they were close to several of the main thoroughfares down to the docks, which might be lit by torches. The docks for certain would be lit. Even with the battles occurring elsewhere commerce would continue as long as possible. Ned had also not heard of any of the galleys in the port throwing their men into the conflict.

When the men were all assembled, Ned looked at them all one by one, staring into their eyes one after another. "This is it; you know what's at stake. We need to push forward towards the port, and then the lions and their men will be getting a bit of a surprise."

They all nodded grimly, if tiredly. Exhaustion hadn't quite set in, but all of them could feel the specter of it. It had been a hard day of on and off fighting to get this far, but all of them were grimly determined to see it through to the end. "We're with you Milord." said Ser Jory, cracking his knuckles where they lay on his sword'sommel.

"Good. Then at the trot, let's move." Ned said simply and turned leading the way with Brynden down the streets.

They didn't make it four blocks before the Lannister force was on them. This time Ned couldn't in good conscience stay back and let his men do all the fighting. He, Jory and Brynden slotted into the line facing the largest street, down which the majority of the attackers were coming, trying to cut them off from the port, where Ned supposed Jaime assumed he was trying to commandeer a ship or something. Jaime didn't know Eddard that well unfortunately. Running was the last thing he was looking to do.

Behind them the few remaining archers began to fire, but quickly ran out of arrows, which they had been scrounging for since near the beginning of this conflict. They dropped their bows, picked up blades and rushed to join the line.

His scouts having spotted Eddard and his men, Jaime had hoped to hit them from all sides at once. Unfortunately, this didn't work nature of the city cutting into Jaime's organization as usual. A few of the attacks coming out of the alleyways to either side of Eddard's line of advance came in too quickly. They were wiped out with the Starks losing only one man in the process.

This allowed two of the squads to switch from the side of the advance to the front, where Eddard was. So despite the main assault coming from that direction, they continued to press forward.

Two more blocks, and five men were down. Another squad had been cut off from the main force and surrounded, lost for all intents and purposes though they kept fighting. The Lannister supporters and mercenaries were paying for every Winterfell and Riverrun man that went down, but all of them could tell that the opponents were on their last legs.

Ned found himself separated from Jory and Brynden, though he still had several of his other guards still around him, so wasn't worried just yet. He cut down a man in House Cressey colors, Ice opening his guts to the nighttime sky. Turning to his next opponent Lord Stark found his blade locked with that of the Jaime Lannister.

"You almost got away Stark," Jaime said almost conversationally as he parried the older man's blow. "Too bad."

"Too bad for the kingdom." Ned snarled back, straining against the younger man, pushing him back a pace. "Your sister has committed treason Kingslayer, as have you for backing her! Joffrey has no right to the crown!"

Jaime smirked. "I would say that Robert committed treason against my sister first, but I don't suppose it matters at this point." Setting his feet he pushed the older man back before moving into a series of cuts and thrusts He found to his surprise that Ned was able to parry or dodge all of them, even the final blow towards his leg, a trick Jaime had come up with that had never failed to cripple his opponent.

He grinned wildly. **This** was what he lived for, fuck politics, fuck leading the battle. He lived to fight, and this would let him see what Eddard, who was reckoned a good blade himself, had learned from his son. "Try to make its at least interesting for me old man!" Jaime laughed moving forward even faster.

Ned had trained with his son Ranma and Jon often back home in Winterfell, and had kept up his exercise regimen as much as he could even here in King's Landing. He wasn't as fast as Jaime, or as strong, nor even his skilled, but he was close enough in all three to make the fight almost even. He also had tricks of his own, both taken from Ranma's training and his greater experience, and his weapon was far better than Jaime's.

This was proven when he cut Jaime's shield, hacking a large portion of it away with Ice before backing away from

Jaime 's follow-up attack, nearly disarming the Kingslayer with a swift strike of his own before Jaime could recover.

The battle had moved into the well-lit area of the warehouse district by the docks, which allowed the warriors to see what they were doing, but came with it's own dangers. This was proven when someone nearby knocked over one of the large metal lamps lighting the area. The fire quickly spread, the smoke and fire confusing things further.

Not enough however to let Ned break off from Jaime. Still, even with the Kingslayer pressing him hard, Ned had the energy to smile grimly. "You were wrong you know," he growled when their blades locked again.

"Oh?" Jaime grunted, trying to push the older man back. But he nearly lost his footing when Ned danced backwards, Ice flickering out to thrust, almost taking Jaime in the face before he jumped backwards in turn. "About what?"

"I wasn't trying to get away."

Over the clamor of battle he had heard a new warcry. "The White Harbor! The White Harbor! Lord Manderly for Lord Stark!"

Jaime back away, getting enough distance between him and Ned to take in as much of the battle as he could see from there. A new force had arrived on the scene, and judging by the way they were cutting into his men from behind they weren't on his side. Worse yet, they seemed to be well rested which was telling against his own, semi-exhausted men.

Captain Woolfield had timed his assault perfectly. The Lannister supporters were in just the right position for his men, one-hundred and fifty Manderly armymen, to take them from behind and the flank.

All of them had been cooped up in the bowels of his ship for months now, Eddard being unwilling to let them do anything that might give them away. So the men had only been able to go out in small lots to get away from one another or see the city. Thus all of them were angry and very willing to hit things at this point.

This was proven in those first few minutes of their assault, where they cut down nearly their own number of Lannister supporters. After that, their own disorganization bogged them down slightly among the warehouses. But the battle had definitely turned.

Realizing this Jaime scowled angrily, but pushed forward. If he could cut down Stark the heart would go out of the opposition, and this new force wouldn't matter.

Ned understood Jaime's reasoning, but didn't try to back away, knowing Jaime had to either die or be capture to truly break the queen's forces. Instead he stood his ground, matching the Kingslayer blow for blow for a few moments as the man of Manderly got close, almost breaking through to him several times before being pushed back.

Moments later Lord Stark found himself fighting with his back pressed against a wall of a warehouse. He ducked underneath a blow from Jaime, throwing himself into a roll underneath Jaime's outstretched arm. Ned came up on his knees twisting around quickly to bring Ice up to cut into Jaime's back.

For just a moment there Jaime knew he was going to be cut in half. Surprised at the older man's sudden acrobatics while wielding that massive blade he hadn't turned fast enough to block the blow. And Ice was Valyrian Steel, it would cut through his Kingsguard issue plate armor easily.

One of the Lannister men nearby however had dispatched an exhausted Riverrun knight just at that moment. Seeing Eddard concentrating on Jaime he turned slamming his mace down on Ned's shoulder shattering it. Ned grunted in pain, his stroke going wide. The blow still landed, Ice cutting through the back part of Jaime's chest plate easily enough, leaving a long gash in Jaime's back. But it wasn't deep enough to cripple the Kingslayer.

He turned scowling angrily at the fact that someone else had interrupted them. Even worse was the realization that said interruption had saved his life. "Still," he said raising his blade and moving forward. "All's fair in love, war and all that, Stark!"

Ned grimly backed away. The mace user tried to move forward too quickly, and his stroke took the man in the stomach. But he couldn't back away further before Jaime was on him, his strokes coming quickly, forcing Ned to use both arms to parry them despite his mangled shoulder. The pain was getting to him, and he was slowing down quickly.

Soon the inevitable happened. One of his attempts to parry wasn't quite strong enough, and he was thrown backwards off balance by Jaime's blow, opening himself up to the return stroke which caught him in the side. Ned's

desperate twist meant the blow didn't kill him outright, but cut into his chain mail, deep and bloody.

The older man fell backwards to go down to one knee, one hand holding his side where he was bleeding profusely through his chain mail. Ice still held in one hand his eyes still defiant as he glared at Jaime.

Jaime sighed, holding his blade up in a salute. "Good fight." he said respectfully before darting forward, ready to finish his opponent off.

"RAAHHHH!" Suddenly through the smoke and chaos of the melee around them Ser Jory came roaring, holding a spear he had taken from somewhere as if he was trying to gore a boar. The spear shaft was missing its head, but the blunt end of it slammed with all the force Jory could put into it into Jaime's side.

The Kingslayer grunted as he felt his ribs crack under his armor from the impact. The blow actually lifted him off his feet, throwing him backwards and away from Ned. Behind Jory came others most of them wearing Manderly colors, along with Brynden, who went to one knee beside Eddard.

Getting his feet under him, Jaime growled angrily. His sword lashed out, cutting the spear shaft in two before flashing up to attack this new opponent.

Jory scrambled, letting go of the spear and bringing out his own sword to block the blow desperately. "Take Lord Stark and go!" He shouted. "This battle is lost!"

While Eddard had been dueling with Jaime, more Queen's men had arrived. Lord Pyle had finally ended the gold cloak civil war. He had split his forces into three, sending a small portion to reinforce the Red Keep just in case, then sending two hundred men around to try and start to get control of the middle class portions of the city. Lord Pyle himself then led his men and three hundred gold cloaks towards the port, where Jaime had gone. Not well trained or armored, there were still too many of them coupled with the remainder of Jaime's men.

Now it was the men from White Harbor who were in danger of being flanked. Dozens of them had already been cut off from their fellows and subsequently cut down. Worse, the men from Riverrun and Eddard's original guard had been nearly wiped out in the last hour and a half of combat. Realizing this and unable to find Ned, Brynden had commanded the men to fall back towards the ship. Then he spotted Ned battling the Kingslayer, and, from his vantage point on top of a large pile of crates, pointed Jory in that direction with the few remaining Winterfell guards.

Jory ducked under Jaime's blow, his fist coming up to slam into Jaime's side while his spear had impacted. The Kingslayer grunted, before Jory brought an elbow around into his face forcing Jaime back with a broken nose. Jory grabbed his sword arm by twisting his own sword arm around it, holding it in place wrestling with Jaime now rather than going sword to sword. "Go!"

Behind him two men in Manderly colors grabbed Lord Stark, dragging him away as Ned finally gave into his injuries, falling into blackness. The surviving guardsmen Eddard had brought down from Winterfell, all six of them, grimly stood their ground. Holding there they were a small roadblock, holding back the tide of reinforcing gold cloaks from pushing on after their injured lord.

"FALL BACK!" Brynden cursed internally while he directed the retreat, his voice almost gone now from continually bellowing orders. *Ned's gamble would've worked if the damned lions hadn't had so many men! Or if they hadn't been able to call on so many mercenaries!* He thought to himself savagely. *If we had just the Lannisters and their supporters to deal with we might have won this despite the gold cloaks. But not with the mercenaries throwing their weight in and our losses against them throughout the day.*

The men from the ship were still a fighting force, and they weren't as exhausted as the rest of the fighters on either side. But the gold cloaks arrival had turned what would have been a close fought victory into a running retreat. "Form up on me! Defend Lord Stark!"

OOOOOO

Myrcella and her group had continued through the city as the noise of battle and actual fires and riots got worse all the time. They'd taken the time before leaving the merchant district behind to grab two cloaks to hide Alayaya and Myrcella's faces from view, but they were still visibly women despite that, and the bands of rioters could see that easily enough. As Evening began they had lost Eaton and Richard, Riverrun men who had come to the city with Edmure. They fell fighting a particularly nasty group that ambushed them, but they were nearly to the wharves now.

They entered the warehouse district and were making their way around its edges towards the closet docks to where

Mattimeo knew the ship with the men from House Manderly was moored, a less used area that was mostly unlit. Thankfully this was also the area where one of the naval cutters was moored, so Ser Oakheart hadn't questioned him yet.

There were close to breaking out of the warehouse district onto the actual docks when a shout went up. "Look it's a group of those damn wolf lovers! Get them!" Two dozen men raced for towards him, all mercenaries save for a few very shabby looking gold cloaks.

Ser Oakheart turned with a frown and looked down at himself realizing his white enameled armor now was much stained with soot and blood, its original white enamel almost invisible. His cloak was gone as well and he lost his shield in the last battle. He strode forward shouting "I am Sir Oakheart of the Kingsguaaaahh!"

That was as far as he got before a brick slammed into his face. He went down gasping as he tried to breathe through a shattered nose wiping away the blood from that and his ruptured eye, which had been caught by the corner of the brick. The thrower had been one of the gold cloaks, who snarled aloud, his eyes lit with madness. "Kill the traitor!"

Merry gasped and would have gone to her knight's aid if Mattimeo and Thomas hadn't grabbed him up, each one taking an arm. "Move!" The young man bellowed, and Merry and the others obeyed save Clifton, who knelt to his knees, sighting down his crossbow. His bolt took the brick thrower in the chest, killing him, then he fired two more shots, the last bolts he had while the others retreated before dropping the crossbow and springing after them.

In the dark lit only by starlight and the waning moon they were soon lost, but their pursuers were able to keep them in sight this time. Alayaya led the way with Myrcella running behind her, but they both skidded to a halt in front of a rickety wall about seven feet tall. "Seven damn it!" the black girl cursed.

Mattimeo and the others caught up to them, Arys able to move under his own power now, if groggily. The young armsmen stared in dismay at the wall, estimating how long would take them to cut it down while behind them they heard the shouts and screams of their pursuers, like hounds after a fox. He looked at Alayaya. "How far to get to the docks from here?"

Alayaya gulped looking around, knowing full well what would await her and Myrcella if they were captured by such men, regardless of their supposed allegiance. "We're at the back of a warehouse that uses this area as extra storage space, I recognize the warehouse because I've been here with my mother a time or to buying bulk foodstuffs. The wharves should be right on the other side of this wall."

Mattimeo nodded, reaching over to pick up Myrcella easily and hoisting her up to where she could grasp the top of the wall. "Pull yourself up and over." he ordered.

Myrcella looked down at him with wide eyes. "What about you?"

"Do it." Mattimeo ordered, not answering. Myrcella hesitated for another second then did so, pulling herself up and over landing with a grunt of pain as her ankle twisted when she landed on the other side, her dress torn even further than it had been after so many forced sprints.

Mattimeo turned to Alayaya while Oakheart looked at the wooden wall then around them as the men who had been pursuing them rounded the corner of the warehouse. Even through his pain from the throne brick Arys understood, and he nodded in approval while Thomas and Clifton formed a very makeshift shield wall at the narrowest point of the alleyway.

He raised his sword and shouted, spitting out blood from his nose and eye. "Remember me fondly little princess, and run!"

Mattimeo hoisted Alayaya into his arms, lifting her up to go over the wall as well. He took a moment to lean in, kissing her hard on the lips. "I wish we could've done more." He murmured. "Make for the ship that will be flying the House Stark colors, and if you see someone dressed in the colors of house Manderly, white on a light blue background, tell them the 'merman serves the wolf' and they should help you and the Princess."

So saying he didn't give her time to reply, hoisting her up to the top of the wall the wall with a grunt of effort. Alayaya scrambled, and then with a final push on her rear which caused her to squeak a little she fell forward over the wall, quickly covering her head with her arms as she hit the ground.

Myrcella was hammering on the wall, screaming. "Come over too! You can make it!"

"Not in armor I can't." Arys replied. "Get out of here little princess. Look after yourself, because I'm no longer going to

be there to do it!"

Behind him the first of the rioters slammed into Clifton and Thomas. Clifton nearly went down with a spear to the guts, but he dodged it enough to let it graze his side, killing the man who wielded it with a thrust of his sword, before having to pull back quickly to avoid a mace swinging for his head.

"Run!" Mattimeo bellowed, and jumping forward with Arys as Thomas went down, tackled by two men even as his belt knife took one of them in the throat, his sword having been knocked out of his hand. "RUN!" And then neither man had time for more words.

Alayaya pulled Myrcella away sobbing. Myrcella tried to fight, tried to run back towards the wall, but Alayaya's grip on her arm was too strong and Alayaya pulled Merry away her own eyes wet as they raced on. Luckily Alayaya had been correct in her guess that simply boosting herself over the wall had put her onto the docks and she ran down them, looking for the ship with the flag of House Stark on it.

Soon they saw men in chain mail and strange tabards patrolling the area. One of them looked up and saw the two women running and shouted "Ho, stop there you two!" Six men converged on them quickly looking at the two women quizzically.

"Both of you should be hiding somewhere." One of them said assuming these were two merchants' wives or something of that nature that had gotten separated from their minders at some point. "Where are your menfolk?"

"Dead behind us." Alayaya said choking back a half sob. She looked at them, barely able to make out their colors in the light of the fires raging through the warehouse district, and said simply "The merman serves the wolf."

The man who had spoken stiffened. He was the lieutenant of the ship and had been left to guard the docks, more to make certain that the Navy galleys didn't put into sure than anything else. This area of the city was relatively quiet, since most of the merchant crews had simply upped anchor and moved away from the docks and those that didn't had forted up where they were. "Who are you two?"

"I am Alayaya," the black girl gasped. "An informer for the Hand. And this is the Princess Myrcella Baratheon." Myrcella pushed off looked up at the man from where she was now clinging to Alayaya's hand like a lifeline, her eyes wet with tears.

The man looked at the two of them it with wide eyes wondering how the hell they had gotten through the madness that was the city to here, but thanked the Seven that they had. Detailing one of his men to take over the patrol he hurried them back towards his ship.

As they went however, more men broke out of the warehouse district, all wearing Manderly colors and moving with purpose, especially a small group that were carrying a makeshift stretcher. "Lord Stark is down!" Several men bellowed as they saw their few fellows scattered around. "Back to the ship! This battle is lost!"

Myrcella's breath caught, and she raced forwards towards the ship meeting with the men from the battle just as Brynden came backwards still organizing the running retreat. Aboard the ship a dozen archers had been kept back for just this purpose (and the fact they wouldn't have been useful in the maze of warehouses) and they began to lay down a withering hail of fire aimed thanks to the fires in the warehouse district, allowing the men from White Harbor to gain some separation from their pursuers.

Brynden looked down at the princess happy to see her yet also concerned by who he didn't see. "Myrcella you're here, does that mean Sansa is as well?"

"Sansa refused to come with us today, she wanted to spend lunch with Joffrey, I'm sorry." Myrcella replied, her voice cracking as she tried to cling to her need to be polite in the face of so much upheaval.

But in the next instant she lost it. "My Lord Tully, what has happened!? One moment everything was fine, the next we come out of a shop and we hear that my father is dead, and someone has accused Lord stock of treachery! Then we hear that Lord stark has proof that the Lannisters have committed treason, what's going on!?"

"That would take too long to tell right now Myrcella." The man said waving her aside for now, though Myrcella could see his face had seemingly aged ten years after hearing her news about Sansa. "Lord Stark is sorely wounded." He looked up at captain Woolfield, who had just come towards him through his men as they bunched up near the plank leading up onto the ship. "Does this ship have a surgeon?"

The captain shook his head. "I'm afraid not."



Myrcella looked at the men as they brought Lord Stark aboard biting her knuckle as she looked at the man who had so often been kind to her, been that had become her rock when Ranma was no longer around. She spoke up hesitantly, current worry overriding her grief. "I-I have some knowledge of healing, do we at least have a stock of herbs and medicines? Alayaya, do you think you could do the stitching?"

"I could try, I suppose," Alayaya murmured looking at her benefactor as well, her eyes wide in both memory of recent loss and shock to see such a strong man laid low.

"Good. You men, get Lord Stark down into one of the beds, then heat water and find the smallest needle you have aboard this ship. We'll do all we can for him, I promise." Myrcella said taking command in a way that astonished those around her. Still they obeyed with alacrity, though later would be hard-pressed to say why.

Brynden smiled down at her rubbing her head affectionately. "Do what you can, I need to direct the battle."

Myrcella nodded. "I will however require that explanation of what in the Stranger's name is going on at some point Ser!" She said looking up at him with all the stern hauteur she could muster after years at her mother's knee. With that said she then hurried after Lord Stark's makeshift gurney, determined to do what she could for the man.

Brynden took a moment to stare after her shaking his head. "I hope to put that off as long as I can lady, and I hope you can handle it well when it comes."

OOOOOOO

Scrambling on the cobblestones, Jaime tried to get loose of the madman who had a hold of them. But Jaime couldn't get to his sword, and without a sword Jaime wasn't nearly as formidable. He tried to twist away, but the man, who had dropped his own blade, held him down while scrambling for his belt knife. He reached it, but Jaime was able to get a foot between them kicking him away.

Jaime grabbed his sword from where it had fallen, bringing it up just in time to smash the knife away when Jory tried a desperate lunge. Jaime in turn tried to cut the man down quickly and hurry after Stark, but Jory jumped backwards, grabbing up his own blade wearily.

"For Winterfell and Lord Stark!" he shouted charging forward. Jaime met him, but Jory wasn't as good as his lord. He was younger, but even more exhausted than Stark had been at the start of his duel with Jaime. Five parries, and suddenly his blade went flying, his fingers cut off where they had held the hilt. Before he could try to grab his sword up with his off-hand, Jaime's sword ran Jory through, punching through his chain mail over his stomach in a welter of gore.

Kicking the man off his sword, Jaime scowled angrily, staring down the street towards the harbor. The street was blocked end to end now with men wearing Manderly colors, holding off the reinforcing gold cloaks, whose lack of armor and formal training was telling.

*They had to have been hiding on some kind of galley. How Varys and Petyr missed that I don't know but I'll be having words with them both later!* The men there were now in good order, retreating but not beaten.

"Harry them!" he bellowed, his voice hoarse from smoke inhalation and pain from his ribs and his back. "Harry them, Seven damn you!"

But it wasn't to be. The gold cloaks lacked the ability to break the Manderly men's line, Jaime's men were too exhausted, and the mercenaries had no wish to throw themselves into battle again.

The mercs had lost more than four fifths of their number through this day of blood and carnage. Petyr had started the battle with about a thousand bought men, spread out over the city in penny-packets. About three hundred never actually joined the battle at all. They were picked off in small lots by roving bands of smallfolk all over the city. Thanks to Jaime forcing them to the fore of the battle, the constant small scale battles against Lord Stark's force throughout the day had cost them even more than that, and the final battle had killed more.

By dawn Petyr would find he only had a force of about a hundred bought swords remaining to him, the difference made up by those who had decided he had no idea what he was doing, and had decided to leave for greener pastures with the money they had already received. The Lannister supporters had fared better thanks to Jaime's forcing the mercenaries into the hottest fighting, but they were exhausted and disheartened now that a new force of Northerners had arrived.

An hour later, Jaime was impotent to do anything but watch as the men gained the wharves, moving quickly to a galley moored there, stuck between two others in such a way that no port-master would've approved of. He kept staring while the ship, actually scraping against another merchant vessel as it was pushed off the dock, sailed away into the bay.

O O O O O O O

The Queen, Varys, Joffrey and his captive Sansa, were waiting in the King's Counsel room for news of the battles in the city and the search for Myrcella. Cersei had questioned Sansa closely, almost desperately, about the whereabouts of her daughter, but Sansa had been unable to tell her more than she had Barristan. Cersei hadn't been nasty about it, only worried, but refused to answer Sansa's questions in turn about what had happened to spark this insanity, merely saying she would answer that question when her daughter was safe.

Cersei had sent Barristan immediately along with Ser Moore and ten men of House Lannister, including her cousin, into the city to find Myrcella. Lancel had wanted to talk to her alone, but Cersei had put him off. Now was not the time for his... payment, not when her daughter, her little lioness, was out there in the madness of the city. So here Cersei sat, her fingers tapping a nervous beat on the table in front of her, waiting for word.

She glanced at where Joffrey sat, seemingly composed as he whispered instructions of some kind to Ser Trant, while Sansa sat silent and unmoving next to him. The sight of her son made a proud smile form on Cersei's face. Though she hadn't known it until after, Joffrey had taken command of the battle to take the Tower, and he seemed to have done admirably.

Actually, besides ordering the initial attack the only thing Joffrey had been in command of was the final few clashes in the tower, when the battle had been all but won. Although he had been the one to demand they start to take prisoners. And he had saved Sansa and Jeyne from death and rape.

At least for now; Joffrey had his own ideas in that direction, as evinced from the scene Ser Barristan's arrival had brought to an end. Something Sansa was all too aware of, which added to her reasons to be silent, topped only by the shock of Lady's death still reverberating in Sansa's mind.

Several hours after the battle in the Tower ended they were still waiting for news when Petyr entered, nodding his head to them all. Inwardly Littlefinger cursed seeing Sansa there. He had hoped to get back in time to secure Sansa's wellbeing himself, he knew a passageway into the tower of the Hand that he could have used to get her out, and he could have easily hidden her among his staff for a time.

But Cersei's demand he take part in the initial attempt to confront Lord Stark, and Jaime's refusal to let him go after the battle began, had put paid to that idea. Now he was left scrambling, trying to think of a way to get Sansa under his power in some way.

That was for later though, right now, he had to deal with Cersei. He bowed formally to the queen and heir before giving his report. "The battles between the gold cloak factions have been decided. We now have full control of their remaining forces. I've ordered them to start quelling the worst of the fires in the city. We need to start getting order out there. We've also captured Edmure Tully. At Ser Jaime's orders, I've transferred him to the prison here in the keep."

He sent an apologetic seeming look at Sansa, where she was sitting by Joffrey, though now that he had time to look, Petyr saw that Sansa didn't seem as if she wanted to be there any longer. *Perhaps the boy's mask cracked already*, Petyr thought.

Cersei's voice brought his attention to her quickly. "Is there any news of my daughter? What of Jaime, has the actual fighting died down?"

"Your daughter?" Petyr asked, blinking in actual surprise. "Your majesty, I never received any news about the princess. If you sent runners out, they might have been killed before they found me. A single person wearing Lannister colors, or even a single nobleman traveling through the city right now would die quickly."

That made Cersei swoon for a moment, but she got control of herself quickly. "My daughter apparently went into the city earlier today before this all began, with Ser Oakheart and a few of the Hand's men and one of his maids." Cersei had not heard about Alayaya's past, Myrcella not having shared it, nor had Lord Stark or anyone else seen fit to mention it to her, so that was all she knew.

"I'm sorry your highness, I never saw any sign of the princess." Petyr replied, and he actually was sorry too. It would have been simple to use his finding Myrcella to gain further favor from the Queen Regent, something he could have

used in many different ways.

Cersei waved him away before rubbing at her face wearily, her normal arrogance in abeyance for the moment. But only for a moment, and she straightened up quickly, staring at Petyr. "Grab the lords and the retainers here in the Red Keep that remained neutral, get them out into the city to help quell the fires and chaos, we can't let the smallfolk get used to acting like this."

Bowing, Petyr left to give those orders, just as Lord Gaunt entered. Cersei's face and eyes hardened, and she leaned forward eagerly. "Well?"

"It's done." The man said simply, his voice gruff. "I lost fifteen of my men doing it though, we were attacked several times by bands of smallfolk. But we were able to find them all." Nearby Varys frowned, wondering what that was about and fearing he had an all too accurate idea.

"Good, I'll double the agreed upon payment for this Gaunt, you have my word." Cersei said earnestly, now smiling slightly. She waved him off, and Detmer left the room without another word.

About an hour's anxious waiting later Lord Pyle came in, going to one knee before the queen creaking in his armor. "Enough of that!" She snapped. "What has happened? Where is my brother? Has there been any news about my daughter?"

"Your daughter? Majesty, I haven't heard anything about the princess. Ser Jaime was injured your Majesty, he is with the healers right now. It isn't serious." He said quickly, looking up at her face which had started to go white, "But it was extremely painful. Several cracked ribs, and a large cut that needs stitching."

That caused Cersei to breathe a sigh of relief. Jaime had such injuries before after all, and he pulled through easily enough. "Very well, if Jaime is alright and you don't have anything to tell me about my daughter, tell me what has been going on in the city. When can we expect Lord Stark to be brought before us?"

The man gulped. "Lord Stark escaped my lady. We were winning the battle, Ser Jaime had finally pinned the traitor down in the warehouse district, but Lord Stark had more men, men we had no idea he had, in reserve. All of them wore House Manderly colors. They hit Ser Jaime's forces and it was only my arrival with my force of gold cloaks that saved the day. Even so they were able to win through to the ports and boarded a ship, which put out to sea immediately."

At those words Sansa felt both elation and despair. Elation that her father had gotten away. Despair at what it meant for her.

"And Lord Stark escaped!?" Cersei said her voice rising with each word as Joffrey scowled, clenching his hands.

"S-sorely wounded, your Majesty." Lord Pyle hastened to say, shrinking in on himself. He was a middle-aged man, who was rather submissive in personal confrontations. It was well known he spent so much time in court because he wished to stay away from his wife, and he reacted visibly to the female voice of anger. "Lord Jaime fought him sword to sword, and nearly took his head. I, d-doubt that he'll live through his wounds. He's not a young man anymore after all."

Cersei's eyes narrowed that last comment, since she was only three years younger than Ned, but she ignored it for now. "Still he escaped. And the Blackfish, what of him?"

"Went with them your Majesty, uninjured, so far as I know." Lord Pyle replied, wincing.

Cersei leaned back sighing faintly as she rubbed her forehead right above one eyebrow. *I do not share this belief that Ned will die by his wounds. So there will be at least two who know about the fact that Joffrey is not Robert son. Will they be believed if they declare it? Please, this is the oh-so **honorable** Lord Stark, of course his own Lord's will believe him, and others.*

With a wave of her hand she dismissed the man, while Joffrey turned to glare at Varys. "Well eunuch, what do you have to say? Stark having more men that we didn't know about, it sounds as if your little birds have failed you."

"I have no excuse your highness." Varys said, bowing his bald head. "I have no idea how Lord Stark could have kept such a force secret, but will assign several of my agents to look into it."

Of course, many of his informers were child whores, and if men didn't visit them, the number of agents he had in the city fell sharply. Worse, very few of them could discern the difference between a Valeman and a Northerner's speech.

After ten more minutes, Petyr returned, having turned over the duty of working with the gold cloaks to Ser Balon Swann, a knight of the Stormlands House of the same name. He was a tough, tested young man, well thought of by his peers, who had stayed out of the conflict that had suddenly roared through the city only because he couldn't tell which side to believe. Now that the battles were dying down however, he would willingly do his part to restore order and law.

The queen filled Petyr in on what Lord Pyle had told them, then looked at her two 'advisers'. "Is there any chance we could send a ship after Stark?"

"I'm afraid not your majesty. None of the Naval galleys in the city have responded to our orders from the start, and I received a report just before returning to the Red Keep that all five of them have pulled up their anchors and have left the port." Petyr replied apologetically.

Again the feeling was real, though only the tip of a hate-filled iceberg. *How did Eddard survive! Damn it!* His vengeance against House Stark had not gotten off to the start he had hoped. After a moment's reflection though, he felt this might be the best in the long term, a whole House Stark would be able to weaken the Lannisters further so both could be finished off easier.

"I too do not think we can count on hope that Lord Stark dies of his wounds. We must assume that he will live, the question is what will he do? There is the King Beyond the wall pulling away much of the North's strength, nor can the North field a large force even at the best of times." Varys murmured, one perfumed hand tapping his baby-bare chin. "The North may be large, but it is also sparsely populated, and their roads are abysmal."

"Are you an idiot, or merely incompetent?" Cersei scoffed. "If Lord Stark declares that my son is not legitimate as he **claims**, there will be fools who believe him for their own reasons. Stannis for one, he has always hated the fact that Robert had sons removing him from the line of succession. Renly for another, he's ambitious as well, and would leap at the chance to name himself king."

Joffrey twitched at that, as did Sansa. Neither of them had heard that before. Joffrey had merely been told Lord Stark had wanted to reign as regent rather than allow him to take the crown, which had been more than enough for him. Now rage filled him at the very idea of someone thinking Robert wasn't his father, the very idea was ludicrous! Sansa on the other hand was now doing her best to seem invisible, not wanting anyone in this room to realize she was still there.

"We need to battle rumor with rumor your Majesty, spread the word that Eddard is connected to the Targaryen siblings possible return. And we need to prepare our forces." Petyr replied.

Cersei nodded. "I will send word to my father. I have no doubt that he already has forces in place to combat the 'bandits' around the borders between the Westerlands and the Riverlands. He can march into the Riverlands, and with an army already in their territory and with Edmure in our custody, the Riverlanders will not rise against us. I can also send messages to the Crownlands calling their men up."

"We could send to the Vale and have them attempt to run the ship down, it might be possible though I don't know how likely." Petyr said hesitantly.

"Unless you have connections I don't know about, that's not likely." The Master of Whispers said dryly. "The Vale might have a small fleet, but with it's Lord Paramount dead and Lyssa Arryn acting so irrationally since her husband's death, I doubt she would listen to any orders from us, or that her lords who have ships would listen to Lyssa in turn."

Cersei scowled, rubbing her forehead even harder as she felt a headache coming on. She looked over at the drinks cabinet along one wall, then resolutely turned her back on them. She would never fall to the drink that as Robert had, and she needed her head clear now.

Turning back, her eyes flashed over Ser Trant and Blount, the two Kingsguard who hadn't gone with their commander into the city. Cersei decided then that she needed to do something with the white cloaks. *Both in skill and loyalty* she thought to herself coldly. *I know that they are loyal, but loyal to my son and I, or loyal to their positions and the money that my family has paid them. Men bought like that can be bought again, I need to remember that. They've been useful up to this point, but there are enough empty slots now that I can find men of ability and honor to fill them rather than just bought swords. Something to talk to my brother about later.*

"So you're just saying we have to let the traitor get away free like this!" Joffrey said, smashing his hand down on the table, like a child having a tantrum.

Petyr spoke before Cersei could. "He's already escaped your highness. We have no ships to send after him, none of the navy will answer to us. We need to deal with the reality of this rather than our anger at it."

"Find whoever should have discovered that Stark had this extra force on hand, I want them executed! Them and whoever was in charge of the battle that allowed him to get away."

"Your uncle was in charge of the battle in the city." Cersei said coolly looking at her son, who quailed slightly under eyes, though not as much as he once would have. "He nearly killed Lord Stark personally, but he could not do everything." She looked back at Varys. "I agree that the lack of intelligence is something that needs to be addressed, though that is a conversation for later."

"What do you think of this, Sansa?" she asked looking over the girl, her eyes narrowed. "What do you think of your father's accusations?"

"If my father has been led astray by someone as to spread such rumors your Majesty, then he has indeed turned traitor." Sansa replied, keeping her voice level and not meeting anyone's eyes. "I, I cannot predict what his actions will be now."

Cersei smiled internally. The girl was good, but you could tell that she was distraught, and didn't know what to believe, really. That didn't matter, she would still be a good bargaining tool. "Very well, one of the servants will show you to Myrcella's room for now. Until this conflict is resolved, you will remain a guest of our hospitality."

The girl curtsied her way out, still shocked and numb at what had happened. Joffrey however was still furious that Lord Stark had escaped and decided that Sansa needed to pay for her father's perfidy. He bowed to his mother. "I trust that you will be handling things in the city mother? When can I expect to be crowned?"

Cersei smiled at her son fondly, for the moment forgetting her concern for her daughter's safety. "Tomorrow my little lion. You may retire now, you'll have a busy day starting early." He nodded to her, then left quickly, but he did not head to his room.

As the door shut behind her son Cersei turned to Petyr, her eyes narrowed. "You mentioned Lord Stark backing the Targaryens twice now, is there any reason behind that accusation?"

"I knew Catelyn Tully when we were young Your Majesty. When I learned from Ranma that she had welcomed a bastard into their family, it got me curious, though at the time I couldn't put my finger on why. She is a proud woman, so to allow her husband's baseborn bastard into her house... While she would not argue against her husband's decision if he was honor bound to take him in, she would certainly **not** make the boy welcome. Yet that seems to be the case. It has taken me months of research, but I have determined that John Snow might not be who he seems to be. I am waiting for evidence of that before saying what I suspect but..."

Petyr shrugged eloquently. "And it is fact that both Ranma and his father seemed to place more value in bringing the Targaryen siblings back rather than killing them. Yet their deaths would've been better for the kingdom as a whole."

Cersei frowned thoughtfully, wondering what to do about that. She could see what Petyr was insinuating, but proving it was another matter. "I've seen the boy, he's pure Stark. There is **nothing** of house Targaryen in him, if that is what you are implying."

"There doesn't have to be your Majesty, and it doesn't have to be believed by Lord Stark's people, or even those who would side with him for their own reasons, but our own people and that of Stannis and Renly."

"True. Very well, prepare proclamations to that effect, and send out men to find Ser Barristan and my daughter!" Cersei snarled the last sentence, getting worried every minute that Barristan didn't burst in with her daughter with him. "Leave me!" she shouted, looking at both men, before falling back into her seat.

She rubbed her face wearily, letting her concern and fear for her daughter show now that neither of her so-called advisers were there. She knew what happened in this city at the best of times, and was deathly afraid of what could have happened to her daughter in this time of chaos.

Just then there was a sound of booted feet outside. Cersei quickly straightened up, her face hardening into her normal expression of cool hauteur. Ser Barristan walked through the door, his normally resplendent white cloak and armor splattered with blood and soot, his helm gone, and a cut on his cheek. Ser Moore was not with him, nor, to Cersei's rising fury, was her daughter. "Where is my daughter!?"

Ser Barristan had faced more than one angry royal in his time, but he had rarely stood before one to report failure,

and it galled him to do so now. He was more angry however at some of the things that had been shouted at him when they went through the city in search of the missing princess. "Your majesty, I regret to say we lost Ser Moore and several others, including Lancel. He was struck down in one of the fights we ran into."

Cersei waved that off, glad she wouldn't have to pay her cousin in the coin she had promised, having no family feeling toward him at all. He had been useful, but his lust toward her, which he had fondly thought was love, had been disturbing, despite her ability to manipulate it. "I'm sorry for the losses of course, but where is my daughter, Ser Barristan?"

"We were able to find smallfolk who were willing to tell us they had seen a small party of the Hand's men and two girls with a white cloak. We found Ser Oakheart, dead, your majesty, his head was caved in by something, along with three other men wearing Winterfell colors and over a dozen smallfolk who were armed with various weapons. After that, we questioned several sailors from the ships in harbor who had forted up told us they saw someone matching Myrcella's description boarding the ship."

Cersei's bit her lower lip so hard it bled.

OOOOOOO

Sansa sighed to herself looking around Merry's room. She'd had quite a lot of fun times here, but she knew that time was over. *I hope she's all right* part a part of Sansa thought to herself, while the rest was too busy with self-pity and recrimination to have much room for anyone else's problems. *How did this all happen? Why do they think my father would tell such lies?*

*But, another part of her mind said, is it a lie? If Joffrey really is illegitimate, then he isn't the heir to the throne, he isn't the Prince, he isn't even a lord. Baseborn bastards cannot be heirs. If so, your father was in the right, not that it matters now. You might be forced to marry him anyway.* A thought that even yesterday had been her fondest joy was now revealed to be a nightmare.

Sansa sighed, pushing that thought aside as she contemplated the number of men that had died to this day, many that she had known all her life. She would never see Ser Jory again, never see mister Vayon smile at her like a proud grandfather, or even the younger men of the guards. Never hear about their latest training practice, never see them bow to her as they did, with smiles and their eyes and on their faces back in Winterfell, never hear them call her 'the little lady' again or laugh as they tried to vie for a scarf or something else she had made. Never be scolded again by the septa, which hit her harder than nearly all the rest.

Tears welled up in her eyes again, and she brushed them away quickly. She sighed looking down at herself, then decided to get ready for bed, it was late, and it had been the longest day she could ever imagine. She needed sleep.

Behind her the door abruptly banged open, and Joffrey, Ser Blount and Ser Trant came in. Sansa quickly held her bodice which she had been about to pull off back up to protect her chastity, and squeaked "M-my Lord?"

It was taking all her self-control not to shriek at them, but Sansa knew that wouldn't help matters. She had to stay calm, had to play the dutiful fiancé. She needed to try to appeal to Joffrey's good nature rather than the 'Baratheon' anger that seemed to have risen within him since this all began.

Joffrey smiled thinly stalking forward, his eyes alight with eagerness. "You know, your father might have escaped, but someone has to pay for his crime. And if I can't get to him, well you'll have to do." His hand flashed out catching her in the mouth and sending her to the floor.

Sansa cried in shock, holding one hand to her cheek cursing the fact that she her hold out knife had been taken from her. The sight of the two Kingsguard members laughing at her pain drove that thought out of her mind though. Even if she could have protected herself against Joffrey, and she wasn't certain she could have, the two of them would've dealt with her easily enough.

Above her Joffrey wrung out his hand, wincing, then smirked. He clicked his fingers at Ser Trent. "Blount, hold her down, and you Ser trent, I want you to flog her until I say to stop."

The men did so, and Sansa, tears once more threatening to fall from her face, simply let them position her for the flogging. A deep wellspring of anger however had begun to make itself known however, and even exhausted she had decided she would not allow Joffrey the victory of seeing her tears. The men jeered at her near nakedness, but she kept her eyes closed, concentrating on not crying.

The flogging went on for several minutes, leaving large, painful welts on her back and shoulders when it was interrupted. "This is unseemly Your Highness, said a stern voice from behind them.

They turned to see the door open again and Petyr there with Sir Barristan. Barristan looked weary, but his eyes were hard when they flipped over his fellow Kingsguard, and both men flinched, backing away.

The older man sneered mentally. *Paper shields*, he thought sarcastically. *Jaime's the only one amongst them who could fight me, even now I could cut through the rest like they weren't even there.*

Barristan walked forward before the other man could holding out a hand towards Sansa who took it and was helped to her feet, while her other hand again held her bodice up.

The Master of Coin looked over at Joffrey. "This is an unseemly way to treat your wife-to-be your Majesty, or has that changed since I last heard?"

Before Joffrey could speak he went on in a soothing tone. "Moreover, we have just learned that the princess has been kidnapped by the Starks, no doubt they will use her as a hostage for our good conduct of this lady. Your mother would not be pleased to hear that you did anything to Sansa that could cause the Starks to hurt her daughter in turn."

Joffrey ground his teeth angrily at that. *First Tommen, now Myrcella, both of them thorns in my side! Why can't mother see it any longer, I'm the heir, I will be king tomorrow, I'm the only one that matters!*

Yet he had enough self-control to know his mother wouldn't take lightly to that, and may even be against him beating Sansa at all considering his father's treatment of her at times. "Very well" he said angrily looking at Sansa. "So long as this one knows her place I won't do more to her." A sudden thought occurred to him and he smiled evilly to himself. *Not physically at least.*

With that he stalked off followed by his two cronies, leaving Barristan and Petyr there. "My thanks my lords." Sansa nodded to them both, still leaning on Barristan's hand. "You are a true knight Ser."

"I'm no longer certain of that as I once was lass," he murmured shaking his head. "You need a healer?"

Sansa nodded weakly, and Barristan quickly moved to the doorway to call for one. Once the older man left Petyr moved over quickly to whisper in Sansa ear. "Keep on playing their game for now, I may be able to manage your release from this hell eventually."

Sansa looked up at him, her eyes a little colder then she would normally have allowed them to be. "And why would you be helping me Ser?"

"Your mother and I were good friends when we were younger. In her memory I would not let her daughter be treated in such a manner." Petyr replied smoothly.

Sansa nodded, seemingly taking in his words wildly inside her head she screamed, *If you were such a good friend to mother why did you help the Lannister's against my father?! Do you take me for a fool?* On her face however she simply smiled and said. "Then I will try to keep from letting Joffrey get to me and wait for that day."

She shivered a little as Petyr gently stroked her cheek, something about it sending a stab of panic deep into her mind, but she remained still as he did so before bowing his head again and exiting the room. Sansa shivered again. *Enemies all around me, and not a friend in sight. Lady, I should've treated you better my brave wolf, Jeyne, what have they done with you?* Now alone a Sansa fell on the bed sobbing, and was still sobbing when the healers arrived to see to her bruised back.

OOOOOO

Cersei had been correct that Joffrey would have a very busy day the next day. He was crowned that very morning. The Queen wanted that done as soon as possible to further strengthen their hold on the throne. She had also sent out a raven late last night to her father, detailing the events in the city, though not detailing the rumors that Ned had begun about her for children being illegitimate. It would come to Tywin's ears eventually, but with no evidence to back it up, he would never believe it, simply seeing it as a ploy for the Starks to seize power.

She had detailed the action in the city, as well as their capture of Edmure, and asked him to march into the Riverlands to make certain that they would not rise in war, as well as warning him about how Stannis and Renly might react. Renly had escaped the city unfortunately, well before she had even sent out Ser Gaunt, and Stannis already seemed to have plans in motion.

Cersei knew that her father already had an army, not a large one but still an army on the border waiting to crush the force sent against the so-called 'bandits', so his move from there into the Riverlands wouldn't take long. His arrival here in the city however would take months. Until then they would have to do what they could to bolster their defenses.

From her position at the bottom of the dais with the Iron Throne Cersei smiled thinly as she watched the crown set gently on her son's head feeling pride in her boy. Her daughter not being here was like a hangnail worrying at her mind, but at least her son was now king as he should've been. She wouldn't have cared which son, but Joffrey was her personal choice, and it was good to see it happen.

The courtroom wasn't as full as normal, even in comparison to the days leading up to Robert's death, but everyone there cheered and clapped as Joffrey stood up from the throne wincing occasionally from the cuts the swords had given him. The thing was more of a torture device than a throne really, all those blades would nick anyone who sat there, making certain that no king could sit comfortably.

With the actual ceremony over however Joffrey could transfer to a much more comfortable seat at it's base and he did so now. "Now, to business" he said clapping his hands and smirking. "I believe we have warrants of treason to sign? I know we talked about it last night, but could we try at least to catch up to Lord Stark?"

Petyr shook his head from where he stood nearby, moving forward with the other small council members as the rest of the court tears slowly dispersed. "We have no naval assets to do so your Majesty, we could ask some of the merchant captains, or even take them over, but I don't have any idea if we could catch up to them. Not with a full night's head start, and besides..." he shrugged. "We have no one who has any experience in naval combat."

"We need to bolster the gold cloaks and the Kingsguard." Cersei said quickly. "We lost several more members of the Kingsguard, and we haven't even filled the place that we lost in Winterfell."

At the mention of Winterfell Joffrey smirked. Not being privy to the messages that Ned and Cat exchanged every month he had no idea that his little mission there had failed. It was a pity, he reflected that he couldn't have told his father about it before the man's death, perhaps that would've made him proud of Joffrey. After all, what was the difference between hunting and sending in assessing? Joffrey couldn't see it.

"Actually speaking of the Kingsguard, I have an announcement to make. Uncle." He said looking over at Jaime.

Jaime was looking a little pale, his ribs were hurting something fierce, and the cut to his back had painful to sew together. Still he stood there in his armor, resplendent in his armor.

"Sir Barristan." Joffrey went on looking at the older man. He too was resplendent, standing ramrod straight, his eyes watchful. Nothing in his manner hinted that he was still quite tired from last evening's work.

"You have served the crown faithfully for years, I feel however that it is time for a change and that you have earned your retirement." Joffrey smirked. "I release you from your oath to the Kingsguard, you may go. Uncle, you are the new Kingsguard commander. I would like to see it be brought up to full strength within the week."

Jaime nodded his head, not trying to hide his shock. The Queen too frowned. Yet a part of her also whispered that Barristan had failed her, not being able to bring home her daughter last night. Because of that, she stayed silent.

Barristan ground his teeth. "You cannot dismiss a Kingsguard, we serve for life your Majesty." He said making the words ironic in a way that made Joffrey's eyes narrow.

"You serve at the king's pleasure" he smirked at the older man. "You have failed two Kings, and you don't seem to be as enthusiastic about my rule as I would've liked. Therefore you may go. Begone." his smile thinned abruptly "Ser Blount, Ser Trant remove his cloak."

"Don't bother." Barristan snarled backing away stood one step his hand going to his sword. He stared at the three surviving members of the Kingsguard, shaking his head. "The Kingsguard has been going downhill since the Aerys died." he said glaring hard at Jaime. "Be it by oath or by skill or will, none of you are worthy of the cloaks you wear. I could cut you all down here and now, and bury this sword in your heart false King." he said staring hard Joffrey.

The Queen growled angrily, surging to her feet but was mailed to her place by a stern look from the older man. "You're not worthy of that crown you wear, but I'll be damned if I'll let your to puppets here take my cloak." He pulled it off himself and threw it at the King's feet. "There it is, the rest." He said tapping the armor he wore. "Well, that stays with me. Call it a trade for my back pay if you want."



"So dramatic!" Joffrey said internally grinding his teeth but he knew that with his uncle injured the older man actually could go through with that threat. Trant and Blount were loyal, at least to the coin, but they weren't actually very good, even he knew that, hence why he had liked it when his mother found the Hound to serve him. "I suppose we can allow you your dramatic moment, but do remember to be gone from the Red Keep within an hour. After that," and his smile thinned again. "You will be detained at our pleasure. You've spoken your piece, just be thankful that we don't name you traitor with Lord Stark."

Barristan Selmy, the oldest serving Kingsguard, the last survivor of the last kings guard, sneered at that, then left without another word. Where he would go or what he would do he didn't know just then, but he first wanted to get out of this cursed city.

After the man left, Cersei turned to her son. "While I agree with the appointment of my brother as commander, it was foolish to dismiss Ser Selmy entirely like that. Ser Barristan adds credence to anyone naming himself King, he is seen as the one of the most honorable knights in all of Westeros, and is a extremely capable commander."

"Then we will have to see that he doesn't declare for anyone else." Joffrey smirked and looked over at Petyr. "Send some gold cloaks to see to that would you?"

Inside his head Jaime rolled his eyes, questioning his 'son's' intelligence at this point. Sending gold cloaks against Barristan Selmy was like setting so many sheep on a bear, it just wouldn't work. Still with his own wounds he wasn't about to go after the old man. He would've liked to, Jaime would've really liked to. Barristan was another man who could give him a hell of a fight, but with his wounds he knew he would lose at the moment.

With that taken care of and nodding her head at her son's forethought the queen went on to other matters. "Returning to the matter at hand, the gold cloaks as I said, need to be brought up to full strength and then some. We also need to send to the nearest crown lands Lord's, and tell them to start mustering their strength. We are vulnerable here with our losses in yesterday's fighting, and..."

OOOOOOO

It was early afternoon when Sansa was roused from her rather torpid sleep by a maid knocking on the door. "Your grace, his highness requests your presence within the hour. I am to help you prepare."

Sansa groaned opening her eyes and looking around, feeling a vague moment of disorientation despite the somewhat familiar environment as the memories of last night clouded through. "Very well," she said frowning as even talking made the wound on her face hurt, and she just knew moving would be painful. "I **will** need help to make myself presentable." she said grimly.

OOOOOOO

Joffrey smiled pleasantly as Sansa was led to him, guarded by Ser Blount. He sat on the raised dais in an area of the keep's open grounds which had been set aside for executions. In front of him was a long table, on which sat seven plates, with a piece of red cloth covering something on the middle most plate.

Normally executions would happen down at the prison, where the smallfolk could gather to see justice being done, but his mother had vetoed that. The city right now simply wasn't safe. Still, she hadn't told Joffrey he couldn't have his fun. She was too busy organizing the gold cloaks and sending messages to the Crownlands lords, so didn't really care what her son was doing so long as it didn't make her tasks any harder.

"My Lord," Sansa said curtsying formally to him.

"Ah my dear fiancé." he said waving his hand to indicate she should sit in the chair next to him, smiling slightly. "I trust you had a good night's rest?"

"Yes my Lord." Sansa said, bowing her head once more respectfully.

Joffrey peered closely at her face smiling evilly. He could make out the faint marks on her face from his initial blow last night, but Sansa and the maid who had helped her head done a decent job trying to cover it up. Good, it would hardly do to make people think that the girl had been abused after all, rather than simply... chastised in her father's place.

"May I ask why you have sent for me, Your Highness?"

"Ah but I so enjoy your company." Joffrey said taking her hand in his. He loved the small tremor that went through her

at that, it made him smile even wider. It was so **good** not to have to wear his mask any longer. Now he could act as he should've acted all along, as a true King should, taking what he wanted and punishing those that opposed him.

"Your here to see justice done my dear." he went on. "I told you last night that someone had to pay for your father's crimes. Who better to start that process with than the men we captured?"

Sansa's eyes widened in horror at what she was about to see, and for just a moment she contemplated trying to kill Joffrey right there.

But the sight of the two Kingsguard right behind them dissuaded her. She watched horror stricken as several of the men that Joffrey had taken captive were put to death in front of her over the next hour, starting with Ser Willowtree, who had surprisingly been taken captive, the first to die.

The knight showed no fear nor remorse when he was led to the executioner's block. He simply stared straight ahead, his eyes flicking over Sansa for a moment, a faint smile on his lips at seeing her still alive, before he stared with loathing at Joffrey. He continued to do so until Ilyn Payne, the royal executioner, took his head. This seemed to embolden the others, who all went to their death with the same amount of bravery.

It was all Sansa could do to not break her vow of not giving Joffrey the satisfaction of seeing her cry. Nor did it get any easier. By the end of the hour Seven men had been put to death.

Each head was placed on the plane in front of them, three on either side of the plate that already held something. Joffrey said pointing at them, a wide, almost gleeful smile on his face, as his hand reached for the cloth covering the middlemost plate. "This is what will await your father unless he renounces what he has said of me along with his title."

He pulled back the cloth and Sansa couldn't stop herself from crying out in denial. On the plate was Jeyne's head, her face a rictus of horror and pain. She could feel the tears running down her cheeks, but she couldn't stop them, this was the final straw, and her heart could take no more.

Joffrey laughed then, reaching out to touch Sansa's cheek. She couldn't stop herself from flinching away as he touched the mark on her cheek. "This is what awaits anyone who becomes my enemy my dear, you would do well to remember that. I would hate for your head to join them."

With that Joffrey stood up and left waving his hand to the guards who took Sansa back to her room where she collapsed sobbing.

OOOOOOO

Ranma frowned, staring hard at the flag flying from a ship passing about forty leagues away from them from where he was standing next to the steersman. He could barely make out, but... "Make for that ship." He ordered pointing at it.

Daenerys standing beside him looked at him quizzically. "We're almost within sight of King's Landing, why are you so interested in that ship?"

"Because it's flying my father's flag, and there is only one ship in King's Landing that would fly that flag. And only a few reasons why it would be." he added grimly.

Ranma ordered Fenris to join him at the front of the caravel clearly visible to anyone with a spyglass. Soon enough his ship was spotted from the other deck, and they could see him soon after that. The two ships made for one another, and Ranma smiled as he saw uncle Brynden waving at him, though he wondered where his father was. An icy shiver of fear shot through him at that, but he pushed it to one side for now. "Ahoy there!" he shouted waving one hand at his uncle.

"I see you've returned." Brynden said calmly when the two ships came close to one another, his voice not giving any hint as to what had occurred in King's Landing just yet. "Successfully?"

"Well, half successful." Ranma gestured to where Daenerys was standing well behind him, her dragons on her shoulders. She stepped forward imperiously, her hair flying in the wind, to smile across at the older man. "But you could say this is the best outcome for the North personally, even if there are loose ends out there." Ranma said dryly.

Soon enough Ranma and Daenerys stood on the deck of the White Harbor ship. Ranma said formally. "Lord Brynden Blackfish, be known to Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. The little ones on her shoulders are Sunfyre and Rhaegon. Don't get too close to them, unless you wish to lose a random chunk of flesh."

"I wouldn't dream of it..." Brynden said, his normal calm intelligence deserting him for a moment at the site of the magnificent creatures. There hadn't been a dragon sighting in over a hundred and forty years, and now there were two little dragons sitting upright as proud as cats on the Targaryen girl's shoulders. He shook himself after a few moments of staring looking at both young people.

Brynden could see things other people missed, often coming to conclusions that would take other people several minutes of observation, and he could tell almost immediately that these two were interested in one another. It was in how close Ranma stood to Daenerys, how he seemed unconsciously to be standing between her and the crew who were all gaping at Daenerys, how at home the little dragons and Daenerys were with him being so close.

It was in how Daenerys looked at Ranma as he did the introductions, not at Brynden, the way she smiled, the way their hands gently brushed. *Good grief, they are besotted with one another. I wonder if this is a good thing or bad in the long term, especially with what occurred here.*

"Nevermind my story, what's happened here?" Ranma said looking around at the *Fish's Scales* and the men, both sailors and armsmen, who were watching them. He frowned, not seeing any of the men he had known from their bodyguard in King's Landing, not even Ser Jory. "And where is my father?"

That thought broke Brynden out of his momentary amusement at the two young people, and he frowned sadly. "You had best come below..."

OOOOOOO

"He'll live, but that's about all we can say." Brynden sighed, shaking his head as he looked at the bed where his brother-in-law lay. "Merry and Alayaya did all they could, the rest is up to him. If we had a maester here there might be something one of them could do better but Merry's book learning is the only reason he's still alive." The man shrugged though Ranma couldn't see it, too busy staring at where his father lay, unconscious in the bed.

In his lap lay Merry, who had barreled into him hugging him for all she was worth the moment he appeared in the doorway to Eddard's room. Through her sobs and Brynden's calm, purposefully detached words, they told Ranma what had happened in King's Landing. Now Merry was asleep, safe in Ranma's arms, safe in a way she hadn't felt since confronting Joffrey and utterly exhausted from the past two days.

His mind could barely grasp all the changes that had been wrought in King's Landing since he had left. His eyes were wet with unshed tears at the memory of the young boy who he had taken under his wing, the boy who he had become an older brother to, who he would cheerfully have called king in the future. "Tommy dead, open warfare between our house and house Lannister. I can barely believe it..." he murmured. "I know Cersei didn't think highly of the King, but to do this, to commit treason like that!"

"We don't know who she laid with, or what she was thinking at the time, though if she suddenly remarries someone we might have a better idea." But there's no doubt that all three of her children weren't legitimate you're right about that, and Cersei will crown her bastard son king or may already have done so by this point." Brynden replied, speaking quietly so as to not wake up the grief stricken young girl, who was the only reason Ned was still breathing. Whatever else, that act had won his respect, and she was entitled to her rest now.

"And Sansa is a prisoner among them, possibly along with your nephew, my cousin, or he's dead." Ranma frowned heavily beginning to pace.

"Don't forget that Stannis is already readying his forces for war. How the hell did he get the news so quickly?" Daenerys said, from where she was leaning against the wall. She hadn't wanted to intrude on Ranma and his grief or his reunion with the royal girl, though she had felt a stab of mixed anger and jealousy at that. Anger at her looks, which looked far too much like the Lannister butchers for Daenerys' liking. And jealousy at how close she seemed to be to Ranma.

Yet when she looked at Ranma or his father, all she felt was sadness. House Stark might have been instrumental in Robert's victory against her family, but after interacting with Domic, and even further with Ranma, Daenerys had long ago realized that they had no choice in the matter. And her growing feelings towards Ranma had easily buried the little bit of residual anger she felt toward the Starks.

"What are you talking about?" Brynden asked, looking over at her, then back to Ranma.

Ranma briefly explained about the ship that had attempted to board them, causing Brandon's eyes to narrow. "I have no idea how Stannis could get the news that quickly," he said seriously. "We had thought to contact him, but the

king's death forced our hand before we could. But his being ready to move might explain why the crews from the navy galleys didn't take part in the fighting on either side, they would answer to him as master of Ships after all. You're certain that the captain said there was a rumor going around that the king was dead?"

"Positive, he was quite open about it before the battle actually began." Ranma said, not taking his eyes away from his father's face, which was pale and pasty looking, far removed from his normal stern seeming expression.

"That's damn odd, even a raven couldn't travel from King's landing to Dragonstone so quickly, we're only two days out ourselves. How many days ago was this?" Ranma told him and Brynden's frown deepened. "If I have it right, that would be barely a day after, there's no possible way he could've gotten that news so fast."

"No earthly way my lords." Daenerys murmured shaking her head, voicing a thought Ranma had as well, though for different reasons. "Or no way that we know of, but that isn't the most important thing right now at any rate. What we need consider is what we do now."

Brynden smiled at the girl, though other people would have been irritated at her presumption there. "We keep going, we trust to the size of the bay, leave Dragonstone as far on our left as possible when we exit then turn north toward White Harbor. I'm almost tempted to say we should stop in the Vale at some point to spread the word about the queen and Joffrey, but we can't chance it, not with Lyssa acting so irrationally."

Brynden shook his head sadly. "That hurts to say, given my relation to Lyssa, but it's true. She was paranoid before this, she'll be worse after hearing what has happened in King's Landing. No, we need to get home as quickly as possible, to start marshaling our forces, though with Edmure captured, the Riverlands is in a precarious position."

Ranma sighed, gently stroking Myrcella's head where it lay against his chest. He hated what this would do to Merry when they told her, let alone Tommy's memory. Both of them deserved better, but when was the last time the world was a fair place? For now however he kept his mind on something more serious. "We, I can't let Sansa in the crown's custody. She's my sister, who knows what Joffrey would be willing to do to her to get back at us? And even putting that aside, she would be a hostage against our good conduct. I refuse to let that stand."

"Lad, we can't fight our way through the city just to get to Sansa, that's just not going to happen. We need to march back down with an army at our back, that's the only way."

"**We** can't." Ranma said with a small smirk, "but I can."

Alayaya looked up at him one eyebrow cocked from where she had been bathing Lord Starks forehead with water. "What do you mean?" The two of them had only spoken a few words to one another since Ranma arrived. Alayaya not being willing to intrude on Ranma's grief for his father or for Tommy, but his voice was once she recognized, and she was eager to see if her guess was right.

Ranma actually smirked at her. "You know damn well what I mean lady," he said then turning back to his uncle. "I'm not talking about trying to force our way through, I'm talking about sneaking **my** way through."

"It's still too risky. Someone might see you, and alone even you would be overwhelmed Ranma." Brynden said shaking his head. "And even if you could somehow sneak in, there's Stannis to think of now, we can't afford to stay here and wait for you. No, I can't allow this."

"Uncle," Ramos said as he concentrated, "they won't see me." Within one second and the next Ranma had pulled the Umi-Sen-Ken around him, disappearing from their senses for a moment, causing all three to gasp.

OOOOOO

Ranma raced along the shoreline heading towards King's Landing, moving faster than any save Jon could have even followed with his eyes, let alone kept up with on foot. Even Fenris wouldn't have been able to, but Ranma had left him behind on the *Fish's Scales*. This was a one-man job, and Fenris couldn't use the Umi-Sen-Ken. It seemed as if the direwolf simply couldn't grasp the maneuver mentally, despite Ghost having come up with his own, much more subtle version.

Luckily it had been early evening when the two ships met up, but he only had until dawn to get his sister out of there. Once the sun was up, he would be easy to spot carrying Sansa, he couldn't extend his technique to cover her, and even Ranma would have issues if they tried to surround him and shoot him full of arrows.

There was also the concerns about Stannis, Brynden had been right about that. He had told them to give him to dawn, but after that, they would have to pull out without him. But Brynden had no idea how fast Ranma could run. Jon

and the others who had come with Ranma from Hornwood to Winterfell had some idea, but even they couldn't guess that even on that last spurt he hadn't been moving as fast as he could.

Even so, it took him the rest of the evening and well into the night to cover the distance. He spent the time making plans and grieving for Tommen. If his sweat had become somewhat more salty than usual, there was no one around to comment on it.

Sneaking into the city was easy, the gates were always open and the city itself was still dealing with the aftermath of the battles. All the fires had been put out, but people were still leery of going out at night, and the city was rather dead because this. Even sneaking into the keep was not exactly a challenge.

Figuring out where in Maegor's holdfast Sansa would be staying was **very** difficult however and in the end he just had to guess at it. He first tried the guest rooms, knowing where they were on the first and second floors below the royal apartments on the third and figuring that Cersei would want to keep her hostage close and in some comfort, especially if she knew that they knew Brynden had Merry with him. But he couldn't find any sign of her there, forcing him to searching silently from one room to the next, climbing silently along the outer walls of the holdfast to peer into each room.

Surprisingly he found Sansa asleep in a bed prepared for her in what he recognized as Merry's room. The two girls had enjoyed several sleepovers together since they arrived in the city. Yet to find his sister still being treated this well was surprising.

That thought remained in his head until he was close enough to see her face by the moonlight, whereupon he noticed the bruising. Ranma's teeth clenched in anger, but he kept it under control for now. Getting Sansa out of here was a priority, revenge could come later. He knelt by the bedside, quickly covering Sansa's mouth with one hand shaking her gently. "Sansa, wake up."

The girl did, gasping a little but Ranma's hand over her mouth covered that, and the fact that she knew that voice kept her from screaming. She looked to her side, astonished to see Ranma there. He smiled at her he murmured. "I'm getting you out of your little sister. let's go."

Sansa nodded wetly, looking torn between crying in joy and simply crying. She reached out quickly, pulling him into a tight hug, before getting up out of bed while Ranma moved back, watching the door warily. She looked up at him as she changed into a skirt she used for riding, a bit less frilly and more form fitting than most she owned, wincing with every movement. "R-Ranma, they, they killed Jeyne. And, and they k-killed Ser Willowtree, and old Royer! They, Joffrey, he, he made me watch! Why did this have to happen?!" She said, each word louder than the last.

Ranma close his eyes, his teeth clenching even more, his hands twitching with his fury. "I'm sorry you had to see that Sansa, but we don't have time to..."

That was as far as he got before the door opened and the night guard peered in. "Who are you talking to Gah!" He fell back, one of Myrcella's combs stuck in his throat, which Ranma had picked up from the nightstand and thrown at him.

Unfortunately he wasn't the only guard on duty, and the second one didn't bother trying to rush into the room, instead he shouted "Alarm, the prisoner is escaping!"

Thanks to being part of the royal suites, there were dozens of guards nearby even this late at night, including the remaining members of the Kingsguard. Before Ranma could turn back to grab up Sansa, several of them had charged in, swords drawn.

Once they saw who was there however the men hesitated. The story of Ranma's prowess had spread before his utter destruction of the Mountain that Rode, after that the tale had taken on a life of its own. This was only helped by him being here in the first place, here in the holdfast with no one having seen him come in or even known he had returned to the city.

Ranma smirked at their caution, moving into the center of the room staring at the men clustered around the doorway. "Such a pity, I don't see Ser Selmy or the Kingslayer with you, their presence could at least have made this a fight rather than a farce. What happened to the Lord Commander, has he finally realized that serving a dishonorable king is the same as dishonoring yourself? Where is Jaime, I owe him for what he did to my father, or are his boo-boos still hurting him?" He ended in a taunting tone, his smirk turning dark.

The men still hesitated, none of them wanting to be the first to charge forward.

Ranma and glanced sideways at his sister. "Which of these assholes was the one who beat you Sansa?"

"S-sir Trent" she said from behind the bed. She had no desire to show her body to these men, and they had burst through just as she was trying to pull on a vest over her bruised back.

Trent's eyes widened in horror and he tried to move backwards to hide behind his fellows, but it was too late. Ranma took two steps forward, faster than any man there could track, there was a brief flash of steel in the air then he was back where he had stood before, flicking his blade sending blood spattering on the ground.

Ser Trent breathed a sigh of relief, I'm not feeling anything for a moment. Then blood began to seep from his neck, and his head slowly slid off his body falling to the ground in neatly severed bones and all. Cries of horror abounded all around, yet no one stood forward, unwilling to be the first to attack the Stark heir even more now than before. Certainly Blount wasn't willing to, at the other knight's death he looked as if he was going to piss himself.

By this time Sansa had finished dressing. She was sprinting out from behind the bed heading towards the window when the Queen pushed her way through the assembled armymen. She had obviously been roused from bed by the commotion, she still wore her silk negligee, and Cersei's hair was sticking out every which way. Yet her crown was on her head and despite how she must have looked, her eyes were clear and her face composed as she stared hard at Ranma. "Where is my daughter?"

"Your Majesty." Ranma said bowing his head, no irony in his tone. "Myrcella is safe, you should know that I would never hurt her." Ranma paused looking at the mother before him. And right now Cersei was a mother, not the queen. The queen would've been more worried about losing the bargaining chip that was Sansa, the mother was worried about her daughter. And there was something else he needed to say. "My deepest condolences on Tommen's death. Whatever his true parentage I think I might've been proud to call him King, and he was someone I had come to love."

The earnestness of the young man's voice, the fact that his face looked puffy, his eyes red-rimmed in the glare of the armymen's torches, completely disarmed Cersei for a moment. She stood there, lost in her grief once more, sharing that grief with the young man in front of her.

Joffrey had arrived on his mother's heels, and his teeth clenched angrily as he saw his powerful magnificent mother simply standing there when his deadliest enemy was right in front of her. *Even dead you haunt me Tommen!* He yelled angrily, laying about with the flat of his blade. "What are you all doing, take him, he's just one man you idiots! Don't let him escape with my bride!"

Prodded like this, the men in the back pushed those in front forward towards Ranma. He grinned in anticipation but a 'Eep' from Sansa reminded him of his priorities here. "Dammit. Stay behind me Sansa, stay with the window at your back."

The first few men now having no choice raised their weapons and attacked. Ranma's weapons flashed, parrying, blocking, thrusting, killing five men in as many seconds before his katar got caught in one man's armored plate. He cursed, letting go of the blade and kicking the man's body into two of his fellows before pulling his other katar out, hurling it through the press of bodies towards Joffrey.

One man however unfortunately got its way, taking the knife straight to his armored head, flying backwards with the impetus of Ranma's throw. But his furious defense had cleared enough space for Ranma to turn, sheathing his blade quickly unmindful of the blood on it, before he lifted Sansa in his arms. "Hold tight!"

With that Ranma leaped out of the window, ignoring his sister's shrill squeak of fright.

He landed easily on the ground, as the men he had left behind began to shout in shock, having never expected him to jump like that. Cersei knew then that there was even more to Ranma's skills than he had showed, and that he could probably get away. She pushed through the men crowding the window, staring down Hard at Ranma as he switched Sansa to his back, just in case he had to defend them.

"STARK!" She shouted. Ranma looked up at her, as did Sansa, and Cersei smiled sadly, thinking so many what-might-have-beens that she could hardly get the next words out. "Take care of my daughter."

Ranma bowed his head to her. Unlike Brynden or his father, Ranma could see past her actions to the woman underneath, so had no issue with taking her words at face value now, regardless of the fact they would be facing one another across a battlefield soon enough. "I will, your majesty."

With that he turned, racing over the Red Keep's ground with Sansa now clinging to his back like a limpet towards the

outer wall of the keep, not stopping as he leaped up landing on the battlements easily before leaping further out to land in the road leading up to the Red Keep.

Sansa had buried her face into his neck the moment Ranma had switched her position, and she clung even more desperately now despite Ranma having both arms underneath her legs as he raced on. He took to the rooftops occasionally, but the Red Keep couldn't get out the word that Sansa was escaping fast enough to catch up with him and he escaped the city easily, leaving behind chaos and a very worried queen and a furious king.

It was several minutes after they had escaped the city that Sansa finally had the courage to lean away from Ranma. The speed they were moving astonished and somewhat terrified her despite her clinging to Ranma, but Sansa had to concentrate on the here and now. "W-what about the others?"

"What others?" Ranma asked looking over his shoulder at her. He leaned forward to kiss her forehead gently trying to calm her down a little.

Sansa smiled faintly, remembering times when she was just out of her toddler years. When Sansa had hurt herself falling she would cry, which would get her minders attention. If he was watching her, Ranma would kiss her forehead just like that then sing this little ditty about the pain flying away.

It had always made her feel better, but nothing could make her feel better now. Childhood was over, never to return and the horror of what she had seen was still vivid in her mind. "Joffrey captured about a dozen men from the battle in the tower. He, he made me watch as that horrible Payne executed several of them, but there were still more there. And what about cousin Edmure?"

"Uncle Brynden didn't know about the men, but we figured that Edmure had been captured or killed. I'm sorry I never met him, he sounds like he was a good man." Ranma shook his head sadly. "I hate to think about what Joffrey will do to them, especially since I was able to rescue you, but I couldn't have rescued them all Sansa, I only have one back, and *Fish's Scales* can't wait. There're more enemies than just the Lannisters, and we need to get out of Blackwater Bay as quickly as possible. Even this was a risk, but I couldn't let you there."

Sansa nodded sadly, traveling into his back and telling him about what had happened since the battles had taken place. Despite it having only been a single day, it felt like years to her, years filled with fear, horror and pain as she came to see the true Joffrey under his façade.

Ranma ground his teeth so hard it was audible in the nighttime air at what his sister had gone through in just a single day with Joffrey, and vowed that the young monster's death would be the stuff of legends if Ranma ever got his hands on him. But it had been the same problem as when he had rescued Danny, Ranma couldn't protect Sansa and take on an entire castle full of enemy troops at the same time.

"Is it true?" Sansa said after another twenty minutes of silence while Ranma kept running down the shoreline. "Is Joffrey, Merry and even Tommen all illegitimate? That's what they're saying our father was trying to spread around, but no one believes it or at least no one will say they believe it now."

While she had nothing of Joffrey's pleasure for inflicting pain on his victims, Cersei was utterly ruthless. She had shown that in a brutal purge of the city's power structure, getting rid of anyone who might have been tempted to believe Eddard Stark's 'lies'. After only two days of this and the fact the gold cloaks and others were once more able to keep the peace in the city, no one was willing to speak out against her. A true carrot and stick approach, as it were. **{does that make sense?}yes**

"It's true. Our father wouldn't have said it if it wasn't, though I haven't talked to him personally. He was badly injured... he'll live!" He hastened to say as he felt Sansa start to shake, but he's still comatose from his wounds."

Sansa still teared up a little at the thought of their father being so badly wounded, but she kept her mind on what Ranma had said. "Were you telling the truth, is Merry really with you?"

"Yes, and so is Alayaya, though how they got to the docks is a story and a half. Ser Oakheart is dead, as is Mattimeo, both of them fell defending Merry and Alayaya."

"I'm sorry!" Sansa sobbed, clutching at his back now. If only I had gone with them, if only I hadn't been in the Tower!"

"The servants would have still been there, and you would've still had to fight your way through the city. Nor did anything you did affect what happened with our father and his men." Ranma said shaking his head. "Don't blame yourself for everything Sansa. It's true I would've preferred you to see Joffrey for what he was earlier, and yes, it

might have been your presence that made the Lannisters attack rather than try to starve our people out of the tower, but they would still have had the prisoners in the Tower themselves. And our father would still have been wounded, and the battle would still have gone against our forces. Don't blame yourself for everything, don't denigrate our people's sacrifice like that." Ranma said again, staring ahead of them. "Simply know that you made mistakes, learn from them and move on."

Sansa nodded jerkily, falling silent. She simply clung to Ranma's back as he raced on through the night, more tireless than the direwolf that was part of their House's emblem.

To say the crew of the small boat resting on the shore were astonished at Ranma's return was a gross understatement. They had honestly thought that the young fool had been going to his death, not knowing anything about Ranma's special abilities. But they were loyal men of Lord Manderly, and they would obey Lord Stark as their Lord Paramount and Ranma spoke for Lord Stark.

"Damn son," the bosun said shaking his head. "I didn't think ya could do it."

"Your grace" he said bowing his head towards Sansa. "Er, pleased to see you safe and sound, milady." With the hard task of speaking to the noble born lady over with, the man quickly hustled Sansa and Ranma aboard.

"I won't feel safe or sound until were back in the North, Ser," Sansa replied with all the poise at her control. "When I step foot in White Harbor is the moment I will truly be safe."

That made every man there to sit up straight, squaring their shoulders with pride. Ranma smirked a little at how easily Sansa had made her trust in these men plain while also challenging them. "Will get you there milady," one man said as he began to pull on his oar strongly. "Have no fear of that."

Ranma nodded grim agreement at that leaning back and looking up at the stars as the first flush of dawn appeared in the sky. The ship that had tried to take Daenerys away had gotten off lightly, and Ranma was in no mood now to play Mr. Nice Guy with anyone that tried to stop them getting home. If he had to break out some more of his bag of tricks, so be it.

Soon enough they were being hoisted up the side of the *Fish's Scales*. Daenerys was there waiting for them with Brynden, who was shaking his head in bemusement that Ranma had actually pulled it off. Daenerys however was unsurprised, smiling in welcome with Rhaegon on her shoulder. Ranma smiled back, and, as Sansa stared at the slightly older girl in front of her, introduced them.

Sansa was in awe of the dragon princess. Even by the light of the lamps here and there on the ship she could tell the other girl was a rare beauty, and the shimmering of her silver hair was mesmerizing. Then there was the drakling on her shoulder, sitting up as proudly as any cat, yet easily recognizable as a dragon, its wings unfurled slightly behind it for balance.

"Lady Sansa, your brother has told me a lot about you." Daenerys smiled, though it segued into a prankster's smirk after a second. "Mostly embarrassing things it must be said. Did you really try to sew your sisters to her bed when she ripped up one of your dresses?"

Those listening laughed at that, while Sansa went red and began to smack Ranma's shoulder, the ice well and truly broken.

About forty minutes later Sansa was put in the same room with Merry, the two of them sharing the second of only two beds aboard the ship. Daenerys refused flat-out to take it herself, allowing the younger girls to have it. Instead she had a few of the crewmen rig up two hammock for herself and Alayaya. Alayaya had looked a little askance at the hammocks, but resigned as well. Merry was still out of it, not even waking up as Sansa fell into the bed next to her.

The *Fish's Scales* continued on, under full sail as dawn began to break, speeding along as quickly as they could. After settling Sansa down, Daenerys and Ranma removed themselves to watching over Eddard, whose condition had not changed in the hours since Ranma had left.

After a moment Daenerys spoke, her voice low so as to not disturb the two asleep draklings, Rhaegon having joined Sunfyre in the overlarge basket prepared for them in the corner of the room. "I'm sorry this happened to your family. At least I know my family was wiped out because of the actions of one of our own. Your's has nearly been ripped apart simply because it refused to play the 'game' of politics. I also wish I had been wrong that the unity of Westeros was a fiction, barely covered by a lie, but the Baratheon's rule was never going to be stable enough to last, not when it was undermined from within and built on so feeble a foundation."



"I know, Robert was never strong enough on his own to keep the crown, and he wasn't really suited for it either. But I never thought the queen would have done what she did." Ranma actually had hoped that his shows of force, and the rumors about it, would keep a lid on the shifting balance of power, but it hadn't worked out that way. He sighed, slumping against the outer wall of the room, rubbing at his face tiredly.

The two of them were silent for a time before Daenerys asked. "So what will we do now? And how is this going to effect your plans for me?"

Ranma looked up at her, his face amused. She smiled as he reached out to pull at her hair, gently urging her to sit down next to him. "I think we both know my plans for you changed well before we spotted this ship, don't we?"

"So, then what now?" Daenerys asked, her face flushed at the teasing tender note to his voice.

"Now?" Ranma's face firmed up even as he took her hand in his, squeezing it gently. His mind however was all on the business of the moment. "Now, Joffrey sits on a throne that shouldn't be his, Stannis has seemingly declared us an enemy, the Lannisters hold my uncle prisoner, and the Westerlands will no doubt be marching into the Riverlands soon. Now, we travel north, we return my family to Winterfell. Then? Then we prepare for war."

End chapter

Whooh! What a chapter to write out. I hope you all enjoyed the flow of the battle, if not the outcome. Sorry, but there was just no way after Edmure was captured before rallying the gold cloaks that they could win, the numbers were simply too against them, though they came a lot closer than anyone on the other side would ever have imagined, and both sides paid for it.

In regards for the budding romance between Ranma and Daenerys, I've always thought that public perception and the pressures of those around them would hurt any courting going on regardless of the individuals in question. If they didn't have the needs of their families to worry about Margaery and Ranma would have developed romantic feelings rather than friendly ones toward one another very quickly. Beyond the older man Domic, Daenerys and Ranma really had only one another to talk to on this voyage, they were attracted to one another from the start, they had the draklings to bond over, and simply a lot of time to sit and talk with no real ulterior motives. Is Daenerys ambitious? Somewhat, but it isn't the central part of her character, that is her deep and growing love for her draklings, and her desire to make her family a proud, honorable one again. Not the same thing.

For those wondering, yes, Joffrey will die in a spectacular fashion in the future, but right now, he and Viserys are both a sign of what I would call the inevitable escalation of enemy forces to match Ranma's ability and the changes he creates. Magic too will have been effected by his presence, as will be shown in the future when I do some Melisandre scenes (ugh, hate her, just as much but in a different way than Joffrey).

So, the civil war has begun, and the sides are set. What will happen next? And what has been happening up North all this time?

Thank you for reading, and as always please review.

## \*Chapter 9\*: Chapter 9

A moment of silence for the passing of Terry Pratchett. He was an amazing writer, a truly fantastic personality, an inspiration both with his writing and in the rest of his life. The world is a slightly colder, more serious place without him.

I don't own A Song of Ice and Fire, if I did, I would commit seppuku for how long it's taken for me to finish the series. Nor do I own Ranma 1/2, I would have killed Kuno and Genma in Martineqsue ways if I did.

And my flamer is back! Or another one has taken his place, uncertain since they are both guests, though not the sort I'd welcome into my home, ya know. I'm sorry dude, but calling Ranma a faggot for showing human feelings and sympathizing with Cersei's recent loss of Tommen, who Ranma had come to care for as well, despite the battle that occurred between their factions is not what I call a review. Your little hate-blurb has been deleted with extreme prejudice. Let me state now, his sadness over Tommen's death won't stop him from killing Cersei if he has to, he doesn't want to, but he will.

A special shout out to EleazarJ, for answering some of my questions about the expanded world of ASolaF. Thanks also go to Crossfort for taking on the task of beta. Jessolt alas has retired from being my beta, but so everyone should thank Crossfort for stepping up to the plate for this chapter. If you think you are up to spotting small mistakes, word choice issues and other things, PM me please, since I need a specialist in that area both for this story and ATP.

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### Chapter 9: Divided, United

Jaime Lannister rubbed his face tiredly, looking down at the reports that covered the desk he had commandeered in the gold cloak garrison in the Street of the Sisters. He wasn't someone who was naturally good with paperwork but as the senior Lannister Commander in the city it fell to him to reorganize the city's defenses. He had been working on that since Joffrey had promoted him to the position of Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, a task made worse for having to deal with his injuries.

This, along with the dozens of carts devoted to removing bodies throughout the city, had woken Jaime up to the reality of the losses they had taken in beating off the Starks. Nearly crippling losses when you looked at both their supporting houses and House Lannister's own troops. Several houses had even lost their heirs or lords.

Lord Staunton would never return home, nor would **any** of his men. Lord Thorne was also dead, leaving only his second son and heir, a whelp of only ten and two to lead the family, minus the fifteen armsmen who had been with him. House Manning had been gutted, losing both their lord and two younger sons along with forty armsmen. Jaime doubted they would ever recover. Nor were those the only names on the battle's butcher's bill, just the worst. All these deaths would no doubt have political implications in the future, but Jaime would let that in his sister's capable hands.

The Lannister forces themselves had started off with a little over four hundred men in the Red Keep. They had been used almost exclusively against the defenders in the tower, who, they knew precisely having had to remove the bodies had numbered fifty-seven men. The price Jaime's House had paid there was almost worse than the fighting in the city. Ninety-two men had survived that fight, just ninety-two! The Winterfell and Riverrun men had used every trick in the book, and their training, their organization, and their prepared defense in depth had been just as deadly as their blades.

The fighting in the city had killed another hundred and ten men who were nominally under House Baratheon, but had been bought off by Lannister gold or were loyal to Joffrey as heir of the King's Landing branch of that House. Not all of them had died in the small, brutal skirmishes against Eddard's forces, many had been pulled down by smallfolk rioters.

The gold cloaks were even worse off because of that issue and their own civil war. Several garrisons had been shattered in the fighting between factions, with bare handfuls of men having lived through the bloody battles fought in the close confines of those garrisons. Two garrisons had in fact been burned to the ground. The Mud Gate garrison had burned their own barracks as they retreated. Its commander, Ser Jacelyn Bywater had been a staunch reformist and put up a spirited defense before eventually being overcome by superior numbers. That battle had been why Lord Pyle had taken so long to get to him to with the reinforcements. All told, a little less than six-hundred men of their original two-thousand remained.

Worse, his house's practices of paying for loyalty had left them with the dregs, those men who were more interested

in lining their own pockets rather than fulfilling their duties to keep order in the city, which made what would have been a tough job nearly impossible now. The city was not really safe for any of the upper class outside of the richer districts and some other sections that hadn't been the target of much rioting. The rest of the city was pretty quiet, but it was a surly sort of quiet. On the surface the city seemed on the mend, but that was only surface deep, and the Lannisters were even more reviled now than before.

*I know Cersei mouthed the words in that meeting of the council where I was elevated, but I don't think she understands how badly we were mauled. Still, she's done a good job pulling the remaining neutral lords on board, though if we can actually trust them I don't know.*

Those neutral lords were the ones providing much of the stability in the city at this point. They also helped remove the bodies which were burned or tossed in the sea depending on where they were found. But even those nobles who didn't take part in the battle were finding scant welcome among the smallfolk. There was no sign of an outright rebellion, not yet, but the city made Jaime feel like he was standing near Mad King Aerys again; like danger could come at any time with no warning.

He looked up from the piles of paper when the door opened, showing a messenger from the keep. "Ser Jaime, her majesty has asked you to report back to the Red Keep."

Jaime nodded, standing up wincing from the pain from his wounds. They weren't serious, but they would take many weeks to heal fully, Jaime had cracked ribs before this, so knew how quickly they healed, and the slash in his back was debilitating as well, the stitches pulling every time he moved. Still he could walk at least. Soon he was back in the keep, standing before the doorway to the queen's conference chamber, a smaller, but even more opulent chamber than the king's.

He shared a nod with Ser Balon Swann, who was standing guard outside. He was a tried and tested knight, youngish, but grim of face, honorable and a decent blade by Jaime's reckoning. Truth be told, he was easily better than the two Kingsguard who had died since their journey up to Winterfell, and more honorable to boot. He had performed well returning order to the city since the Lannisters won against the Starks thus proving their legitimacy, and Jaime had made him his first appointee to the Kingsguard.

Balon opened the door for his commander, and Jaime's sister smiled at him as he entered. "I have good news brother. We have heard back from a few of the nearest Crownlands lords, they are prepared to answer my call for aid." She scowled a little. "Grand master Pycelle and I nearly emptied the keep of ravens to send messages out to all the lords I wanted to reach including our father and some who I hoped to overawe, but I think it was worth it. Ravens arrived from Rosby and Stokeworth this morning. In total two-thousand, seven-hundred men will be arriving here in a matter of weeks from those noble houses and their minor houses."

She waved Jaime into a seat across from her at the small table. "I want the Kingsguard and the gold cloaks up to full strength before they arrive. We cannot be seen to be weak, these men may be loyal to us since we retain the throne, but I don't doubt that they will just as soon kneel to anyone else who seems strong enough to take the throne from us. Once they bleed for us though they will be tied to our cause."

"That is a tougher job than you might think." Her brother answered, sighing wearily. Jaime then filled her in on the troubles he was running into in that area, listing the number of dead lords and heirs that had fallen in the battle in particular, and also mentioning how the city was still tense.

After a moment Cersei nodded. "I hadn't realized how bad it had been among our allies save in the gold cloaks. Still there is nothing we can do about it now save blame the Starks when the families learn of their losses. Name three more names for the Kingsguard, then concentrate on rebuilding the gold cloaks, and think up ideas for defense of the city. Maester Pycelle will be working on that as well. I'll let Joffrey fill out the rest of the Kingsguard, it will give him something to work on while I..."

The two siblings were interrupted as the door banged open and Joffrey stomped in, his entire body screaming out petulance. "Have we discovered my fiancé and her brother yet?! I want his head on a pike at sundown and Sansa returned to me immediately!"

The Queen sighed while her brother cocked an eyebrow in question. "As I told you this morning my son, there is no chance of us finding Rannar or Sansa. They were out of the city before our message could reach the outer walls of the city. I do not doubt he can run as quickly as that direwolf of his for a time, and I doubt carrying Sansa would bother him at all."

"What's this?" Jaime asked. "I've been neck deep in Stranger-be-damned paperwork since the meeting yesterday,

when I wasn't with the poxy healers. Did something happen last night?" He had been given some sleeping draughts by the healers to help him sleep with his wounds, and had taken to leaving the keep early in an attempt to get as much work done as he could each day, so this was the first time he had heard this tale.

"Ranma Stark snuck in late last night to rescue his sister. He escaped with her, killing eight armymen and three knights including Ser Trant." Cersei replied, shrugging slightly. "Evidently there is much more to Ranma's abilities than we knew. He survived jumping down from the royal apartments to the ground outside the holdfast with ease, and then was able to get out of the keep before our men on watch at the walls could be warned. I doubt they could have stopped him in any case."

"You seem... awfully calm about this sister..." Jaime said, looking at her in surprise, himself being not happy about the fact to have lost yet another of the Kingsguard. *'Even if he wasn't worthy in the first place'* he thought, rather amused. Trend should never have been elevated to the white given his skill set, let alone his moral fiber. *And that's without some of the looks I've seen him give Merry and other young girls, no the world is a better place without him.*

"It is an affront against the dignity of the crown!" The young King growled out before Cersei could reply. "I want my fiancé back **now!** It's impossible for one man to just escape so fast. He must be hiding in the city somewhere and I want them found **now!**"

Jaime was amused to see that 'his son' actually stamped his foot in a fit of pique.

"Yet evidently it can be done, if the person has the skills of a hero from the Age of Legends." His mother replied coolly while watching Joffrey through narrowed eyes. "Ranma could have made it his mission to kill you my son, or any of us, and gotten away with much less fuss than his rescue of Sansa. Ranma is not an assassin, he doesn't think like that."

Indeed the Queen saw his heroism as something to admire, his love of his sister striking her in the heart, as had his grief over Tommen's death which she had seen in his face and eyes. And Cersei knew she could trust him to watch over her daughter. "We have lost a political tool, nothing more, and I know Ranma well enough to know he will guard Myrcella with his life, something the mother in me is thankful for."

Joffrey ground his teeth in rage, knowing now that his mother's acceptance of Ranma's escape had more to do with insuring her daughter's protection than anything else. *Damn it, both my siblings should have died stillborn, it would have been better for the crown if they had. They are always taking attention away from me, and now my mother's love for my sister has clouded her judgment.*

Before he could continue his tantrum however, Pycelle and the others entered the room. The Queen nodded to them all, gesturing at the table to indicate they should all be seated, looking at their expressions closely, but she couldn't tell how they had taken last night's events. Yet Joffrey was not the only one who was mortified and chagrined by Sansa's rescue.

Petyr's reaction to Sansa's rescue mirrored Joffrey's save he felt even more hate and loathing for Ranma Stark. His rescue of Sansa meant that the Master of coin had missed his chance to ingratiate himself with Sansa, which would have been useful on many level. She would have been a perfect wife, a surrogate for her mother who had obviously been so sullied by the barbarian Starks as to enjoy it. Petyr could also have used her to create a connection with House Stark so that whoever won he would be well-positioned to take advantage afterward. Now Baelish had to think of some other way to seem at least neutral in this conflict, or he would be forced to work so that the Lannisters come out on top.

*Face facts Petyr, no one of the Stark's faction would ever believe you had no part in how the battle here went, Petyr thought now. Not unless they were so desperate for aid they couldn't turn anyone offering such away. Eddard and Ranma would have to die first at the very least, possibly Jon Snow as well, all in such a way that the blame was placed on the Lannisters, or simply the random luck of battle. So, how to make that happen...*

The moment the three men sat, Cersei told them her news then looked at Varys. "Do you have any of your 'little birds' in Dragonstone? Stannis will be the first to move against us, he will receive the news of the king first since Dragonstone is only a week by boat away, and he is an ambitious, prideful man."

*And I have some suspicion on who helped Jon Aryn in his initial investigation. Stannis might have known about Joffrey's illegitimacy well before the events in King's Landing.*

Varys looked a little worried, or perhaps the term disturbed came better to describe what his fat, florid face was showing. "I am afraid not your highness. I used to, but they stopped reporting to me about a month and a half ago.

Their last messages all spoke of a woman in red who preached the religion of R'hllor. Apparently Stannis' wife has been converted to it, as have others. The Dragonstone maester is also dead, though the reasons for his death were unknown to my agents. "

"Odd... I wonder why Stannis has allowed this priestess such leeway, he isn't known as religious or tolerant of such." Pycelle mused aloud.

Cersei however smiled thinly. "Inform the High Septon of that would you, Pycelle? I think we can spin that easily to make this a religious matter, and that may force him to open the Great Sept's coffers to fund the defense of the city."

"An excellent thought your majesty." Pycelle responded enthusiastically, a smile on his somewhat fligid face. "We need to prepare the seaward defenses for certain. We'll need to build siege equipment. The walls too, might have weak points, and the port itself needs to be defended. This will all take money, of course, and the Great Sept's coffers are very deep."

"Hmfm." Joffrey scoffed, hiding his fear of Stannis under bravado. He had never gotten along with either of his uncles, not liking how Renly didn't seem to understand how important he was, and he had hated how Stannis looked down on him the few times they were around one another. "We should just take the merchant vessels in the harbor out and meet him. Surely we can pull enough men from the city and the gold cloaks."

"The gold cloaks are a bare shadow of what they were before the battle against Eddard's faction. And even if they weren't there is no chance of us using them as an offensive force." Jaime said, shooting that plan down harshly. "They aren't even as well trained as common armsmen, and you need special training to fight aboard ship. Footwork and working with others in enclosed spaces becomes much more important, things armsmen don't learn normally."

Joffrey subsided for a moment, scowling at his uncle speaking to him like that, but Petyr spoke up before he could fire back, looking at the queen. "Besides appealing to the High Septon, where can we raise more money? Can you use your family's name with the banks in the city?"

"I can for now, though for anything over a hundred-thousand gold dragons I would need to have my father's approval. The bankers will take my word on that approval coming however. But my brother raises a good point. The gold cloaks and our noble allies alone might not be enough to defend the city. We need to garner public support, turn the citizens against Stannis, to get them to throw in their lot to help the defense of the city. The High Septon's backing might help, but we'll need to do more. Varys, we'll use your network to spread rumors about Stannis throughout the city: how he will be a cruel king, how he doesn't care for the common man, this new religion, anything you can think of."

Varys nodded, agreeing that the idea had merit, though for his own reasons. Varys hadn't really wanted open conflict to break out, but now that it had, he wanted all the Lords Paramount weakened, ripe for conquest by his backer.

"Besides Stannis being so close, we have time if we can rebuild the gold cloaks at least on paper. Our father will not receive my missive for five days, but will no doubt move quickly after that. Where does everyone see threats appearing long term? Also Varys, I want to find out the outcome of Ranma's mission. It could prove disastrous if he actually did come back with the Targaryen siblings. Find out if the ship he sailed to Pentos on came back and followed the Northern ship up North, or entered one of the other ports in the Bay." Cersei concluded.

Pycelle smiled thinly. "Before the Starks attempted their coup I received word from some of Lord Lannister's agents in Sunspear. Prince Oberyn has been jailed by Prince Doran to stop him from leading the army of Dorne against us for what they see as the murder of Tyene Sand. This is another sign that the Dornish Prince is too cowardly to pose an offensive threat. The Vale is rapidly disintegrating. Lysa Aryn may be its nominal leader, but she has little to no control outside the Vale of Aryn itself. The mountain clans are nearly in open revolt, and the lords are bickering amongst one another. The Riverlands will not challenge us either so long as we keep Hoster Tully's heir as our hostage. It is to the Reach and the Stormlands we need to look to."

"What about the North?" Joffrey asked indignantly. "You didn't mention them, and it is the North and that Seven-damned Eddard Stark who began this strife along with his son. I cannot understand why we don't simply march north to reclaim my fiancé from her barbarous family, and torch Winterfell as a pointed reminder to the rest of them who their masters are!"

"That isn't really an option I'm afraid." Varys said apologetically, an easy mask for him. "We named Eddard Stark a traitor from the beginning of this conflict. As king, you need to marry to a house that will bring power and prestige to the crown. Marrying a daughter of a traitor would bring neither. Nor could we simply march an army north. It would take months to arrive there with any appreciable force, and they would know of the armies coming well in advance of its arrival."

"I'm afraid he's right my son." Cersei said apologetically. "If Ranma hadn't absconded with her as he had we might have gone through with the marriage, but as it is, no. Instead, I will send a message to lord Tyrell to offer your hand to Margaery, you liked her didn't you?"

Joffrey now felt torn, he had indeed liked the look of the Tyrell girl and it would be great to steal away the fiancé of that cursed northern barbarian. Though she seemed to think she was clever, a failing in any woman really. Even his own mother thought that, and look at the mistakes she was still making because of her female sentimentality. Nor did Joffrey like the idea of giving up anything he saw as his by right, and Sansa was his, there was no doubt of that in Joffrey's mind. *Still, I understand their points, and House Tyrell would indeed bring in a lot of men, men I could use to crush my uncles and then march on the North. But I wonder if there is a way to have my sweatmeat and eat it too...*

"What news of Renly?" Jaime asked.

"I sent two score of my men out to try and detain him, but he was too fast to flee the city for them to find him, and he stayed ahead of our pursuit until they could no longer find the trail." Petyr said, shrugging. "He's no doubt halfway to the Stormlands by now."

"Would he not go to the Reach instead? They could field a larger army, and the majority of his guards at present came from house Tyrell." Varys said. "If so, your offer of Joffrey's hand to the Rose of Highgarden wouldn't be as welcome if they could marry Renly to her instead."

For just a moment the image of Margaery with a crown on her head filled Cersei's brain. She shivered in fear at the idea Margaery might be the young queen from the prophecy from old Maggy that had told her she would outlive all her children and then be replaced by a younger, more beautiful queen.

But then a sudden burst of joy wiped away her fear. *With Ranma protecting my daughter, my sweet little lioness will come to no harm. If she doesn't die, that will invalidate old Maggy's predictions, even after Tommen's death!* "It will still muddy the waters, and may force them to consider other options." She said, then frowned. "I just wish there was something more we could do to make certain the Stormlands would not answer either brother's call to rise against us."

"Now wait a moment." Petyr said. "I think his highness has a point." Joffrey sat up straighter at that, forgetting his own plans and desires for a moment. "I think if we strike quickly against the North, get to and through the Neck before they can get word of what happened here, we would have a much easier time of it later on. Once Moat Cailin has been cleared we can hold it, and then bring in more troops once we finish off our more southern opponents."

Both Varys and Jaime shook their heads at that, but it was Cersei who spoke up. "That isn't an option for many reasons. For one, we don't have an army to send just yet, and it would take months as I said to get an army up there at all. Plus you never saw the work being done on Moat Cailin Littlefinger. It doesn't need reinforcement any longer."

Jaime nodded, shuddering at the idea of going up against the Moat. The Rock might be more defensible, but the Moat's defenses would massacre any army that came against it. "Could we make overtures to the Ironborn? We could have them attack the North in our stead with the promise of more freedom under the crown, or a slice of the Northern pie."

"I wouldn't trust an Ironborn further than I could throw this table," Cersei replied tartly. "We'll need to wait for the Lannister fleet to be in a position to help our forces get around the Neck."

"Then I have another suggestion." Petyr said, smiling thinly. "Why don't you send me on a mission to the Vale? If we can get them on our side it will be a major boon. They might only be able to field a small offensive army, but they have closer ports for an invasion around the eastern side of the North through the Bite, and excellent defensive positions. I also suggest we send messages to House Sunderland. The smugglers of Sisteron can be brought to our side by the promise of gold, and should be able to assault Lord Stark and the Northerners before they reach White Harbor."

The Three sisters were three small islands set in the Bite about two weeks (because of weather and the Bite's sailing conditions, not distance) from White Harbor. It had originally been home to pirate kings, before they grew too bold and attempted to gain territory in the North, which caused the North to invade them in turn. In desperation the 'kings' of the island had bent the knee to the Eyrie of the Vale, and the two kingdoms had gone to war over the islands. The war may have ended a thousand years ago, but the men of the islands still remembered and would no doubt jump at the chance to kill Northmen with crown approval.

"That's a good suggestion, but we won't send you to the Vale, Littlefinger." The Queen scoffed. "You have duties right

here as master of coin. Nor do I see how you could get the Vale on our side, unless you have something to tell us?"

Petyr subsided with a self-deprecating shrug and the meeting continued. Joffrey tried to interject his opinion a time or two, but for the most part was willing to let his mother carry the conversation, which she did fairly well, with Jaime and Pycelle aiding her. Joffrey knew his time would come in battle of course, much like his father before him, so had no issue allowing his mother to take the lead now despite his being king. He would make his name the same way Robert did, by remorselessly cutting down his enemies.

Later that day Joffrey followed that idea by going down to the Street of Steel to buy himself a new blade. Surrounded by a force of fifty, Joffrey still heard the mutters of the smallfolk and one or two thrown bricks impacted his guard's shields. But after killing the one too-brave idiot who threw one, the crowd grew more respectful in his opinion, melting away. Upon arriving at his destination, Joffrey was surprised to find that master smith Tobho Mott had died in the rioting that had spiraled out of the Stark's attempted coup, along with his apprentice, who was already considered a very good smith.

After a moment spent staring at the burned out ruins of the smith's shop, he shrugged, turning away to rejoin his retinue of Kingsguard and Lannister men. He would need to settle for second best for now. He didn't even look at the cart carrying their bodies away. One of the dead bodies was an old man who would have still looked hearty if he had been alive. The other was a young man around the prince's age, with broad shoulders, dark hair and eyes set into a wide face.

The trip back to the castle however was when the crowd began to reappear. It wasn't anything planned or anything like that, it was simply that the news the Lannister king was in the city had spread, and a crowd of smallfolk with more hatred than common sense to put it bluntly had begun to arrive. They began to circle the king's party, tossing refuse, a few bricks and anything else that came to hand. "Down with the yellow king, down with the burners, the rapists! Down with the gold fucking Lannisters!"

Ser Swann urged his horse forward, gently nudging Joffrey's steed behind him. "Your highness, I think you should move back." Balon raised his shield just in time to catch a brick thrown at his head, whipping out his sword. He turned to the rest of the party. "Flat of the blades only, we don't want a bloodbath here." The others all nodded, knowing the real reason, that there were far too many smallfolk for them to break through if the crowd became any more unruly, which it would once blood began to flow.

"What! I am the king, this scum need to be put in their place!" Joffrey snarled. At that moment a wine bottle was hurled over the intervening guardsmen, smacking into Joffrey's horse. The beast shied, but Joffrey regained control quickly, looking around in sudden fear.

"At a canter, make for the Keep!" Balon yelled, charging forward. The throng hadn't crowded them enough to stop their horses from gaining speed, and the front of their column slammed into the crowd blocking their path to the Red Keep easily, laying all around them with the flat of their blades.

The crowd gave way, some fearfully others reluctantly, but with the momentum and size of their warhorses Balon and his men forged a path through the masses for Joffrey. Now that he knew things had returned to the way they should be, Joffrey rode forward at the center of his guards, thinking of how best to remind these uppity smallfolk that he was their king. The same mind that had tortured Sansa now turned its attention onto a larger playground, staring around and noting the faces of particularly loud rioters.

Thankfully for the smallfolk, Cersei well knew they needed public opinion on their side, and curtailed many of Joffrey's excesses in the coming weeks. But eventually, her ability to control Joffrey would fade, and he would begin to earn the name that he would carry to his grave: Joffrey the Vile.

OOOOOO

Elsewhere in the city the former, though he was still getting used to that bit, White cloak commander Ser Barristan Selmy began to hide the bodies of the three armsmen that the Lannisters had sent after him. They had come upon him just as he exited the slums, having stayed at a rundown inn whose owner owed him a favor there. "Of course the little whelp would send someone after me, did they think they would catch me unawares? I'm almost insulted." He shook his leonine head, continuing talking to himself while piling garbage on the bodies, an easy task here in the slums. "Still, that doesn't help me much now. I still need to get out of the city, and then decide where to go..."

Barristan paused as he heard a murmur of voices coming somewhere in the maze of warrens that made up the slums. "I tell ye, the Stark girl's gone! Me mam's a servant at the keep, and she said she saw the stark boy, the one who gulched the Mountain right proper. 'e just 'peared outta nowheres, leapin' up the wall wit' his sister on his back.

An' there were a few deaders bein' dumped outta the keep this morn."

"Bah, yer mam's seein' thins, she been at some lordlin's alc when she were up there? Ain't no way no mortal man could jump 'at far, no way, even the man who un-armed the Mountain. Get it? Un-armed? HAR!"

In his hiding place Barristan frowned thoughtfully. *I've always suspected that Ranma Stark was hiding some of his abilities. How he got into Maegor's holdfast in the first place I don't know, but if he's really returned...* For a moment, he considered all he knew about the Stark heir, then went over that meeting with the small council when he was assigned the mission to find the two Targaryen siblings. *Unless they were truly gripped by the Targaryen madness the Stark boy would have returned with the two siblings if anyone could, and that he returned at all tells me he succeeded in some fashion.*

Yet this brought up another question he had been asking himself since his unlawful expulsion from the Kingsguard. *What claimant for the Iron Throne has the best claim on the throne, and is therefore worthy of my sword?* Barristan stood up, pulling his utilitarian cloak around him, hiding his white enameled armor from view. He stared up at the sky, nearly obscured by the walls of the hovels around him. He stood like that for several minutes then nodded sharply, before striding away purposefully.

OOOOOOO

Ranma and Daenerys woke up the next morning in that same position, slumped against the wall of Lord Stark's room aboard ship with Daenerys leaning her head on Ranma's shoulder as they slept, the two draklings curled up in her lap. Fenris was nowhere to be seen.

Knowing by smell somehow that Sansa was in distress the large direwolf had bedded down outside the girls room, growling at any sailor that came by. Worse, he felt a hollow feeling inside ever since seeing Sansa. Where the connection to his prissy, too domesticated female packmate should have been there was an emptiness now, telling Fenris Lady was dead, though not the manner of her death.

Ranma woke up first and after cracking his neck he looked down at where Daenerys was leaning on his shoulder, a smile playing across his face. Ranma didn't really understand how to describe husband/wife love in words, but after watching Ned and Catelyn he certainly understood what it was. He knew that was what he felt for Daenerys.

He'd felt affection for Dacey, but their friendship was more important than anything else, their physical relationship had simply been an addition to this, and he had willingly given it up when he went south to meet Margaery.

For a moment he felt a spark of guilt at the memory of Margaery, but Brynden had told him that the Tyrells had officially called off the courtship between them, and it had never gotten to the point where he was actually in love with her. From the very beginning neither of them had been able to enter into the courtship wholeheartedly thanks to the pressures of her family's plans and Ranma's desire to remain distant from her. Oh, there had been a moment where he had been very attracted to Margaery when they first met. Then Ranma had seen her flirting with Joffrey, and that feeling had died instantly. Despite that inauspicious beginning they had become firm friends, though Ranma didn't know if that would survive Loras choosing to not support his father in the battle against the Lannisters. Still, Ranma was honest enough to realize their friendship might have become love eventually if they had given more time or didn't have her family mucking things up.

But that feeling was a summer breeze in comparison to the storm he felt for Daenerys and Ranma knew it wasn't simple lust. He respected Daenerys more than he had Margaery for one. He had seen Daenerys at her weakest moment, when she had tried to get away from the magister's mansion. That moment, her glaring around her, using the dragon eggs to shield her chest, still defiant despite her plan coming to pieces around her, was one Ranma would never forget. Margaery had never been tested like that. Daenerys was intelligent too, shown in their conversations over the past month or so, and had a gentle nature under her fierce willpower that was astonishing. That gentleness, the fact she actually cared about people, merged with an incredible amount of charisma, making people gravitate to her naturally.

As intelligent as Margaery, as fearless as Dacey, as kind and strong-willed as both combined, Daenerys Stormborn had taken his breath away over the past few weeks. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, to kiss her every day, to wake up next to her, to talk about their problems together and face any trial that came their way side by side. A feeling beyond anything he had felt for Dacey or allowed himself to feel toward Margaery.

*Now I know what my father and mother feel about one another. Yes, I will marry this girl, my Stormborn lady. She might only bring the dragons but that's a very big only, and...* he frowned thoughtfully thinking of the future. *She'll bring other allies I suppose in the future.*



In Daenerys' lap the draklings began to cheap imperiously for their morning meal, waking Daenerys up. She yawned widely, then mumbled something about her back bothering her before she looked up and realized where she had fallen asleep. Her eyes locking with Ranma's Daenerys smiled up at Ranma, taking one of his hands in hers and squeezing it between them for a moment, leaning up to kiss the underside of his jaw. She smiled a little impishly at Ranma's surprised look of her action, evidently not having expected her to be that playful so soon after they had admitted what was happening between them

Standing up, Daenerys allowed the two draklings to climb up her leggings and her leather jerkin, which had been resized from one of the sailors on the caravel they had been travelling on before. It was a necessity since Rhaegon and Sunfyre both loved climbing up and down from her shoulders for some reason. She idly hoped that Ranma's prediction about them still having that habit when they were larger did not come true, but for now, Daenerys rather liked having them so close.

She stretched her arms from side to side working on her shoulders, accidentally thrusting her chest forward as she did. Daenerys smiled faintly as Ranma watched her, preening a little under his gaze. Exercising with Ranma actually started to put on some muscle on her, and while she would never have thought it given her reaction to being looked at by Viserys or Jorah Mormont, Daenerys positively loved it when Ranma looked at her like that. Where their looks had made her feel dirty, Ranma's made her feel simply desirable.

Unlike Ranma, Daenerys had never been in a relationship of any kind before, but she understood where their feelings were taking her. While neither of them had said the words yet, their affection was out in the open now, and Daenerys saw no need to lie to herself about her growing feelings for Ranma Stark.

Ranma stood up, and reached out to take her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing it lightly before looking at the two hungry draklings. "Let's feed these little monsters then speak with Brynden and the captain." Daenerys nodded with a smile, slipping her hand into his. They left the room like this, leaving behind a smiling Domic to watch over the injured Lord Stark.

They found the Blackfish already awake and talking with Captain Woolfield staring out over the ocean as the ship continued to make its way through the waters of Blackwater Bay. Brynden smiled at them, but his smile froze on his face as he saw the two of them holding hands. Ranma simply cocked an eyebrow at him, daring his uncle to comment but Brynden simply smiled and bowed his head slightly for now.

Eddard had told him about the plans that Renly had come up with to marry the rose girl to Robert to produce some more heirs to the throne, and he didn't doubt that that house would jump at the idea of marrying Renly himself to Margaery, poor girl. So there was no honorable previous engagement in the way, and the draklings on the Stormborn's shoulders were a show of power even the Tyrells would have trouble matching.

"We need to talk about what we're going to be doing." Ranma said bluntly looking at the two men and holding out his hand to clasp arms with the captain. The two of them had greeted one another when Ranma came aboard, but they didn't know one another very well. Woolfield was a house that Ranma hadn't encountered personally, but he knew enough about their history and their loyalty to house Manderly to trust the man. "Captain, how likely is it that we can get away without someone from Dragonstone being able to run us down?"

"It depends on how many ships Stannis can spare milord." the man said with a shrug. He was a medium sized man with a full beard that was turning to gray slowly, though that was the only sign of age. His arms were bare showing heavy corded muscles, and his right hand rested on a belt where a heavy cutlass rested. "They'll know these waters better than us of course, but even though it's called a bay, finding a single ship isn't that easy. Even if they do find us, I didn't lose many of my men before were forced to pull back due to Lord Stark's injury. I have a hundred and forty men aboard fit to fight."

Daenerys nodded. "That's good to know captain. However I think that rather than fighting our way through we need to sneak through. Recall that Lord Stark is indeed down with injuries, and there are women aboard. Any battle can go badly if we are careless." She smirked at Ranma, making him remember the time she had stepped in to direct the battle against the ship Stannis had sent to capture her.

Ranma laughed squeezing her hand before letting it go when she moved over with the draklings to the stewpot that had been brought out for them. It was a heavy meat stew with some mushrooms and other vegetables in there, and Daenerys smiled at the cooks who smiled back looking almost in awe of her.

This was not an isolated feeling towards House Targaryen in Westeros. While the Lords Paramount and the larger noble houses had moved on rather gleefully from the days of the Targaryen Dynasty, the smallfolk and the minor houses still retained their awe of the family, and of their dragons. This would be important in the coming days, though

unfortunately not as much use as it could have been were certain circumstances different.

Watching Ranma watch Daenerys walk off Brynden laughed, clapping the younger man on the shoulder, causing Ranma to look at him. "Your lady mother will be very angry. Catelyn will think that the young lady doesn't bring enough to the table for you to wed her, after all the Stormborn doesn't bring any men or swords or even land, and will bring out a lot of old prejudices among the other powers, plus removing one of your house's largest diplomatic tools. The two dragons might convince her though, we'll see."

Brynden smiled softly at his nephew, already knowing what the two young people felt for one another. Indeed, he had the feeling of, not destiny not quite, but of greatness whenever he looked at the two of them together. "For my part I will simply wish you well."

Reaching out to grab the other man's shoulder in turn Ranma laughed quietly. "Little early for that, but it's definitely a thought in my mind." he said, flushing a little bit. Despite his experience with Dacey, he wasn't actually experienced about actually **talking** about such things, and he moved on quickly. "With Edmure captured, what do you think Lord Tully will do?"

Brynden sighed sadly. "My brother is old, and dying. Even before all this began I didn't think he had more than a few years left, he doesn't have the strength for war. With his heir captured, there will be little he can do."

"How fast can the Westerlanders march into the Riverlands?" asked Daenerys coming back carrying a large bowl of stew from which her drakings were feeding while she walked from the perches on her shoulders. "I confess I don't have as good a grasp of distances in Westeros as I would like, but there's no doubt that Lord Tywin is the most dangerous of our opponents."

"And if word of the treachery of the queen gets out, how will the rest of the lords major react? I don't doubt Stannis has already begun to spread that news considering he knew about it nearly right after the fact." She said tartly, remembering the battle they had with the galley out of Dragonstone coming into the bay. "How will the Riverlands lords react, or the Stormlands lords? As one, or will they be divided? These are questions we need to think about going forward, gentlemen."

"**My** question is how the Freys will react." Ranma said shrugging his shoulders. "They're the family nearest the North, and they're one of the most powerful if not the second most powerful house in the Riverlands. Charging their damned tolls has made them rich, and I remember my mother mentioning a few Frey's had married into House Lannister. Worse, Edmure's helping my father can already be seen as an act of treason by itself, and Lord Lannister and the Queen won't let that stand."

For all his respect for Cersei, Ranma didn't delude himself on what the Queen would be willing to do to protect her son's life or their grip on the throne now that it had come to this. "He could strip Lord Tully of his title, and add their lands to someone else's, though whether that would stick without violence I don't know."

"That, my brother would **have** to fight." Brynden said sadly. "If they go with that kind of maneuver I have no idea what my brother will do but he won't simply bow to their demands. Even if his son's life is on the line Hoster won't allow anyone else to hold Riverrun if he can help it."

"And he's family." Ranma said reaching down to rub one finger over Rhaegon's green-scaled head. "I won't allow my grandfather to fight that fight alone."

Daenerys smiled approvingly at that. Her smile widened as Ranma went on looking at the other two men and then her. "But it won't be a large force. The Neck and Moat Cailin might protect our landward defenses from any invasion coming up from the south, but we are still very vulnerable by sea most particularly by the Ironborn. Worse, winter is coming."

Woolfield chuckled, and Ranma smirked at him. "I'm not just repeating my family's motto. Those words are as true for us as they are true for every other man, lord, knight or smallfolk, and we need to prepare for it. I haven't spoken to a maester recently, so I have no idea how long we really have until winter truly comes, but I've been to the Wall. I felt the cold there, it is coming. And then there's the King Beyond the Wall and other issues north of us we'll have to deal with." Woolfield looked quizzical at that while the other two simply nodded while Ranma went on. "We cannot, **I will not** allow us to neglect the defense of our people. We'll need to help Lord Tully and see justice done for the queen and her family, but our people cannot be the ones to pay for it."

Daenerys nodded, looking at him with shining eyes. *Few Lords indeed would worry about their own people like that, but Ranma does. That tells me more than anything else what kind of a Lord, what kind of a man he truly is. Or*

possibly a thought entered her mind, *what kind of future King he is*. "I trust you would be leading such a force?" Daenerys asked raising one eyebrow.

"Oh definitely." Ranma replied, already thinking of the size and makeup of such a force. Ten thousand men would be the maximum he would allow to be pulled from the ready forces. Ideally he would like to field two thousand light cavalry/scouts, a thousand heavy cavalry, three thousand archers, three thousand heavy infantry and a thousand light infantry, but that was in an ideal world. Ranma knew that would probably be impossible.

Still, that number would certainly let enough force in the North to deal with any normal threat. The fact he would have to go south rather than to the Wall irritated him, but he hoped they had enough time to reunite Westeros before dealing with the White Walkers. "Do we have a map?"

Captain Woolfield went to fetch one and they all went back down into the ship to Eddard's room, letting the crew go about their business. Once there, Woolfield marked out the route they were going to follow north before looking up at Ranma. "We're currently moving through this area here, we shouldn't run into any trouble in terms of weather, at least I hope not. This part here," he tapped the map down by the marks for the island of Dragonstone and Driftmark. "Will be where we're most likely to run into opposition. But it's always possible that Stannis wants us enough to send enough ships to run us down even on open water even after we leave the bay."

"I doubt Stannis will bother sending ships after us once we leave the bay. He'll concentrate on rallying his forces." Daenerys said firmly with Ranma nodding agreement. "Stannis is not Lord Paramount of the Stormlands; Robert passed him over for that in favor of his younger brother Renly. He'll have to gather men to him by persuasion or force. The fact that precedent says he is Robert's legal heir will not matter in the face of their well-known mutual dislike. If he knows the truth about Joffrey he'll be able to rally some lords with that but his position as master of ships would've given him something like six thousand men all told? Not enough to take King's Landing if the defense is prepared and I have no doubt that the Queen and the Kingslayer at least will push as hard as they can on that front."

Ranma scowled angrily cracking his knuckles as he thought of Jaime Lannister. The man had nearly succeeded in killing his father, and Ranma very much wished to return the favor.

"What I'm surprised about." Ranma said shaking his head to get rid of his rather bloodthirsty thought. "Is that there hasn't been a response from Dorne about Tyene's death. I met Obery, and he was an emotional sort of man. I have no doubt that he at least will want take some kind of vengeance."

Domic shugged from where he had taken up position on Daenerys' other side. "While the roads in Dorne are better than the ones in the North, they have even worse logistics issues than us northern louts normally." Ranma and Woolfield grinned at one another while Domic continued. "I've travelled there, and trust me, water in particular is a major issue for any army marching through Dorne's territory. Not only would it take them time to gather their troops in large enough numbers for a foray into the Marches, but it would take them longer to get there. Nor do they have any naval power to speak of."

"That is one point that I particularly think we need to keep in mind Ranma, one which made me very pleased that you remembered the need to keep some of our forces at home." Daenerys said frowning thoughtfully as she looked at the map, tapping the Iron Islands, not even noticing Ranma's smile at the phrase 'our forces' or Brynden and the others reactions.

"The Ironborn will use this opportunity to return to their old ways." She said firmly. "The use of a hostage will not stop them, if the Greyjoys do not do it themselves than the other major houses among the Ironborn will do it anyway. They're reavers and rapist plunderers, they've probably been waiting for an opportunity to slip the leash again."

All four of the men nodded agreement, and Ranma replied dryly that was why he wouldn't be taking a large force from the houses on that side of the northern territories.

"They could still strike Moat Cailin from behind." Daenerys said worriedly, working her lower lip in such a way that made Ranma want to kiss her. "If they join forces with the Lannisters and take the Moat away from us, the Lannisters can then simply march through the Riverlands to deal with us first before picking up the pieces there."

Ranma laughed shaking his head. "Not going to happen, Daenerys. Trust me, you haven't heard of the changes we've made to the Moat. What's more, my family has known that something was going to be coming our way since before I left Winterfell, and we've been preparing for the worst." He smirked. "Ravens are such useful birds, and I believe that the preparations already in place will surprise you."

"I hope in a good way." Daenerys said smiling faintly as she flicked her fingers lightly against Ranma's arm. Her smile

widened as Ranma took her hand in his holding for a moment as they turned back to the map. Their discussion continued from there for another hour before they were interrupted by a cough from nearby.

In the bed nearby Ned awoke to the sound of their voices. That he awoke at all was a shock to Eddard. While the wounds themselves were not immediately mortal, he had been prepared to die from the one in his side at least. He took a moment to just lay there in peace, enjoying the feeling of being alive, before coughing to get the attention of those in the room with him.

Despite the weariness and pain stamped across his features Ned's eyes were clear as he looked at the group which rapidly crowded around the bed locking on Daenerys and the two dragons on her shoulders. "Legends come before me in many forms it seems," he said, his voice a bare shadow of its normal commanding tenor. "Lady Daenerys Targaryen?"

"Milord." The platinum haired girl nodded her head formally then decided to try humor, it worked often enough with Ranma. "I would curtsy but..." she gestured at the leggings she was wearing.

Ned smiled slightly, but didn't seem to have the strength for more. He looked around at them all. "Who do I have to thank for the minor miracle of my life?"

"Myrcella, apparently." Ranma said smiling broadly, reaching forward to grasp his father's hand. "She's been studying medicine apparently, and she and Alayaya were able to stitch you up. You're still weak, and I'm afraid there wasn't much they could do about the shoulder save to tie it in place and hope it heals, but you're going to pull through. Still, I don't want to hear about you trying to lead from the front again father, that's a younger man's job!"

"I see. And it is good to see you too my son, both for its own merits and for that very reason." Ned replied, smiling faintly but warmly at his son. "But tell me, how long was I out, and what has happened since? How did your mission go besides the obvious? Are we sailing for Dragonstone?"

Ranma exchanged glances with the others then told his father what had happened to him and Daenerys as they came towards King's Landing, and about his rescuing Sansa. Ned looked at him in shock at that, but then bowed his head in true thanks, squeezing his son's hand again as hard as he could, which alas wasn't very hard at the moment.

He and Brynden both then filled Ranma in on the battle in the city in greater detail than Brynden had before, going into detail on the evidence that the maesters had sent him to prove the queen's infidelity. Ranma, his mind on a certain young lady, looked at the names of the children and noticed something, which he immediately brought up.

Eddard frowned, but nodded and acquiesced to his point for now before turning back to the topic of Stannis and what was going on now. He looked at them all shaking his head. "So the world changes, and in ways I did not expect or can understand. Legends come among us again, the direwolves to my family the dragons to yours milady, a King beyond the Wall and more, treason in the South and Stannis Baratheon having access to some kind of magic that allowed him to learn of his brother's death a mere day after the fact." He leaned back, closing his eyes and the others thought he might've fallen asleep but he opened them again now staring searchingly at Ranma. "So, what will you do my Lord?"

"My Lord?" Ranma said his eyes wide. "I, um, I had hoped to convince you to send of me and a smallish army south father, but um... my Lord? What...?"

"A crippled Lord cannot be a Lord in the North, you know this." Ned said simply moving his shoulders very slightly, wincing at the pain of the crushed bones in his one shoulder. It was all he could do as exhausted as he was, but it brought to Ranma's attention to his wound there, and then Eddard tapped one leg with a hand. "I can't feel this leg." Ned said simply. "Even if my shoulder repaired itself, I don't think I'm ever going to be able to ride to war, or to defend my honor in single combat as a Lord must if called upon to do so. That makes you Lord Stark my son, and Lord Paramount of the North."

He sighed sadly, shaking his head. "And I have made too many mistakes of late, too many errors in judgment. I should have known that Cersei would have heard of the King's death, if she didn't plan it herself, and made plans well in advance of the news reaching us for such an eventuality. I should have done more to prevent Tyene's death, or Tommen's! By the old gods, I should never have come south at all, nothing good has come of it!"

Eddard looked at Ranma and Daenerys, who was standing close by, her shoulder barely touching Ranma's as they crowded around the bed. He smiled faintly, wondering what was going on there but not wanting to push for the moment. *Possibly nothing at any rate.* "You are ready for this my son, I know you will do me proud."

Ranma and the others looked at one another and after a moment Ranma shrugged. "I knew this time would come, but at least my father is alive, which was one of the ways it could have come."

He patted his father on his good shoulder before moving away from the bed. "We were talking about problems in the future and had covered Dorne. What of the Vale or the Reach? The Stormlands will answer Renly's inevitable call to war of course, or Stannis possibly, one of the two. The Crownlands will answer the crown, at least most of it and the River lands we talked about earlier."

"The Reach will march with Lord Renly," Ranma continued tapping it thoughtfully. "Their strength from what I've seen reported to the crown is something like sixty-thousand men? Possibly more if they neglect the defenses." He ground his finger into the map over the mark for High Garden angrily, remembering what Brynden had told him about Renly and Loras having fled the city before the battle even began.

If Loras and Renly had stayed with their men and the men they could rally from the few remaining neutral lords in the court, his father might well have won the battle in the city. But no, instead of helping, instead of doing the honorable thing, the two 'knights' had run, taking their men with them. That act of cowardice would cost them, and it would cost them dear. Ranma wasn't prepared to name House Tyrell or Renly among their enemies just yet unlike Stannis. But they certainly weren't among his friends, nor would he trust either man again.

He wondered what Margaery and their family were making of all this beyond the obvious, but decided in the end he didn't care. *House Tyrell tried to play the game of politics rather than solidify the arrangement between me and Margaery. Fine, I have a new 'arrangement' now. Let them try wringing what they can from the cluster fuck that's about to begin, right now I've my own plans to make.*

"The Vale is leaderless," Brynden said striking his head. "Lysa won't listen to anyone, she'll stay on the defense and be a non-factor until well after the war is over. At that point we can remove her and her child from power if need be."

Brynden's leaving the Vale had been rather acrimonious. Lysa had called him a traitor for leaving to help Ranma and Eddard rather than stay to guard Lysa and her son. She went so far as to say if he left Brynden was no family of hers. The Blackfish had tried to keep calm, but words had been said on both sides that could not be unsaid. And Lysa had been acting irrationally long before that, something Brynden had noticed even removed from the Eyrie as he was in his role of Defender of the Gate.

The conversation continued from there for another hour with Domic joining in now before Ranma leaned back satisfied. The numbers he had worked out for the North matched with what captain Woolfield thought was accurate, and Brynden and Daenerys's knowledge of the Riverlands was also very good. Daenerys proved herself invaluable in her knowledge of the Reach and Stormlands, knowing nearly every house there and having a shrewd idea of their force strength and how they would react to the coming conflict. Ranma had only studied the most powerful houses, and them poorly outside the Lords Paramount.

They calculated how long they had before the Lannisters could get a force up to the Neck, how long it would take them to go around it by sea. Their analyses on what the various reactions of forces would be and how large the window was for them to start marching down into the Riverlands well as what forces they would have to retain at home were less accurate but close enough. It was enough for now for Ranma to call a halt to their planning session for now, looking over at captain Woolfield. "Do we have some way to send word ahead? Is there a raven aboard?"

"We have a sea-hawk milord. They're not as intelligent as ravens but they can be trained to travel back to their home. They're fast and very hard to train but good for messages back to White Harbor. But they won't be able to contact us, finding a ship at sea is impossible." Captain Woolfield said.

Ranma and Daenerys put their heads together for a moment composing the message, based off a plan that Daenerys had thought up. That this allowed Daenerys to run her hand up Ranma's thigh for a moment was just a bonus, as was his return kneading of her thigh. Though when she began to move her hand in a 'mischievous manner' and Ranma felt himself begin to respond, he was forced to grab her hand and move it away, much to her hidden amusement.

Despite their little under the table games, Daenerys still kept her mind on the task at hand. Indeed, at least one idea that would be mentioned in the note was something that Ranma wouldn't have considered even if he had at one point thoughts along similar lines in regards to the Wall and the Night's Watch. Still, from what little he knew of the man Tyrion would jump at it, removing The Imp as a threat and possibly strengthening the Wall for centuries to come if it went as Daenerys hoped. If not, Tyrion would still be removed as a threat.

The final message was brief since sea-hawks couldn't carry as much weight as ravens (they were very different flyers), but covered a lot. It read 'Bringing the Wolves home along with the Stormborn. Treason in the South, Joffrey is

illegitimate. This must be answered. All lords to gather at Winterfell. Send for Theon and the others to bring Tyrion to meet us in White Harbor. Lannisters are not to be trusted. Lord Ranma Stark.'

"I think that's enough for now." Ranma said handing the message over to the captain who would affix it to the special carrier for the Seahawk. "I think it's time to go see if the ladies are up, and tell Sansa and Myrcella what is going to happen." He sighed heavily. "And for us to tell Myrcella what we suspect about her parentage."

Daenerys nodded. She nearly laughed aloud when she stood up and watched Ranma remain sitting for a moment, visibly getting control of himself before standing up in turn. Ranma mock glared at her, but Daenerys merely smiled back impishly. For some reason knowing she was having that large an effect on him was empowering in a way she had not anticipated. *I will need to think about that in the future.* For now she put aside such thoughts, taking Ranma's hand once more, allowing him to lead her out of the room.

OOOOOO

Sansa had woken up but decided to simply stay in bed for a time. She was still bruised and battered from her beating two nights ago, and despite Ranma rescuing her, a part of Sansa was still hopeful that the past few days had all been a bad dream. Sansa knew it wouldn't be, but she could dream about it being a dream couldn't she?

This rather convoluted thought had just meandered through Sansa's head when it was knocked out of her mind by her current bed partner rolling around and smacking Sansa in the back accidentally with one hand. Sansa hissed, the sound waking Myrcella up with a start.

"Wh-what?" the blond haired girl asked blearily looking around. Her eyes immediately lit on Sansa as the girl curled up a little from the pain of having her sore back hit like that. "Sansa?! How did you get here? Oh, I'm so glad to see you! Did I hit you when I turned over, I'm sorry."

Sansa waved that away turning awkwardly to face Myrcella. The two of them had shared a bed many times on sleepovers, so there wasn't any kind of awkwardness between them. Myrcella glanced around not seeing Lady. Her face fell and she looked back at Sansa. "Lady?"

The northern girl's eyes tear it up, and Myrcella wordlessly reached out for her and the two girls hugged one another tightly. In fits and starts they both shared what they had faced since separating the morning before.

Sansa cried when she heard about Mattimeo and the others. Mattimeo had been one of the youngest guardsmen, and one of Sansa's personal favorites. He always had funny stories to tell much like Ranma's, only sometimes better because most were about his older brother and how he had bumbled his way through courting his wife. Clifton Snow had been another armsmen she was fond of, one of the younger men who had trained extensively with Ranma. Indeed he had been chosen for the trip down to King's Landing by her brother. He may have been a Snow, which given the late septa Mordane's beliefs about baseborn children and her influence over Sansa should have immediately made Sansa look down on him, but thanks to Ranma and his influence that hadn't happened.

Both of them cried for Arys Oakheart, who Sansa had thought was a worthy knight, not on the same level as his commander, or Ser Jaime or the Rose Knight but still a kind and handsome gentleman. Sansa however did not share with Myrcella what she had heard about the reasoning behind the Queen suddenly turning on her father. She would let Ranma or someone else tell her friend that. That may be cowardly, but right now Sansa just did not want to think about that or her friend's reaction to it.

"I should've listened to you." Sansa said instead, taking Myrcella's hands in her own. "You were right to try to guide me away from Joffrey like you tried to, I can see that now, and Ranma and my father were both right about him. He's a monster!" she spat this viciously through her tears. "A complete monster. He killed Jeyne, and then he, he made me watch as, as some of the other prisoners were, were executed by that horrid man Payne."

Myrcella nodded grimly, pulling her hands free from Sansa's clenched hands, once again hugging her gently, making certain to not touch the other girl's bruises. "And he gave you those bruises?"

"He ordered it." Sansa said mumbling a little as she leaned against the smaller girl's shoulder. While Myrcella had begun the track to womanhood, Sansa was almost finished that journey, and had about three or four inches on her. Even laying down like they were it was still noticeable despite the princess' growth spurt over the past few weeks. Sansa remembered that time herself, she needed new clothing every other week, and it seemed as if her sense of balance and poise had deserted her. Myrcella didn't seem to have that last problem, not that Sansa was jealous or anything.

For a moment after that they were both silent, simply taking comfort in one another's presence, then Myrcella moved back looking at Sansa, her face set. "Let's see if I can do anything for that back, I made up some salves for your father and the other men, they should work."

"Tell me the truth..." Sansa said as she painfully sat up so that she could swing her legs out of the bed. "Will my father live?"

"I'm not really a fully trained healer." Myrcella said cautiously. "I've read a lot of books, and Alayaya's stitching was **incredible**, so we were able to stop the bleeding. But I can't tell you that with any certainty if that was enough given the damage to his side. I think it's up to Lord Stark. And... and even if he lives, your father could still be crippled."

Sansa took in that statement with a stoicism that would have surprised her even so much as three days ago, yet couldn't stop a shiver of fear going through her at the thought of never seeing her father alive again. She knew her father wasn't immortal, and then meant he could be killed, but Sansa had seen so much death lately she was just tired of it.

"Let me help you, your grace." Alayaya said, making her presence known from the nearby corner where she had been sleeping in her hammock until the girls began to talk to one another. She had made no attempt to join in, knowing that a good cry was often very therapeutic.

Sansa nodded thanks of the offer, and allowed the older, and even Sansa had to admit beautiful, woman to help her pull off her dress. The two of them had issues initially, not that Sansa had thought that she had been brought in to ply her trade or anything. But the septa had colored Sansa's worldview and had little truck with such people even if they were trying to reform. Brynden had set her down sharply on that, telling her about the girl's work as a spy for them, though not the particulars.

At the sight of the bruises on Sansa's back Alayaya and Myrcella both winced. So busy were they with helping the northern girl none of them had noticed the door open, and they all jumped when someone spoke up from behind them. It was Ranma's voice, normally a very welcome one for all three even if Alayaya was more at home with calling him the Rock Hurler, but this time it sounded different. There was a timbre there that none of the three had ever heard in his voice before, a sort of growling note. If a hurricane could speak it would sound like that, a fury fit to tear down mountains. "If I had known that bastard had done that to you Sansa, I would've made time to kill him properly before we escaped."

"By the Seven don't do that!" Sansa gasped pulling her dress up a little to hide the front of her body from view. Myrcella who was simply gasping a little holding her chest nodded agreement.

Alayaya stood still, trying to still her hammering heart. "So it wasn't only your invisibility trick that allowed you to become the Rock Hurler, Lord Stark?"

"He likes to do that, you wouldn't think it given his personality but Ranma is actually quite good at sneaking around. I think he likes to startle people, or at least girls." Daenerys said moving around Ranma to look at the three girls, frowning deeply at the marks on the northern beauty's back while Ranma allowed himself a very faint smile at her quip, still staring at his sister's bruised back. "We'll wait for you outside, we didn't realize you were changing." she said looking over at Ranma pointedly and nudging him back towards the doorway.

Ranma nodded, but his hands were still clenched, and there was a rage in his eyes that Daenerys knew she had to do something about.

The three girls turned back to one another, then shrugged and got on with business while outside Daenerys began to question Ranma about his rescue of Sansa forcing Ranma to realize that he couldn't have stayed and killed Joffrey, not with so many armymen so close to Sansa. He would've had to fight his way through them to the doorway and probably through more in the hall while Joffrey retreated, and it would only have taken one man that he missed to get to Sansa to either kill her or use Sansa as a hostage against him.

Ranma nodded reluctant agreement, turning around when the girls exited their room. Sansa moved forward quickly, her arms going around Ranma. "Thank you again for rescuing me, Ranma..." she breathed.

Her older brother chuckled, a familiar sound that added to the feeling of safety that having his arms around her shoulders gave Sansa. "That's what older siblings are for sister, to protect their little siblings, it's why we come around first."

Sansa giggled wetly and Ranma nodded over at Myrcella. "My father's already woken up, he looks as if he'll pull

through. But he has something to say, and you need to hear it Sansa." he said turning back to his sister was still in his arms as he continued to hug her very gently around the shoulders being very careful to avoid the marks that bastard Trant had left on her back at Joffrey's order. *Oh yes, Joffrey is going to die. Maybe cutting him into pieces while he's still living and feed him to Fenris? No, it'd be just like Joffrey to give Fenris terminal poisoning or something. Huh, do they have piranha in this world? Something painful, and possibly slow anyway, will need to think about that.*

As soon as Sansa let him go, Ranma moved over to Myrcella, enfolding her in a hug in turn. "Thank you for saving my father." He said, his voice almost a whisper, though everyone in the corridor could hear him. "Without you and Alayaya he would've already died from his wounds."

Myrcella hugged him back, burrowing into his stomach a little. Suddenly Ranma realized with a start that Merry had grown up quite a bit since he had left King's Landing. It wasn't actually surprising given her age, what was surprising and what was making him rather uncomfortable was the feel of her small clementine (he was guessing there) sized breasts pressing into his waist right above his crotch. His control had been badly frayed from the past months of forced celibacy, and Daenerys' earlier flirtations had weakened his control further. Ranma could actually feel himself reacting to Merry's hug and it was mortifying.

For Ranma anyway, Merry's reaction when she felt it through his leggings and her dress was quite different. First she stiffened in Ranma's arms, letting out a nearly inaudible gasp. For a moment Ranma thought she was going to pull an Akane and slug him where it hurt. But to his surprise Myrcella then hugged him even tighter, moving her shoulders around, deliberately moving her chest against Ranma before moving back.

When she looked up at him, Myrcella had a light flush on her face, but a look of triumph in her eyes, and Ranma groaned under his breath, knowing she had not only felt his reaction but liked it. He knew this might make her crush on him worse, but he was at sea about that issue anyway, so Ranma resolved to continue ignoring it as much as possible.

To his side Daenerys looked amused, but her eyes were locked on Myrcella, taking note of the flush on the younger girl's face, wondering if the girls crush really was just a crush or something more serious. *Only time will tell if I have a true rival or if the Lannister girl is simply a young girl enchanted by an older boy who has treated her so well. For now, I have more pressing concerns.*

After a moment of embarrassment Ranma turned away from Merry with a strained smile, before leading the way through the ship to his father's room. When they arrived Sansa barely stopped herself back from running at him, seeing her father sitting up in bed. Having asked Brynden to help him sit up Eddard smiled faintly at seeing Sansa safe and sound.

It took a moment for Sansa to pull her attention away from her father, sitting there looking so wasted and weak, not tall forbidding and implacable as he should be, to notice that there were other men in the room. One wore the colors the Woolfield family, a minor but rather important house who looks to Lord Manderly as their overlord. She curtsied cordially to him, and he bowed gravely from the waist before she turned to the third man who she didn't know.

He looked slightly familiar, as if she had met him once before. He stood next to Brynden, who smiled at her stepping forward for his hug. Sansa met him eagerly, and resolutely did not cry again feeling another family member's arms around her, ensuring her safety. She'd done enough of that lately

Once Brynden let her go Sansa cocked her head quizzically, looking at the man leaning against the wall behind Brynden. "You look familiar ser, but I cannot place you."

"I would be surprised if you could, milady." The man said bowing far more flamboyantly than Captain Woolfield had. "We only met once, you were around ten or so I think. It was many years ago, regardless. Only a few months after your brother here rescued me from durance vile. I am Domic Snow, bard of the harp."

Sansa nodded her head still cocked to one side. "Are you the one who wrote that song, 'the Wolves of Winterfell', about my brother rescuing you from the Dreadfort? I thought you were a girl."

Domic looked sheepish for a moment, trying not to look over at the suddenly the glowering Ranma while the other men in the room laughed, even Daenerys joining in. "As I have repeatedly told your brother in the past few weeks I took certain dramatic liberties with that story. It makes much better telling if it is a woman being rescued, rather than another man. Much more dramatic and emotional that way, adding a, well a romantic element even if there is no romance actually mentioned in the song."



"I see..." Sansa said looking a little dubious, though her eyes were actually twinkling faintly with humor. "Well in any event perhaps you could play it for us later, I've never been able to hear the entire song in one sitting."

At Ranma's pout the others laughed again, but Ned spoke then, drawing all their attention back to him. "While this is amusing, and I realize that laughter is the best medicine, there are serious matters we need to discuss."

"I agree." Myrcella said, curtsying to the man she had saved. But her eyes were now hard as she looked around at them all. "I for one would like to know what by the Seven happened! One moment all was peaceful, the next..." She stumbled over her words as the memories of that horrible race through the city came back to her. "The next I hear people shouting in the streets and... I don't know who to believe or what is going on!"

Daenerys strode over, putting one arm around the girl's shoulders, who welcomed the support even if it came from a near total stranger. Daenerys knew what it was like to be surrounded by enemies or people who might be enemies, to not be in charge of your own fate. It made Daenerys feel rather sympathetic to the girl, despite how Lannister she looked. She looked over at Ranma and Eddard, silently urging them to simply get it over with. The longer she went on in ignorance, the more Myrcella would begin to doubt their words when they finally did tell her.

Before Eddard could speak Ranma held up a hand, signaling he would do it, making Eddard and Brynden both sigh unobtrusively in relief. For his part, Ranma it would be best for this news to come from him, since Ranma knew that Myrcella trusted him more than his father. "Myrcella... There is no easy way to say this so I'm just going to have to blurt it out. Your mother, well you know your father isn't the most... wasn't the most faithful, um in, um, in regards to his marriage vows?"

Myrcella was not stupid, nor was she slow. She made the connection quickly and gasped looking at them all. "You... you think that..." The blond girl gathered herself and said coolly. "I presume you would not believe that my mother did the same without evidence? Do you have such?"

"We do not know who Cersei laid with." Eddard said bluntly, taking up the tail. "But in the end that hardly matters. We... we do have proof that you and your siblings were not legitimate. Robert is a Baratheon, and they are known for having strong blood as it were. Their features black hair and light blue eyes, as well as certain mannerisms are always passed on to their children. They have married into the Lannisters four times before, and in over a dozen children all have favored the Baratheon in looks if not in temperament. And Robert has had at least fourteen other bastards, and all of them have favored him in looks."

"My son..." Eddard glanced over at Ranma. "Has brought up the point that none of the names of the children we have seen of those previous unions between your family and the Baratheons were those of daughters. Whether or not the Maesters that worked on this for me felt they were unimportant and simply did not include them, or if those pairings did not actually have daughters I do not know. Until we do know that, your own status is up in the air. I'm, I'm sorry."

Myrcella Baratheon, *No I'm not a Baratheon am I?* She thought to herself, a little disjointed by the shock of it, backed away from the other's pushing Daenerys' arm Myrcella got the feeling that they were telling the truth, but it **hurt** so much. She knew her mother and the King, she guessed no longer her father though he hadn't had much to do with rearing her after all so that wasn't much of a stretch, hadn't gotten along. *But for mother to respond like this? There is a certain poetic justice to it but it's also high treason! Is that why she always called us her little lions when we were alone?*

The others gave Myrcella a moment to collect herself for which Myrcella was very thankful. Finally she simply nodded and spoke with as much strength she could muster. "I can understand, I understand both why my mother was so terrified as to begin open conflict between her family and yours, and I can understand what you must've been thinking or trying to do. Though if you are trying to figure out who Joffrey's real father is, I am afraid I can't help you. I never saw my mother spending much time with anyone save my uncle Jaime."

A horrible thought struck Ned at that statement, making him shiver before he shook it off. There was no proof of that, so he would not even try to bring it up.

Myrcella continued regardless. "However I will not believe this in my own case or Tommen's whatever proof you show me. In Joffrey's case it would be almost a relief to not share at least one parent."

That caused Eddard and the others, even Sansa who had met Joffrey and knew what he had done to laugh grimly. Ranma and Daenerys both also nodded in approval of the younger girl's poise after having her world view shattered.

Ranma however answered before anyone else could. "If we could keep it quiet, we could say that you and Tommy were both legitimate, and ask the maesters to not share any further evidence. Say it was only Joffrey that was

illegitimate but we probably won't be able to. Stannis is already moving against us, he attacked the ship Daenerys and I were on a day after Robert died and the captain of that vessel said that he already had evidence that all three of you were illegitimate. He'll probably spread that information as far as possible to strengthen his own position."

"Words cannot hurt me Ranma." Myrcella replied, smiling faintly at his concerned tone. "I just wish they couldn't damage Tommy's image in people's minds."

Ranma nodded. He didn't know what his father would've done if Tommen was still alive, but if it had been up to Ranma he probably would've simply met with the queen and talked about it, then removed Joffrey from the succession and family entirely. But somehow he got the feeling that it would prove to be all three children that were illegitimate. That would be the ultimate payback for all the times Robert had cheated on Cersei, for Robert loving a dead woman more than Cersei herself. He could also tell that Myrcella feared that too, but didn't say anything to take away her hope that it was untrue.

She rubbed at her eyes, wiping away the tears that had formed there as the realization of what this could mean hit her. Bastards had **very** limited rights after all, and as a bastard of the queen, Myrcella was a living, breathing act of treason. She was almost afraid to ask, but Ranma's kind, gentle gaze gave her the courage to go on. "M-May I ask what this will mean for me in your care?"

"Nothing." Ranma said promptly smiling at her. "You're still under my protection Myrcella, my family's and my **personal** protection. We'll still call you a Baratheon for now, until we get in contact with the Citadel and make certain one way or another. But even if the worst occurs, I won't let anything happen to you."

"Then I am much safer with you than with my brother, or even my mother. She always took his side, and she would continue to do so even if I was there." She looked at him, then suddenly could contain it no longer, and blurted out what laid on her heart so heavily. "And... and Joffrey has killed one sibling already." That sent a jolt through everyone in the room, and a little malicious part of Myrcella was grateful to return the favor.

"Are you certain?" Ranma said sharply, getting over the shock quickly, followed by his father, who looked rather skeptical as did Daenerys though for different reasons. "Are you certain? He really killed Tommy? He poisoned him personally?"

"I don't think he carried it out personally." Myrcella said shaking her head looking apologetically at Sansa. Sansa however simply looked back at her and then shrugged slightly. Her opinion of Joffrey had reached negative numbers, so she didn't have any issue with seeing him as a kinslayer. "But he admitted it to me, used it as a threat when I tried to confront him. I'll admit that wasn't the most intelligent thing I could've done, but I was just so, so **angry** at the time."

Ranma smiled a bit at that. "Now that kind of temper you could get from either side of your family Merry!" he said softly, reaching out to rub her head fondly.

She blushed under his touch, ecstatic that it really didn't seem to bother him that she might not know who her father was, that she might not be a Baratheon. She looked over at Daenerys who also didn't seem bothered by it for some reason, though that was because of a kindred feeling she felt for Merry's current circumstances. Ranma simply ignored blood status for the most part, something Merry should have realized given how close he was to his brother Jon.

"Could you tell us what Joffrey said exactly when you confronted him, Merry?" Brynden asked.

Myrcella did so word for word while the others listened quietly. After she was finished, she looked at them all, trying to see if they believed her. Sir Woolfield shrugged his shoulders after the princess finished, not having met the boy he didn't know what Joffrey was capable of though he was getting a very grim picture here from this and what Ranma had shared of Sansa's ordeal. Brynden looked thoughtful, but he wasn't one to make a snap judgment one way or another. Sansa too looked ambivalent, though she didn't question that Joffrey would do something like that if he could get away with it. Domeric simply looked uncaring one way or another. She turned back with some trepidation to look at Ranma.

"I believe you." Ranma said simply, and it was as if a tremendous weight had been removed from Myrcella's shoulders. Those simple words meant the world to her, even more than Ranma's accepting her still despite the possible issue with her birth.

Ranma went on. "Joffrey, he has nothing but being the heir to the throne. He's never tried to be anything else, has never excelled at anything else that could give him worth. He's a cruel little bastard, and I can definitely see that he would do something like that after hearing what he put Sansa through."

"But to kill your own kin?" Ned said shaking his head. "Even now, even knowing what he did to Sansa I can't...that is the ultimate taboo! Worse than killing a guest after breaking bread with him! Kinslaying is a horrible crime in any religion, any religion I know of at any rate. The gods both new and old will not just turn their backs on a kinslayer but work to strike such down."

"For my part your grace, I can easily see how someone could fall to that level if what you based your entire life around was going to be taken away from you. I'm thankful that you don't know what depravity humans can reach. **My** brother was willing to whore me out to gain an army so I can understand how siblings can come to hate one another, as well as ambition." Daenerys said, smiling slightly at the younger girl, who smiled back, despite beginning to have some concerns about the Targaryen girl's relationship with Ranma.

"No, I agree that your brother could come up with the idea but planning it out? From what Ranma has told me about him, Joffrey doesn't seem capable of planning that well, especially not finding a scapegoat as he seems to have in Tyene Sand." Daenerys finished, looking at them all with one eyebrow cocked in query.

"I don't know." Myrcella said seriously looking over at the older and, she was forced to notice once again, very beautiful girl. The Stormborn's silver-blond hair cascaded down her back, and despite the fact that she was wearing men's clothing her curvaceous form was easy to notice. Those violet eyes set into her pretty face that didn't have a single blemish were both striking and commanding.

However at the moment the question mattered more than the bit of jealousy Myrcella felt at the girl's appearance. "Joffrey was, well I wouldn't say close but he seemed to have some kind of understanding with Petyr the days after Tommy's death and I certainly don't know anyone else who would try to help him kill our younger brother."

"And what about carrying it out?" Daenerys asked.

Myrcella had to think hard about that but she eventually nodded. "House Lannister sent several dozen servants to serve my mother and us, and there are one or two that serve Joffrey personally. One of them... I'm trying to recall his name but I can't think of it, he's such, well, he blends into the background so well..."

Frowning in sudden thought Eddard raised a hand to hover above the bed. "Short, about this tall, brown hair, brown eyes, has the sort of face that would disappear into a crowd? Well thought of by the rest of the servants?"

"I don't know how the rest of the servants think about him but that's the one I was thinking of, yes." Myrcella replied honestly.

"He was the one who gave testimony against Tyene." Brynden murmured, nodding over at Ned. "You're right, he's very hard to think of, it's almost as if he slides away when you try to concentrate on him."

"Whoever did it, Joffrey seems to have planned it." Ranma said bringing them back to the present discussion. "If Petyr helped him plan it, that's one thing, but I don't know if he could or would do that. It's a rather big step for him isn't it, I mean he was trying so hard to keep neutral between our families. He failed obviously." He said laughing a little with Brynden and his father, though Eddard's laughter broke off into a rasping cough. "But still I don't think it matches his personality."

"You might be right about that big brother." Sansa said. "But Petyr is hiding something." She described what happened between her and Petyr, what he had said about being Catelyn's friend when they were younger, and the way he looked at her.

Ned growled in anger. "He must still be holding a grudge about that, how even after my older brother died Catelyn's hand was simply transferred to me rather than the arrangement broken off entirely."

"Or he wanted the daughter of the woman he was so entranced by when he was younger." Ranma said growling. "Again, if I had known that, I would've taken the time before finding you to give him some attention."

"Regardless I'm going to put him down on the 'needs to die list'." Daenerys said laughing lightly at Ranma's look of anger. She nudged Sansa in the shoulder lightly. "You're very lucky to have such a protective older brother. As I said mine was at the other end of the spectrum to say the least."

"It wasn't nearly as much fun when I was growing up." Sansa replied honestly. "Oh, when I was younger it was great fun, but then I discovered boys, and Ranma discovered I discovered boys, and suddenly the boys realized that and ran off faster from him than Septa Mordane."

"Good times." Ranma said with a laugh remembering several boys he had run off both noble and not after finding

them sniffing around his sister.

"Father." Sansa said changing the subject before Ranma could go into detail on those 'good times'. "How are you feeling, really I mean?"

"I will not die if that is what you are worried about." Ned said smiling faintly at his oldest daughter. "However I am stepping down as Lord Paramount. A lord in the North cannot be a cripple, and my shoulder and my leg are both crippled. Despite Myrcella saving my life there are limits."

Sansa nodded reaching over to take her father's hand and looking up at Ranma. "I am sad, but I know you'll do a good job Ranma. I just..." she paused, and all of them could see tears in her eyes before she straightened her shoulders and womanfully banished them. But her voice still came out plaintively. "I just want to go home." For just a moment Sansa sounded like the little girl she had been a few months ago, in Ranma's memories at least.

Both Ranma and Eddard nodded agreement, and Eddard squeezed her hand gently. "I think we all do."

Sansa looked over at Fenris, who was curled up next to the bed around the two young draklings, who were still sleeping off their after-meal torpor. Sansa was very interested in the little creatures, but she had more serious business right now. "I'm, I'm sorry, Lady died. She'd died protecting me."

The large direwolf stretched his neck up slightly to lick her face before pressing his nose against Sansa's shoulder consolingly, making the younger Stark stumble a little. She wasn't nearly as bulky as Ranma nor as strong even as her younger sister. Moreover Fenris was much larger than Lady, and his entire massive frame was muscle. Despite this, Sansa threw her arms around his giant head, hugging the direwolf tightly as she had to once more fight back tears.

After a moment, Ranma touched her shoulder gently. "Why don't you three go get something to eat, then we'll see what we can do to make your quarters a little more comfortable. We've got a long voyage ahead of us before we reach White Harbor."

Alayaya had remained by the door, silent as possible as the lords and ladies talked, but now she moved forward, gently taking Sansa by the arm. She curtsied to Lord Stark, sent a sultry look toward Ranma then led Sansa and Myrcella out of the room.

Brynden smiled faintly, shaking his head. "If I was going to remain as your spymaster, I would like to make Alayaya my assistant. As it is that won't happen so what will you do with her or Merry?"

"I've been speaking to the crew on and off since we boarded." Domic spoke up, having been silent for most of the discussions today, not having anything to add other than helping in figuring out distances and travel times. "The crew is impressed by Merry, she not only saved your life Lord Stark, but several others, and even helped one man with a bad facial burn."

"Alayaya's stitching is incredible, the sail master has already asked if she can help him work on some of the spare sails." Captain Woolfield added. "For now, both of them can be useful on board, and don't worry about the crew acting out. There might be some issues with Alayaya, but none with the young princess, not after how she saved Lord Stark."

"Squash any such problems quickly please." Daenerys said, though the sentence came out with all the authority of an order, and Woolfield nodded his head before he even realized he had responded. "That will do for now, and when we get to White Harbor I can use them both as handmaids. I may need them when we go south."

Domic and Ranma both simply nodded, though Ranma was smirking at her slightly, which Daenerys returned before looking at the others who looked surprised. "My dragons may become an asset faster than we thought, and I may be able to use them and my name to garner us allies. And Ranma might need my advice as well. You didn't think I'd allow him to go off on his own did you? Who knows what kind of trouble he could get into?"

Eddard surprised everyone by bursting out in laughter for a moment, before subsiding into a cough. "Jon will appreciate the help..." he gasped out between coughs, causing Ranma to laugh as well, remembering the many times Jon had said the same thing.

While Eddard began to tell Daenerys some stories of the trouble Ranma had gotten into with Jon, Woolfield excused himself to send off the message, and Ranma found his mind travelling before it. *By the old gods I've missed Jon and the others. I hope they weren't exaggerating about the preparations they've put in place.*

OOOOOO

In the Chamber of the Painted Table, Melisandre very carefully concealed her triumphant smile. Normally she would've let it show, but right now was not the time. Things had been going very well, so well that she knew that R'hllor was pleased with her. The sword she had pulled from the rubble of the statues to the heathen 'Seven', which had been smashed by her magics not the hands of men, had proven that.

The Lightbringer of Azor Ahai in the Age of Legends was a flaming longsword, made by quenching the blade in the soul of the maker's wife. It was made to be a weapon against the Great Other, the leader of the Others, those who came with darkness and eternal winter. Melisandre had only hoped to create a blade that would showcase the power of R'hllor in a minor way, a small glamour that would make it seem on fire.

Instead because of the strength R'hllor had given her it blazed with a hard orange and red flame, a real one that gave off heat every time Stannis pulled out of its sheath. The cutting edge was also phenomenal. Stannis had tried it out on a small piece of the wreckage of the relics that hadn't burned, a piece of rock of some kind. He had cut through it easily.

And it had certainly worked for her purpose. Stannis had renounced the Seven immediately and bowed to the will of her god without further reservation in her power.

Since then Melisandre had been converting other nobles, the ones around Dragonstone as well as the captains of the Westeros fleet. House Celtigar, House Velaryon, and the new House Seaworth had all acquiesced to the conversions easily, having seen the proof, the new Lightbringer and her own R'hllor given magical abilities winning the day. She wasn't certain if she believed Davos Seaworth had truly converted or given lip service, but his loyalty to Stannis was such that it wasn't truly necessary. Sunglass had not, and its lord had been imprisoned for denouncing Stannis. With their lord in Dragonstone's dungeons, the house had joined Stannis, but they were hardly trustworthy.

Moreover, some of their maesters and of course all the septas and septons in the nobles castles however hadn't, and she had gleefully sacrificed many of them to her Lord's fire. This had impacted how the smallfolk viewed her, and they weren't converting in as many numbers as she could have wished, but that was fine, since the real power lay with the nobles and their armymen, who were converting slowly but surely outside of Sunglass and Rambton, a minor house sworn to them.

But what was making Melisandre have to hide a smile now was that her visions had once more cleared again, a sure sign that her R'hllor was happy with her. Composing her face appropriately, she turned from her viewing fire to Stannis, who had been sitting at his desk, sipping from a glass of campaign water as he read through several messages. "The old Wolf, the young Wolf and the Dragon Queen come back this way. The Lion's victory in King's Landing was not complete, they are weak, badly weak, the old wolf pulled down many of their supporters. But this gives us another opportunity to take and sacrifice the Dragon Queen."

Stannis stood up from the table, marching back and forth thinking hard, more counting than thinking actually, while staring at the table that gave the room its name, which had a detailed map of Westeros carved and painted on it. *I have access to some forty ships docking here and on Driftmark, they each have around two hundred men, plus another seven or so within distance of the signal lights on top of Sea Dragon Tower. Say five days to ready them for war, then approximately a weeks sailing to get to King's Landing from here. By which time the Crownlands lords nearest the city could have reached it with their own forces, upwards of four thousand, my estimates of their houses military strength is accurate anyway. Plus they could always conscript the populace of the city.*

"I want to strike at them now." he said aloud, shaking his head, his face twisted into his habitual scowl. "But they will have time to be reinforced from the nearby lords before we get there." He leaned forward, marking off distances making sure he had been correct about the timing.

"If we could have gotten to King's Landing within say three days, that would've been a different thing. But no, a week, if that." The winds were almost always against going into the interior of Blackwater Bay rather than out of it, an oddity of weather that would hinder his plans. *If I could get a message to the cutters I stationed in King's Landing when I pulled back from court all those months ago that would be a different story but better to concentrate on what I can do.*

"Have you seen what my brother is up to?" He asked looking over his shoulder at the Red Witch before going back to pondering the map.

Melisandre frowned faintly. "He escaped, like a coward he fled before the battle began. He goes towards the Reach, though he has sent messengers and messages into the Stormlands. But that's not important, we **must** take the Dragon Queen!"

"Hmm...." Stannis murmured something as he thought. "So my brother is going to the Reach? A bold move I suppose, if he's wishful to rally troops. But he isn't **their** Lord Paramount. He's not going to Storm's End?" he asked to make sure.

"No." she said sharply. "He is not. Again however it doesn't matter! Right now the Dragon queen is the closest of our enemies."

Stannis frowned at her tone, but nodded. He didn't want the Targaryens to return either, though Stannis was surprised that the Starks seemed to be backing the idea. *Ned was an honorable man, and if Robert was still alive there was no doubt that the Starks would have bent the knee to me. But what will they think of my attacking their ship before official word has spread about my brother's death? That will probably have turned them against me, something I should've thought about before.*

He waved one hand in a calm down gesture, something he wouldn't normally do but the Red Witch seemed a little put out that he didn't automatically agree with her. "I cannot send my entire fleet out on this chase of yours. I will send two ships, and you can send your ... creatures along." He said the last words with some discomfort, not liking to think of the creatures Melisandre's magic had created.

"But I will need you with me. If Renly is not going to the Stormlands personally, that gives me the opportunity to rally them instead. Many of them will not look to me as their Lord Paramount, but my actual physical presence may persuade some of them, and your magic and what it says of my cause will do more."

Melisandre scowled but was forced to concede that the man made good tactical sense, and that she would be worth far more in the short term going with him then capturing the Dragon Queen. And there were indeed her shadow-bound to consider. "Very well, I have no doubt my pets will be able to succeed in this."

Despite his habitual self-control Stannis couldn't stop a look of revulsion from crossing his face thinking of those things again. Still, the woman seemed to have them under control. And they surely would prove valuable if this Young Wolf was as formidable as the Red Witch seemed to think. "Send them all to make sure. You... you can always make more when we reach the mainland, after all." That statement actually won him a smile from Melisandre, a sight that was both arousing and terrible to see.

OOOOOO

Illyrio waved one hand grandly at the damage to his estate, the other keeping a scented handkerchief on his nose as he spoke to his guest in the Dothraki tongue. "The proof of what I said is all around us great Khal, there can be no doubt that the King of Westeros feared you. We did all we could to stop them, but the warrior he sent still absconded with the woman that was to be your gift."

Khal Drogo was a tall man, copper-colored skin, black hair, and black eyes like most Dothraki. His muscles and upper chest would normally be on display among his own people, since they traditionally, only wore leather leggings and painted jackets and when he moved his body showed all the self-control of an expert warrior. Since he was in Pentos, he wore a silk shirt of exceptional quality, yet on Khal Drogo it looked out of place, like a dress would on an armored warrior, almost but not quite hilarious in its attempt to cover the warrior beneath. He had a long, drooping moustache and a long braid down to his thighs that was hung with tiny bells. This symbolized his status among the Dothraki as an undefeated warlord.

For all that he truly was as barbaric as his face and hair suggested however, Khal Drogo was also a warlord, and a shrewd observer. He looked around the house, then said something in the Dothraki tongue far too fast for the magister to get to one of his men, his bloodriders, men sworn to his service who filled the role of brothers, guards and close companions.

The other man, who wore similar clothing to Drogo and looked just as ridiculous in it as he did, nodded then answered in a single fast sentence. The magister could only make out two, maybe three words in the sentence, something about fire, something about future, he didn't understand the last one he thought it might have religious overtones though.

The man finished his answer by gesturing at a blood platter on the ground by the outer wall. That was where Illyrio and Viserys suspected Doremic and Daenerys had met up with Ranma Stark in their escape from the grounds.

Arianne Martell had been very helpful in identifying their helper, and Illyrio had grabbed that and ran with it in his explanation to the Khal. He painted Ranma not only as a lord but one of the most dangerous warriors in Westeros, which, judging from what Arianne had told them about what she had seen personally, wasn't an exaggeration, sent to

spirit off Daenerys to keep her from marrying Khal Drogo in fear of his might. The idea of such being sent to spirit his 'gift' away, might be enough to keep Khal Drogo from demanding and getting Illyrio's head handed over to him.

If he did, the other magisters would cheerfully hand him over to the Dothraki warlord, since the alternative would be the death of the city. The Dothraki couldn't have taken the city easily, but they could have destroyed all the farms that fed it, cut off their inland trade, and then siege the city easily enough, though it would take a while since they couldn't well cut off the port trade. But without the farms around it, the city would eventually starve, and all the magisters knew it.

Several of the others bloodriders who had come with the Khal were crowded around Balerion, who was tethered to the ground with ropes, sleeping off its after-meal torpor, the only time Viserys let the creature out of his sight. That was a good thing, since only Viserys could even be near the beast without it trying to bit them. Luckily it showed no sign of developing the fire breath of its breed just yet, but the fangs and claws were enough to make everyone else stay away, which Viserys was quite happy with.

Watching the Dothraki as they stood around the creature, Illyrio thought it was interesting that the barbarians were obviously fascinated with the young dragon. They had been told that if it was awake Balerion would attack any of them who came near, something which seemed to amuse them when he said it.

Illyrio looked between Khal Drogo and the unintroduced bloodrider, trying to follow the conversation they were having, but unable to figure out more than a word for every six they were talking so fast. They were seemingly still discussing the battle that had occurred here though, if their gesturing was anything to go on.

After a moment the barbarians exchanged another sentence, this time with the words 'Vaes Dothrak' in there, which Illyrio knew was the name of the single real city the Dothraki called their own. The bloodrider nodded emphatic agreement, and at last Drogo turned back to address Illyrio. "It is understood. No dishonor will remain on your name, though this would not have happened if the gift had been prepared when it should have been initially."

The barbarians dark eyes pinned the magister in place, and he shivered a little, but Drogo said no more about that, certain his point was made. After a moment Drogo went on. "However, because this was caused by you putting off the gift-giving for so long, no dishonor accrues to us either. We will go. There'll be no exchange of gifts between us at this time. You may go, and we may go on our ways untied to one another."

In point of fact, Drogo was not at all certain what to do in this instance. It was true that Illyrio had been in the wrong by putting off the giftgiving, but Drogo knew even that had been because the gift, the Stormborn who was to be his wife, had proven clumsy and hurt herself several times trying to become fit enough to become a Dothraki wife.

Needless to say, Illyrio had created a worth lie out of pure nothing to cover Viserys beating of his sister. If he hadn't Viserys life would already be forfeit for marking a woman meant as the future wife of the Khal.

But it also looked to be true that the Stormborn had been spirited away by a third party. In any other circumstances, that would have been an act of war, and Drogo would already have vowed to lead his khalasar against Westeros. But this was mitigated by the fact the giftgiving had been postponed for so long and that to follow them, the khalasar would have been forced to cross the ocean.

There was more to the Dothraki fear of water than the city-dwellers realized. Yes, part of it was the fact they were very superstitious, and feared and loathed any water that a horse could not drink, horses being the true center of every aspect of the Dothraki culture. This tied into the other reason why a sea voyage was impossible for them to truly think about.

The Dothraki went everywhere on horseback. If you could not ride, you were less than a man, a slave or a eunuch, the only exception being the women in childbirth, the very young or very old. To go across the ocean would mean to travel by boat, thus travel by means other than a horse, an unthinkable thing for any Khal. Even if Drogo could have done it, his khalasar would have revolted against him at the very idea of going so far without being able to ride, and well they should.

No, for right now he was willing to pull out of the agreement between him and the merchant before him. In the long term however, he needed to consult with the Dosh Khaleen to decide if honor demanded more of him in this case. The wise old women, all wives of former Khals, served his people as seers and masters of tradition. Since Drogo had never heard of anything like this occurring in the history of his people, he would consult them and see what they saw in the future. If they decided he needed to ride down this Westeros King, with their backing his khalasar would follow him even across the sea despite the dishonor inherent in that, but Drogo hoped it would not come to that.

The magister nodded, knowing that was the best outcome he could expect from this debacle. Moments later, the Dothraki left, riding out of his manse on their horses and then out of the city rejoining the khalasar quickly.

That evening, Illyrio shared the details of that meeting with Viserys and Arianne when they returned from their own tasks for the day. At first, Viserys was contemptuous of the magister's efforts to bring the Dothraki to their side, but after Illyrio painstakingly explained the Dothraki position he simply shrugged. "Well, if we can no longer count on Dothraki aid, at least the day was not a total loss. My wife and I have had a much more profitable day than you Illyrio."

Illyrio looked between Viserys and Arianne. Viserys had turned away after saying that, heading out to train with Balerion before giving the black scaled drakling his evening feed. The training consisted of running Balerion around on a halter, giving him treats of specially spiced meats if he obeyed without fighting back, and a few exercises designed to build up his flight muscles.

This left Arianne to answer Illyrio's questions, which the new wife did with a smile. "We have talked to representatives of two mercenary companies today, and agreed to contracts with both the Company of the Cat and the Stormbreakers. The Stormbreakers will arrive by ship in a matter of days, while the Company of the Cat will arrive overland in another week. That will give us some five thousand mixed infantry, and about five hundred light cavalry."

She smiled, reaching for the food on the table, a new purchase like much else since the fire had ravaged the first floor of Illyrio's manse. It wasn't technically time for the evening meal just yet, but she'd had a busy day, and felt she deserved a snack. "Another two thousand men, mostly infantry themselves, will also be joining us, some mercenaries, some slaves, others from the city guard or individual guard troops."

"And who will be paying for these mercenary companies pray? I do not have enough liquid funds for that."

"The two thousand mixed men and the Stormbreakers are going to be paid entirely by the other magisters in the city. They will also pay the Company of the Cat until such time comes when we are actively making war. After that, they will find their own payment in loot and booty, or I will be forced to pay them on credit on my father's name."

Arianne frowned at that, she wasn't in favor of such for many reasons, but the Company of the Cat was their largest contingent of troops, and they were organized and very experienced, both factors in her aiding Viserys in convincing their father to sign with them instead of allowing the man to leave port for Yunkai, which was where he was going next. Their current contract was nearly up, and they needed a new contract, hopefully one, in the man's words, where loot and plunder was guaranteed.

She wasn't looking forward to what that would do for discipline in the field, but right now, they were a worthy addition to their forces. Besides, she had no doubt her uncle and her father could contrive to feed the mercenaries into the battles before Dorne's own loyal men, which would help them in the long run.

"Ahh... I take it Viserys was his normal convincing self then?"

"Oh indeed." Arianne replied, coming back to the here and now at Illyrio's question. "Viserys was able to convince the other magisters to aid us by pointing out what had happened with Ranma absconding with Daenerys was an affront to all of their dignity, and an attack on the very sovereignty of the city. After all, they couldn't let any foreign government think they could get away with sending agents into Pentos to kidnap those under the protection of a magister, now could they?"

Illyrio's eyebrows went up in surprise, but then he nodded thoughtfully. Arianne elaborated slightly. "None of the magisters added a lot, but little bits here and there from all of the other merchants large and small added." Of course, Arianne's presence and what it said for Viserys cause also helped open up the magisters purses.

She nodded at her cousin Obara, who had just come back from placing their horses in the manse's covered stables, which had survived the fire Daenerys had started. The other woman's surly return nod amused Arianne somewhat, Obara wasn't nearly as happy with being here with Viserys as Arianne was, having been, well, rather terrified if she was honest by Ranma's martial abilities.

Arianne wasn't sanguine about facing Ranma across a battlefield either, which was something she wanted to avoid if she could in the future. That was doubtful, but possible. *And if not, there is little he could do to stop himself from being immolated by dragon fire once Balerion can fly high enough to remain out of bow range and is large enough to breath fire.* She thought complacently.

In many ways, this had been the best outcome Arianne could have hoped for. Whatever they might have thought, the



Targaryen Dynasty's real strength always lay on their control of dragons, and here she was, married to a man who was bringing back one such dragon, once more joining the house of Martell to House Targaryen. Daenerys and her two dragons was a fly in the ointment, but one that could be overcome with judicious use of assassins, as Viserys had said.

That was politically however, emotionally she wasn't so happy about things. For one, she was rather angry at her father for never telling her that she was promised to Viserys, which he had shared with her almost immediately. At least now she knew why Doran never put forward any **real** suitors for her hand. Those he had were merely to placate propriety and she vowed they would be will having words in the future. The second is she would have liked to put off marrying Viserys if she could, but he had pointed out that they needed that solid bond between them before he could trust her with his plans going forward, and her hand had been promised to him after all. Those plans were good, risky but still good, so even that was a minor irritant.

As a lover Viserys had the tools, but not the stamina or interest in her pleasure. Those could be overcome eventually, and at least he had an inventive frame of mind, and a willingness to experiment.

As a husband, Viserys was arrogant but not blind to Arianne's importance as an advisor. He could be dismissive at times but she had been able to get him to agree with many of her ideas, including making certain the mercenaries always had minders once they arrived in Westeros, and to use them as shock troops as much as possible in the future.

Yet there seemed to be an edge to Viserys, not madness, but something that could all too easily become it, that made Arianne remain somewhat unhappy with being tied so tightly to him. Still, there was nothing she could do at this point but put her best foot forward, and practice using sex as a control lever on him, of course.

"How long until the fleet we've commissioned is built?" Arianne asked, turning back to Illyrio and doing just that.

OOOOOO

At the sounds of a drum somewhere beyond the torch light Tyrion looked up from directing his work crew to finish up work on the trebuchet, the seventh they had emplaced since beginning the project. His men did as well before racing over to where they had placed their weapons on the massive cart they had used to bring up the equally massive parts of the trebuchet. The entire area was lit by the lights of several braziers and torches, which allowed them enough light to both work and grab up their weapons.

Tyrion beat them there, grabbing up his blade and a bottle of wine, staring one way and another trying to localize the sound. In the night sound carried a little too well up here on the Wall. But this wasn't the first nighttime raid warning he had heard, and after a second Tyrion pointed down the Wall westward from his current position. "Over there!"

The men behind him nodded and raced in that direction, with Tyrion first at their head, then falling behind due to his deformities. Spry, agile and almost acrobatic Tyrion was, a gifted runner he was not. His men soon passed a small, covered wooden palisade set into the center of the causeway. Up on top of the palisade two men were beating on a massive drum sounding the alarm. One of them shouted down to Tyrion and his men, pointing further westward. "Sounds of battle westward two signal towers down!"

Tyrion nodded up at him as his men raced on, passing two more palisades about two thousand paces apart. These two were manned, and they directed Tyrion and his crew on.

A few dozen paces after that they arrived on the scene of a wildling assault trying to get up the Wall. They were being held back by ten men from Castle Black, one of the patrols that walked portions of the Wall, moving from Castle Black in both directions along the Wall like their fellows in the other castles. Two of the twelve men squad were down, one dead, the other with a mangled leg, but the wildlings were not getting past the rest, and had lost seven men already trying to force their way away from the edge of the wall.

The patrolman who had been carrying the torch was their one fatality. Worse, there was only a sliver of moon out, making vision bad all around. Still, Tyrion could see the grapnels attached to the top of the bulwark.

Tyrion and his work force hit the wildlings from their side of the Wall like a hammer, bellowing out a myriad of war cries, throwing the wildlings back over the wall. Tyrion slew one of them, his sword going under his opponent's studded leather back plate before the man even knew he was there. "Destroy the ladders, destroy the ladders!"

Several of the Northmen heard him, and one of them had enough presence of mind to grab of the patrols sputtering torch, tossing it down onto the massive ladder that had been placed against the Wall's northern face. It was actually a

series of massive ladders, no one ladder could ever reach the top of the Wall. But each set of ladders constituted weeks of preparation for the wildlings, as well as being the only really fast way a large group of wildlings could scale the Wall.

The torch struck right in front of a wildling climbing up the last leg of the ladder and he howled in pain as some of the sparks got in his eyes. Then his howl became a scream of agony as Tyrion threw the bottle of wine he carried at the small flickering torch flame. The fire spread quickly, now fueled by the wine and the tar that was splattered on the sides of the ladder in places to keep it from freezing against the Wall.

Tyrion ignored the man's scream, dodging backwards from a female wildling wielding a club studded with sharp bones. The wildling bitch only had that one chance to attack him before she was taken in the side by a spear from one of the patrolmen.

After that, the fight was over, and all the men gathered around the edge of the Wall to look down, watching as the light of the flames worked their way down the ladder. Far below, the wildlings who were waiting to make their way up retreated quickly, while other wildlings scattered here and there on the ladder either retreated down it quickly or if they were too high up, were left with a deadly choice to make: face the fire or jump to their deaths.

Two Hornwood men who had been assigned to the patrol, both archers, pulled their bows from their backs and began to use the light of the burning ladder to pepper those far below. That was enough for the wildlings, who retreated away from the Wall back toward the safety of the tree-line.

Around Tyrion the men gave a cheer, and the Imp left it to them, staring out into the night beyond torches of the Wall thoughtfully. For the past week or so the Night's Watch and the rest of the forces on the Wall had been dealing with probing attacks like this, night raids that were more designed to get a feel for their defenses than actually win through. The wildlings were very good at night attacks, but they had been stymied at every turn by the readiness of the defenders.

Reports from Eastwatch by the Sea and Shadow Tower indicated they saw at least two such attacks per night. The commanders of those castles were both very worried, feeling vulnerable since they knew the wildlings could get around them in various ways to possibly attack them from behind. Lord Commander Mormont was worried however that the numerous probes against the two widely spaced towers might be a feint designed to draw the defenders away from the center of the Wall and Castle Black itself.

This would have worked if the Night's Watch hadn't been so heavily reinforced, so much so that the two castles could watch out for themselves. Of course given the size of the Wall they could still use more men, but they had enough to hold for now, thanks to the organization of the defenders and Tyrion's own work on the ballistae, which hadn't seen action just yet.

A communication network had also been set up at Daryn's behest, a series of covered palisades that doubled as warming areas for the patrols. The Northmen had long used horns to signal in battle, but drums were easier to learn, made even simpler since there were only a few signals the men had to learn. The sides of the first story of every palisade were covered by hardened leather. A brazier was set in the center with room for four men to gather. The heat from the brazier also kept the two watchmen up top with the drum from freezing.

The coldness of the Wall hadn't become a major issue **yet**, but they all knew it would soon. Even Tyrion, who had never seen snow before coming north, could feel the sharpness in the air increasing with every passing month. Yet that wasn't all he felt here on the Wall, evinced by the men around him slapping his back and shouting his name.

He laughed at their enthusiasm then bellowed "All right you Northern louts, that's enough of this little pleasure jaunt, back to work the lot of you!" There was some grumbling at that, but it was good natured. The men in the patrol laughed as well before moving on their way. This was an example of something Tyrion had been noticing ever since he arrived here on the Wall.

There were no jokes about his size or deformities, or at least none that were meant to actually hurt, and there was no sense of his name being more important than his own contribution. While Smalljon, Daryn and a few of the other lords still very obviously saw him as a Lannister, the majority of men didn't care, or at least looked past it. He had won their respect as Tyrion, the Imp, not Tyrion Lannister. This was a first for him, and he liked it, he liked it a lot.

OOOOOO

Four days after his rescue of Sansa Ranma stood with captain Woolfield at the front of the *Fish's Scales* in the early morning. He stared ahead through a dense fog that had rolled in last night at two oncoming vessels which hadn't

been there moments before. Already they were almost within bow range. Behind them the crew were responding, grabbing weapons out of the lockers and preparing for battle.

The other man shook his head, scratching at his beard thoughtfully. "As I've said before lord, the navy crews know these waters better than we do. One of 'em must've been shadowing us forward, then met up with the other ship. They knew this fog'd be coming in, letting them ambush us without letting us a chance to get away or even draw it out. Look, they've caught us in a pincer movement, we can't turn away unless we go to full oars backward, and that would take us too long anyway."

Ranma shrugged. "It doesn't matter how they did it captain, all that matters is that they did." He frowned looking at the ships. "Continue to get your men ready, I'll tell the others."

He found Daenerys with Domic and Brynden in his father's room pouring over the map once more, the two men trying to teach the Dragon Princess how to discern travel times in Westeros, which she was still having trouble with. On the other hand she had a firm grasp on the logistics and the general rule of Army movement which was the larger the Army is, the slower it can move.

They all looked up when he came in, and Ranma sighed. "The lookout was right; there're two ships out there making for us, both of them flying flags that show the mark of Dragonstone. Stannis really wants you for some reason Daenerys. We don't have much time before they're on us."

Sansa, Myrcella and Alayaya had been tending to Eddard in his bed, and they all gasped, looking at one another fearfully. Myrcella feared what would happen to her if she was brought before her uncle, if he really was her uncle after all. Sansa of course simply was frightened of the impending battle, while Alayaya knew all too well what could happen to women after a battle.

Daenerys however merely nodded. The two dragons who had been curled up on Fenris who had been lying next to her woke up, scrambling up to her shoulders quickly. "What is the plan?"

"Like I said, they're too close to escape. We can't back away and try to take them down one at a time. Brynden, Domic, you'll lead a group to defend the hatchway leading further into the ship. Captain Woolfield will concentrate on defense of the ship. We'll use fire arrows on one as they approach, the captain has a few dozen in the ship's stores but not many. I'll take the fight to the other one, take it out and then turn on the next." Ranma shrugged. "That's about all we can do."

"You say that in so blasé a manner." Myrcella said shaking her head, looking at Ranma worriedly. Though to her credit it was obvious it was more worry for Ranma than the overall battle. "Are you certain that you're not overestimating yourself?"

Daenerys and Ranma both chuckled. "I see Domic hasn't set the first battle we had with Stannis' forces to song yet, good." Ranma mock-gloved at Domic who chuckled wanly but continued to pull on his sword belt. "Trust me, this is an accurate statement of my abilities."

OOOOOOO

Aurane Waters, so-called the Bastard of Driftmark, was a bastard of house Velaryon, half-brother of the current lord of that house. He had the looks of a Targaryen, wiry, with a thin, somewhat handsome face framed by semi-silver hair, and an odd eye color that mixed brown with violet, looks which had helped him in many a conquest in foreign ports. On Driftmark or Dragonstone however his looks were not exactly unusual. Many of the smallfolk could count bastards of that family in their lineage, thanks to how long the Targaryens had ruled there.

He was technically a sellsail, a mercenary/free trader who sailed as an auxiliary of the Westeros Navy. But that was only technically, given his connection to house Velaryon, one of the most powerful houses of the Narrow Sea houses. His house had been the first to bow to Stannis as King, and his brother had already converted to the worship of R'hllor, which was why Aurane's ship had been one of the two chosen for this mission.

At first, Aurane had been proud to be given this assignment by Stannis, seeing it as proof that the king was one to overlook baseborn status in competent individuals. Hunting down the traitorous Starks and the Targaryen Stormborn had also seemed an honorable pursuit. But that had been before Melisandre had delivered to his ship and its fellow the two almost but not quite crates, apparently designed to protect those within from the sun's rays, which contained her creatures.

The Red Witch called them Shadow Warriors. They were as tall as a man, though they stooped all the time, and their

arms were far longer, thinner than a man's much like their bodies. Each in some fashion looked like the sacrifice that had died to give them life, though not really, as if the details of their faces was being seen through dark, distorted glass, or as if the entire creature was made of such material, since you could for the most part see through them. Each Warrior also wielded a sword made of shadow, seeming as immaterial as the rest of the warrior, but in their hands those blades could cut open the finest armor.

Aurane had only a vague idea of how they had been created. Some rumors said that Melisandre had burned a dozen people alive to create enough magical power of whatever to create each Shadow Warrior. Another one said that she had slept with Lord Stannis, fucking him on the pyre of the sacrifices, then had given birth somehow to each warrior in turn. Another, far simpler one was that she simply ripped the soul of the dying sacrifices out, merging them with the smoke and the shadows of their own funeral pyres to create the Warriors.

Whatever the case, the Shadow Warriors were horrible, and if it were up to Aurane, he would have tossed their cages over the side in an instant, but he was too terrified of Melisandre to try that. They seemed to live for nothing but to kill, and even in their specially prepared cages they had killed two men who had gotten too close, ripping them to pieces. He did not doubt that the story was the same on the other ship, which had an equal number of them five in each cage, ten per ship.

The Red Witch had promised that they would bring Aurane victory this day, then disappear after seeing their captive in his hands, allowing him to return with the prize alone. She had even done some sort of ceremony that was supposed to have made him the only one they could hand the Targaryen girl over to. Yet even so, Aurane hated and feared them with every fiber of his being

Now time for them to earn their keep. Arrows had begun to fall among his crew, showing him that the men aboard the other vessel had apparently decided not to try to parlay. The sooner he could loose those things the better. He turned to his second-in-command. "Make the signal to the other ship, then move the cages to either side of the boat facing the side nearest the target."

OOOOOOO

Captain Woolfield's men were not sailors. They were armsmen who just happens to have enough skills to play at being sailors, with a handful of few real ones along to really direct the others. Woolfield himself had sailing experience, hence why he had been given this task, but like his men, he was just as good with a sword in his hand as the ship's steering wheel. They were also all very proud of the fact that Lord Manderly had handpicked each of them for this mission, and were grimly determined to get him at his family home. The words of Sansa to the boat crew had spread, and it was with pride and determination that they took their posts. Suddenly the sides of the ship bristled with shields, two stern battle lines prepared to repel boarders.

Those who looked at Ranma also found there courage bolstered further. He stood unarmored, having handed over his armor to Domeric who stood with Brynden and a few men chosen for the purpose, blocking the hatchway leading down into the ship. Instead Ranma stood with only a leather shirt, one hand holding his last katar, the other his katana. Fenris too patrolled the deck, waiting with all the patience of a master hunter.

Ranma ignored his direwolf and the men around him though, staring ahead through the fog that was still clinging to the ocean's surface toward the two attacking ships. They were close enough now the archers had taken one of the ships under fire, their prepared fire arrows tiny flashes in the fog. That ship fell back, its rigging on fire but the crews were experienced, and would soon put it out.

Still, that might be enough to let Ranma and his fellows defeat the first ship, or at least kill a large portion of its crew before the second ship could rejoin the battle.

Soon enough the second ship was close enough to make out details of the men on its deck. Ranma frowned seeing two cages set in the dead center of the ship. For some reason the sight of them filled him with sudden foreboding. He shook it off quickly, and when the other ship was close enough leaped outward over the intervening water, howling his warcry. "Winter is coming!"

He landed near the front of the other vessel, and as he had said a few days before, Ranma was in no mood to take prisoners or be gentle at this point. He had his wounded father to get home, his sister to look after, Myrcella and Daenerys both under his protection. He struck, and there was no mercy in it, no attempts to hold back. In fact he tried to put the fear of god, whichever they worshipped, into these people, letting loose entirely.

Twelve men died in fewer seconds, and Ranma moved on, killing. He jumped up into the air from the forecastle, using one hand bouncing off the hanging jib boom or whatever it was called throwing himself forward. Every slash from his

katana killed or crippled, every thrust punched through helmets or chain mail, every kick shattered bone, flinging men aside like ragdolls.

While Ranma's sudden assault had actually taken the crew of the ship so assaulted aback enough they hadn't even started to throw grapnels over, luck of battle however had worked against the Northerners overall. The ship that the archers had first taken under fire had been Aurane's ship, which would matter soon.

Right now, Ranma's sudden assault had terrified the captain of this vessel, and he turned, smashing open the cages holding the Shadow Warriors. All ten of them bounded out, their fell blades raised as they stalked towards the attacker, the captain's body collapsing in a pool of blood behind them in the instant they had been free. Within seconds they cut through several men to get to their enemy, and soon Ranma came face to face with these terrors.

Ranma backed away quickly, nearly losing his katar in the chest of one of his victims when a length of pure shadow formed into a sword tried to cut into his forearm. He really did lose it when it another blade tried to take his hand off where was holding the knife, the Shadow Warriors astonishing in their speed, not up to Amiguriken levels, but almost as fast as he was normally. Quickly pulling his hand back he cursed as he lost his second katar, the first having been lost when he threw it at Joffrey's head. Hurriedly Ranma brought up his blade to block the next thrust from a third Shadow Warrior, while all around him the regular troopers made way for them.

Faced with trying to join that battle or taking the fight to the other ship, the choice was obvious. Under the surviving officers, the men aboard the navy galley began to toss across their grapnels at the *Fish's Scales*. Soon they had enough across to pull the ships into direct contact, the hulls of the ships scraping together.

With a roar the men tried to charge across, only to be met by a wall of shields and swords from the crew of the other vessel who were waiting for them. The men of Lord Manderly were not nearly as well trained as Lord Stark's retinue had been, not having trained with Ranma or John Snow. However they were organized, and had shields, plus the caravel was slightly taller in the water than the two naval galleys.

This difference in height and their defensive position allowed the Northerners to hold back the impetus of that initial charge. Battle began in earnest there between the bulwarks of the ship, but it looked like the Northerners would be able to hold the line for now. The fire arrows had gained them enough time for the crew to concentrate on the first ship, and they were not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

For his part Ranma was too caught up in his battle against the Shadow Warriors to help repel the regular attackers. There were ten of these Shadow creatures crowding Ranma now, their weapons seeking his life, and they also used their hands to try and grab him. Ranma suspected that his ki-strengthening technique would not wholly stop those blades which made him dodge around as much as possible.

Worse, at first his own blade went straight through the Shadow Warriors, which Ranma found out when he tried to stab one of them through the chest. The damn thing ignored his blade sticking out of its chest, while trying to cut his head off with a vast overhand blow.

Ranma leaped back, watching as his blade actually fell through the thing as if it had no substance now that he wasn't holding the blade where it had been.

"Alright change o' tactics." Ranma channeled ki into his hands, which began to glow blue and gold. He ducked under one blow, kicking off the deck quickly to dodge to one side, his hand flashing out to smack a Shadow Warrior in the side, before kicking another in the head with a foot also glowing blue-gold with the energy of his ki.

The Warrior he kicked screamed, his head disappearing, the substance that made up its head vanishing under the impact of Ranma's life-force. The other was thrown back, but it evidently wasn't a killing blow, they had that much in common with still living opponents anyway.

The men at the back of the crowd trying to push their way aboard the *Fish's scale* noticed this and gasped in shock. Some of them lost their will for the fight at that, backing away. The reaction from the Northerners was the opposite, they all had been frightened by the sights of the Shadow Warrior beyond the melee they were involved in, but now took new heart, seeing the things die under their lords oddly magical blows. Some of them began to Chant "Stark, Stark!"

Questions about Ranma's abilities would come later, though not many. The men of the North had long been accustomed to thinking that Ranma and his brother Jon were at the very least superhuman. Having some kind of body-related magic wasn't that far a stretch. Indeed, the idea that their Lord had such abilities would convince other Northerners further of the rightness of their cause. After all, the old gods would not have given Ranma such skills if

they were not totally behind his cause.

The death of their fellow Shadow Warrior seemed to take the others aback, and they hesitated for a second, which allowed Ranma in turn to roll away. Grabbing up his blade from where it had fallen to the deck he concentrated for a bare second. Then it too began to glow with his ki, and Ranma grinned viciously. "I have no idea what you fuckers are, but if you can die that's good enough for me!"

He charged forward with a howl. The shadow Warriors hesitated another few seconds before charging to meet him across the deck, losing another member quickly before the others could change their attacking style to match their opponent's ability to actually kill them. They began circling Ranma like hyena, their speed making them dangerous even to him. If Ranma charged one that one retreated and the others closed in from behind. If he leaped into the air they all backed away, waiting for him to land, taking away one of the major advantages of his style. The battle became a stalemate, however Ranma was keeping the remaining Shadow warriors on this ship fully occupied.

He killed four more over the next twenty minutes, taking a few shots in turn but his Ki-strengthening technique sustained him while the rest of the battle went on. This had given Aurane enough time to put the fires on his ship out and move back in. With the archers so busy firing at the enemies their fellows were already engaged with, they didn't have enough archers or fire arrows to force his ship was away again, and Aurane skillfully brought it along the other side of the Northerner's ship.

Woolfield however was rather cagey. He had kept four dozen men still along that bulwark, forcing them to remain there while their fellows battled along the other side of the vessel. They were still there when Aurane's men threw across their grapnels, pulling the two vessels. Once more the strange torturous sound of wood grinding against wood sounded out through the fog of the bay. At captain Woolfield's shouted order, another dozen men pulled back from the battle against the crew of the first ship, moving with Woolfield at their head to engage the attackers from the other vessel with the men already there.

Unlike his fellow captain however, Aurane had devised a way to use his shadow Warriors from the very beginning. He ordered the two cages containing them to either side of his vessel and then concentrated his men in the center. When the two ship sides were scrapping along one another, he shouted "Release the cages! Fall back and let them break the Northerner's line!"

None of the other Northerners had Ranma's ability and before Woolfield, his face a rictus of horror, could order them to fall back the Shadow Warriors cut through his line in a matter of seconds. He lost nearly half his men before they burst through, heading onwards to the hatchway leading into the ship. Woolfield fell too, his sword uselessly carving through a Shadow Warrior as the thing's blade took him in the side.

As the defensive line collapsed Fenris was on them in turn. He howled, the sound actually pulling many of the Shadow Warrior's attention away from their task. the nearest on to Fenris died quickly, his fangs crunching through it glowing blue-gold. Six of the remaining Shadow Warriors turned, circling Fenris while the others raced on.

"At them now!" Aurane shouted, leaping forward onto the Fish's Scales. With the shield line broken on this side, dozens of duos and one or two trios gathered around one another, trying to defend the backs of their fellows holding off the first attacking ship's crew for now, but with limited success. If not for the swirling, chaotic melee between the Shadow Warriors and Fenris taking up the center of the ship, the battle might well have been lost.

Brynden held seven men together from the melee all around them. They drew men who got around Fenris and his battle down on them, protecting the backs of the rest of the crew. He saw Aurane, and recognizing him as the man in charge, charged forward, his sword up and questing, smashing against the other, younger man's blade, throwing him backwards slightly. "Hold the line, let Ranma and the other lads do their work, we can still win this boys! Keep heart!"

Domeric and the men chosen as a final guard of the hatchway leading into the interior of the ship had been picked out from the best swordsman aboard the vessel. They had all already noticed that the Shadow Warrior's couldn't be stopped by normal blade. To combat this they kept their distance, flashing forward when they could to hack at them, not expecting to kill them, just holding them up as much as possible, keeping their attention on them rather than doing anything else. The Shadow Warrior's speed was incredible, but they weren't truly trained, nor were their reaction times very good, so in a battle like this, they showed a few disadvantages.

"That's the way lads!" Domeric shouted as he ducked under a blade questing for his unarmored face, stabbing his blade through the leg of the Shadow Warrior attacking him through the top of its knee and down through where its leg bone should have been. Such attacks seemed to slow the creatures down. He raised his shield to block a blow from another Shadow Warrior, pulling out his sword and backing away, leading the two of them away from the hatch. "Hold them here until Fenris can deal with the ones fighting him, and come to our aid!"

If any of the men around him found it odd to be looking to a direwolf for salvation they certainly didn't have the time to voice such thoughts. But they went about their business grimly, and with as much skill as they could muster against warriors who fought in a manner none of them had ever imagined, with bodies they could not injure, merely hinder.

Suddenly in a odd moment of tactical thinking one of the Shadow Warriors turned from fighting Fenris, forcing most of Domic's men back and away from the hatch lest they be caught from both sides. Two of the ones already fighting Domic's men pressed them further back, cutting off many of the men from the hatch while the other three turned away.

Domic, seeing what they were doing grabbed the men around him, pulling them around and away toward the hatch. "Fall back into the ship, we'll try to hold them off in the confines of the passageway below!"

He hoped that this way he could negate the Shadow Warrior's sudden numbers advantage, but he hadn't figured how much their greater speed would matter more in an enclosed space. Domic lost two men in the hatchway itself before he and the last man fell back into the hall, retreating desperately.

Domic gasped as one of the blades nearly cut through the armor Ranma had given him, almost opening up his stomach. He had backed away **just** enough to stop from being skewered, but his fellow swordsman had fallen back into the doorway leading into the crew quarters. He was fighting one of the Shadow Warriors, the door closed enough so the creature could only engage him with his sword, but that left Domic facing two, trying to keep them from pushing on down the hallway. And he simply couldn't do it. While he was able to hold off one of the Shadow Warriors, the last one darted by him down the hall, heading toward where it somehow knew its true target was.

OOOOOO

Inside the vessel the girls had all remained in Lord Stark's room. Sansa and Alayaya were huddled together by the bed. Sansa could all too easily remember her brush with battle after the fall of the Tower, and wanted no more of it, the very idea terrified her. Alayaya too was nearly paralyzed. She had seen women who had been taken after battle by the winning side, their minds broken by the ordeal. One of her hands was playing with where she had a tiny holdout knife, and she was very well aware that it would be better to use it on herself and Sansa than let that fate befall them.

Myrcella was anxious as well but also fighting back a growing anger at all this. Her world had been shattered, recently and all she wanted was some peace and quiet, a week before the next crisis occurred, was that too much to ask? It made her angry, and the anger kept the fear she felt from finding a purchase in her as it had in the other two.

She had taken the little knife that Ranma had given Sansa upon learning that his sister had lost hers. Myrcella didn't know how to use it, but thanks to her medical studies she had a good knowledge of human anatomy, so knew where to stick her very sharp knife to cause the most pain.

Daenerys was waiting by the door, a short sword in one hand. She wasn't very good with it yet, but she was determined to fight for herself. She stood in a low crouch with the sword waiting to be thrust forward, a small buckler that one of the cabin boys apparently used on one shoulder.

Behind her the two dragons also waited, tensed to spring at anything threatening their mistress, their tails the only thing on them moving. They could feel their mistresses' distress, her anger and fear, and were waiting to attack whatever was coming in Daenerys' defense despite their being so young.

Even though she had been waiting for it when the door actually crashed open it was still a shock. The door banged open with a massive "Crash!" and Daenerys backed up slightly then backed up further as behind her all three of the girls gasped in horror at the eldritch horror stalking towards her.

The thing looked as if it had been me out of shadow and smoke, solid looking, but how it could be so was a question since they could vaguely see the deck and the doorway through it. The blade it held however while just as oddly translucent looked sharp.

Daenerys snarled, sounding almost like one of her drakling for a moment, save even more menacing. "I know not what horror has spawned you, but you will have neither my children nor me!" She darted forward, and the thing's blade came around crashing into her own, sending Daenerys stumbling backwards to land on her rear.

For a moment she thought her arm had been broken by the impact of that blow. But she could still move it, and she rolled to one side, before darting back in attacking the thing again as it stalked forward.

The draklings charged forward now, biting and trying to claw or scratch at the Shadow Warrior's ankles. But they did not have the ki ability of Fenris, and could do nothing against the shadow with fang or claw. The Shadow Warrior merely ignored them, not even bothering to smack them aside.

Myrcella darted forward, trying to distract the thing from its single-minded attack on Daenerys, only to gasp as the Shadow Warrior's blade sliced sideways almost too fast for her to follow. She raised her small knife desperately to block the blow, catching it. But the blow threw her back, shattering the knife in her hand. The slivers of the knife went everywhere especially backward from the point of impact, her hand and arm was now a bloody mess from the bits and pieces of the knife cutting her skin, and Myrcella crumpled to the ground, holding her arm in agony against her chest.

Daenerys used the opportunity Merry's sacrifice had brought her to try to dart forward. Her short sword took the thing in the side, but unfortunately it did no damage, and it was all she could do to recover when the Shadow Warrior's blade came up around towards her after smashing Myrcella away.

Her blade did not shatter like the younger girl's knife had, but it was still thrown out of position. Another overhand blow smashed Daenerys down to one knee. Daenerys' desperate attempt to raise her buckler was just enough to turn the next blow away. The buckler however slammed into her forehead and she slumped nearly senseless to the ground from the blow

The Shadow Warrior raised its blade once more, prepared to cut her down. While their orders had been to kill the wolves and all the others and allow the Dragon Queen to be captured, at this distance the Red Witch's control of the Shadow Warriors was tenuous at best. Worse, they had felt the deaths of the others of their shadowy pack, they knew they faced creatures that could kill them, and it was making them go into a frenzy, nearly forgetting all their orders let alone the most complicated.

Daenerys's dazed eyes focused on the thing as it brought its blade up, ready to cut down. For a moment she thought she was going to die, and her last thought was about the little ones, hoping that Ranma would look after them.

Then her violet eyes widened as the thing stumbled, letting out a loud scream, the only sound it had made yet as Ice appeared slamming out of the Shadow Warrior's chest from the back. Whatever magic sustained it could not stand against a Valyrian blade, and with that final despairing wail it dissipated.

Eddard gasped, leaning on Sansa and letting his sword fall once more to grate against the wood of the deck beneath him. Standing had been difficult, wielding Ice with one hand even more so. Ice was a great sword, five and a half feet of Valyrian steel designed to be wielded with both hands, though Eddard had wielded it himself in one-hand thanks to his own size, strength and the fact Valyrian Steel was lighter than any other type. Still doing so now had nearly sapped all of his strength. He had waited, urging Sansa to be quiet until the Shadow Warrior's back was to him then had ordered Sansa and Alayaya to help him out of bed, before moving forward to take the thing from behind with his daughter's aid.

Now he slumped against Sansa even as Alayaya raced forward to help Myrcella. "Are, are, you huh, well, lady?" Eddard asked gasping, his one good leg shaking under him.

Daenerys was still rather dazed, but the two draklings had moved in quickly, climbing up onto her shoulders and nuzzling their heads against her face in reassurance. Sunfyre was making this crooning sound, trying to comfort his mistress, while Rhaegon was feeling fiercely protective, emitting a continual growl of sound much larger than his small frame would suggest.

Suddenly Daenerys could feel them through their mental connection reaching out to her for the first time. Love, affection, fear for her welfare, and a fierce protectiveness thundered through her from them. She could tell Rhaegon was the one who wished to protect her, while Sunfyre was slightly less... belligerent about it, just as defensive, but more concerned with her wound and making certain Daenerys knew he loved her. What was coming from both of them though was something else, a hot, fiery anger that they couldn't do anything to the shadow creature that had threatened their Mother/Queen, as they thought of Daenerys.

She raised shaking hands to them, gently scratching their necks and snouts to reassure them as she stared up at Lord Stark. "I am well for now my Lord, thank you for the timely intervention." The words though formal came out in a stilted manner, as if she was concussed. But she wouldn't say her currently fuzzy thoughts was because of that. No she was awash with the feelings of her draklings channeling to her for the first time. And suddenly through that haze Daenerys knew what she had to do.

Lord Stark nodded, then as then Daenerys stood, reached out with one weary hand to take her own, placing it on



Ice's hilt. "Take my blade to my son, he is out there fighting I know, I don't know however if he has found some way to kill those things. But they cannot stand against Valyrian steel, it seems."

"I hope that it is not the only thing they cannot stand against my Lord." Daenerys murmured, taking the blade in both of her hands. It was as tall as she was, and despite being surprisingly light for its size, there was no chance she could actually wield it. But she could at least drag it along. Daenerys had other plans however. Without another word she moved forward nodding to Myrcella and the others. "Take care of her wounds." she ordered Alayaya, "I'll be back."

The three girls watched in awe as Daenerys turned towards the door, the draklings on her shoulders now looking as tense as springs, her feelings having soothed them, but also warned them of more to come, that she was going toward the danger now. They approved, and were tense and ready to defend her. Blood was coming down from the cut her own buckler had made on her forehead, matting her silver hair in blood. The battle had already caused Daenerys to start to sweat, and she was looking a little wobbly on her feet, staying upright only by pure will and by using by the massive blade in her hands as a staff. Yet for some reason all three girls felt they had never seen a more regal, commanding figure.

Outside in the corridor Domic had fallen, smashed to the ground by the flat edge of a Shadow Warrior's blade, his own blade having barely turned it so that it didn't cut into his unarmored helmet, having lost his helmet earlier to a grab by another Shadow Warrior. At the time, it had been his helmet or his head, a trade Domic had been willing to make, but now he paid for it. His head slammed into the wooden floor of the hallway with punishing force, and Domic could already feel his consciousness fading.

The last sight he saw was Daenerys coming towards him from the doorway into Lord Stark's room, her face hard, her eyes blazing with fury, and her dragons once more on her shoulders. The site of Domic down, a Shadow Warrior above him ready to run him through filled Daenerys with rage. For only the third time in her life she felt that unrelenting fiery wrath that had marked the Targaryen Dynasty.

Her connection with her draklings was still crackling in the back of her mind, vibrant, more colorful and deeper than ever before. Daenerys reached for it, picturing in her mind the fire, the flame that made the dragons so very dangerous. She then pointed a finger from where she holding the hilt of Ice at the thing. "Dracarys!"

For a moment she feared that the draklings were still too young to create the flames that had truly made them so dangerous, but after a bare second both Sunfyre and Rhaegon's heads jerked forward, spitting out tiny fireballs. The heat of them washed over her face despite being behind their elongated necks yet she still grinned in fierce triumph.

Their tiny balls of flame weren't as hot or as powerful as they would be later of course, but they were still **dragonfire**, that odd mix of innate magic and natural flame that made the dragon's weapon of choice so much more dangerous than any natural fire. Eventually a dragon's fire could become so powerful, so hot as to literally melt stone.

Even in this youthful version the Shadow Warrior couldn't withstand it. Their magic could protect them from physical harm, but the magic of the fire of the draklings negated that. The thing standing over Domic screamed as it burned, dissipating into motes of shadow and smoke.

As the two dragons pulled back their necks, recovering from the new, strange exertion, Daenerys strode forward, stopping to reach down to touch Domic's throat. She breathed a sigh of relief when she felt his pulse, thready but there. "Wait my friend, we will see to you soon."

Daenerys stood up, looking at the two draklings still perched on her shoulders. She sent a surge of approval and pride down their link, followed by a question. After a second, she got back in affirmative, the drakling indicating they were ready for more. With that done Daenerys Stormborn moved forward again down the hall, her eyes bleak slivers of violet stone.

OOOOOO

Ranma gasped as one of the shadow blades slammed into his shoulder. Luckily his ki-strengthening technique had held up under the Shadow Warrior's blade. So once more though his shirt was sliced open yet again, the skin underneath was merely badly bruised. In return Ranma's ki-covered katana skewered the thing's chest, causing it to shriek as it dissipated before Ranma leaped into the air, twirling to kick the head off the last Shadow Warrior closing behind him, its sword out to stab him in the back. The thing didn't even have time to scream before it dissolved into motes of shadow and smoke.

For just a moment Ranma stood still, gasped in lungfuls of air. That fight had been tough from the get-go, and he had the bruises to show it, but that was all. The worst wound he received had been an ugly bruise to one side, where he

had taken two blows from the Shadow Warriors' blades, one on top of another. He might have a cracked rib under there, but Ranma was still good to go.

After another second he turned, smashing a blue-gold foot into the side of the naval galley's main mast. With a shriek of breaking timber the mast shattered at the point of impact causing dozens of men still trying to break the weakening shield wall of the northerners to turn in horror.

Dropping his katana, Ranma grabbed up a mainsail, the long wooden spar that stuck out of the mast tied to the sail. With that in his hands he raced forward with a wordless roar. "RAAAHHHH!"

Using the large piece of wood like a battering ram he slammed into the backs of the men trying to break his fellow's line, and suddenly the fight went out of the men. The Shadow Warriors were gone, and the mystical warrior that had killed them was now turning his attention to them. With no leader to rally them and not having made much headway in getting aboard the northerner's vessel to join the melee there, the men broke. Dozens of men broke from the battle, throwing themselves into the water, throwing weapons down and trying to surrender, or retreating into the interior of their ship. Unfortunately for them the Northerners were in no mood to take prisoners, and the men trying to surrender were cut down like the rest.

Captain Woolfield had fallen in the initial charge of the Shadow Warriors, leaving Brynden to organize as many as many of the men as best he could. But the battle had become spread out across his vessel, and he had simply become one more combatants. Even so he had quickly singled out Aurane, and the two of them had been dueling for most of the battle, ignoring all of the others around them.

Fenris ripped apart the last of the Shadow Warriors that had surrounded him, then shook his mane free of blood rapidly to keep it out of his eyes. The unnatural creatures man-fangs hadn't been able to penetrate his fur very far, but he was still covered with little slashes. Not so many bruises thanks to his fur, but more slashes than Ranma had after his own battle. After taking a second to look around him, Fenris turned racing towards the entrance down into the vessel after the others.

Behind Fenris, Ranma join the melee spread out over the rest of the ship, jumping over the area still being held by the beleaguered shield line of the Manderly men. He aimed to land among a large group of them that were attempting to roll up the defenders line, the last of the defenders protecting their fellow's backs having fallen or forced to retreat out of position lest they become surrounded. "Hey, look up assholes!"

Two of them actually heard him over the din of combat. They had a brief moment to gape in shock before his feet slammed into the face of one of them. Ranma used the impetus of that to flip himself up in the air, landing slightly on a surprised man's shoulder, his hands lashing out, killing two more, smashing one straight over the edge of the Fish's Scales to land in the ocean, the other slammed senseless into the center of the deck, his helm so badly mangled he couldn't even see out of it.

The man he was currently perched on tried to thrust his sword straight up to skewer Ranma but by that point he had leaped away. The man had just a moment to wonder how the hell the northern man had been standing on him like that without pressing down on him, when a foot slammed into his head, ending his questions forever.

With the crew of the first Dragonstone ship broken, more and more men broke off from fighting them, turning to help their beleaguered fellows. Ranma saw this, and he laughed wildly. "Form up on me! Push the shadow lovers into the sea!" Admittedly he had no idea where the Shadow Warriors had come from, but despite that it made for a good rallying cry.

The men responded, twenty men of the crew forging toward him, using his position as a fulcrum to create a new battle line and begin to push the men of the second naval galley backwards across the deck of the Fish's scales. The crew of the first ship were so badly demoralized by this point even more men turned from defending against them, and suddenly the whole battle turned. The defenders could tell too, and responded with a roar of their own. "The Mander! Manderly for the Wolf!"

With the Shadow Warriors nowhere in sight, Aurane embroiled in his one on one contest with Brynden, and having seen Ranma at work already the men of Aurane's ship began to pull back. They weren't as demoralized as the first ship's crew just yet, but it was getting there quickly.

Elsewhere on the deck Brynden barked out a laugh, his blade once more locked with that of the captain of the attacking vessel. "Hah, my nephew's returned and you are fucked!" Thanks to his experience Brynden was able to feel the flow of battle around him and the renewed shouts of "Stark, Stark!" was a hint as to what was going on.

Aurane could feel it too, and began to back away, but Brynden wouldn't let him. He charged forward, his sword flitting in and out with suddenly renewed energy. Aurane had been on the attack most of their duel despite his inability to get in a killing blow, but now found himself backpedaling. He realized with a sinking sensation that Brynden had been holding back deliberately, knowing his endurance wasn't what it could be, and lulling Aurane into a false sense of superiority.

The Bastard of Driftmark couldn't deal with the sudden shift, and he found himself flatfooted, his strokes becoming wilder with every blow the two exchanged. Moments later, his sword was battered just too far to one side for Aurane to recover quickly enough. Brining his own sword back quickly, Brynden ran his opponent through his chest, sword plunging through the other man's chain mail to find his heart. He turned then, slashing his sword across the open face of another man's face, charging forward to join up with a Manderly man who had been pushed against the mast.

Behind him, Ranma and the other's continued their push, and the clumps of combat around Brynden began to resolve themselves as the attackers fell back trying desperately to link up. From the hatchway leading into the ship, the attacker's final doom approached.

OOOOOOO

Below in the hall of the ship Fenris raced down the small staircase, crashing into the side of a Shadow Warrior, biting through the back of it. The thing dissipated with a pained wail. The man it had been dueling with, the last armsmen who had been with Domeric, had been desperately trying to hold the doorway to the crew quarters. Now he nodded, at the wolf, leaning against the doorway and gasping in air, his arms nearly dead from blocking the Shadow Warrior's blows. Fenris grunted in some sort of reply before bounding on.

He spotted a Shadow Warrior several feet further down but before he could attack it the creature screamed and burned under the attack of two small fireballs hitting it from the direction it was facing. Around the bend of the hallway came Daenerys, stalking forward with Sunfyre and Rhaegon on her shoulders, the greatsword Ice in her hands, the tip of it dragging along the deck beneath her. Nodding at the direwolf, she smiled slightly, despite the pain from the cut on her forehead. "Hello Fenris, having fun?"

Fenris huffed in amusement, moving forward to nudge the shoulder of his bonded's alpha mate, even if they hadn't actually become so just yet. Silly two-legs, always so slow about the things that actually mattered. Courtship? Simply hunt down a deer, drag it back, eat it together, then mate, done.

Daenerys' arm trembled as she let one hand briefly leave Ice's hilt to rub the ears of the massive Direwolf, who was taller at the shoulders than she was. After a moment she sighed, once more placing both hands on Ice's hilt, dragging it along behind her as she continued her trek. "Come, we have a battle to finish."

The giant direwolf followed her willingly, as did the man who Fenris had saved. The trio emerged out onto the deck of the ship about a minute after Brynden had finished off Aurane.

The sight of the draklings and the return of the monstrous direwolf unmanned many of the remaining attackers, who began to turn and flee back onto their own vessel, hacking away at the ropes and trying desperately to push them out away. The men of House Manderly however fell on them from behind cutting them down mercilessly while Daenerys moved forward, Fenris at her side.

Leaping over a few clumps of still fighting men Ranma landed next to her and Daenerys, quickly handed his family blade over. "Take it, that thing is heavy!"

Ranma nodded wordlessly, taking the blade in one hand and lifting it quickly, charging into the battle. "Winter is coming! Push them into the sea men!"

Behind him Daenerys stood in place, Fenris guarding her as her eyes closed. Suddenly she flung her arms up into the air, and at her signal both draklings leapt into the air from her shoulders. She roared with them, feeling the wind under her/their wings, the exaltation of flight taking their conjoined minds for a moment. It was intoxicating and it nearly made her forget her purpose, but with the iron will that made Daenerys Stormborn who she was, she kept rigid control of both draklings even through their shared exultation, directing them into the attack.

While Ranma and his crew were beginning to wipe out the men who were still aboard the *Fish's Scales*, the two draklings attacked the rigging of the second vessel, the second one's mast already down. It being their first flight, the draklings couldn't sustain themselves in the air for long, but they were able to get into range, spit out their tiny fireballs at the tied down sail of the other vessel and return. By the time they landed only about two minutes had passed, but even so both draklings were drooping with exhaustion, and hunger began to dominate all the other feelings coming

through Daenerys' link with them.

That was the final straw. Faced with the fire on their own ship and the renewed push by the defenders, the men of Aurane's ship broke utterly. They retreated entirely from the defense of their own bulwarks, turning their attention on trying to stop the flames now engulfing their sails and rigging.

Brynden looked around and shouted, "The ropes, cut the ropes, they've had enough."

Ranma took up the shout. "Leave off, the bastards are running now, let's get out of here before that fire can spread!"

The Manderly men set to with a will while the fog around them at last began to dissipate under the heat of the sun. While Ranma and a few others cut down the few remaining attackers on their ship, most of the others began to cut at the ropes tying the three ships together. A dozen men then grabbed up several long oars, pushing at both ships then began to row away from the two naval galleys.

Neither vessel's crew had the numbers or the will any longer to do anything to stop them. Soon enough the *Fish's Scales* was far enough away for the sail-master to take over, bellowing commands to unfurl the sail. This was a sign for the armymen all around to let loose a cheer at their success. It was ragged though, as the men looked around and realized how badly the victory had cost them.

For now Ranma ignored the dead lying everywhere, his eyes instead on Daenerys. He moved over to her reaching out gently to touch the cut on her forehead with the hand that wasn't holding Ice. She winced slightly as his fingers traced the wound gently. For just a moment she could feel something flow from Ranma into her, before she shook off the notion as silly. "You need to stop doing this." He said gently. "This whole charging into battle thing is going to get you killed one of these days."

"I'll agree to not take part in battles the moment it is no longer necessary, I promise." Daenerys replied dryly, leaning into his hand lightly now that it had moved from her cut to her cheek. The two of them stood there like that, taking comfort in one another before Brynden coughed getting their attention. Both young people sighed, then steeled themselves and got back to work.

OOOOOO

Even though the shadow assassins she had made were much more independent than any other she had conceived (literally before the jump in her power she attributed to R'hllor's growing favor) Melisandre still had a connection with them, tenuous though it was.

Melisandre was in her room, mediating naked as the day she was born in front of a small pillar of flame, sweat beading her magnificent body. The sailors hated the fact she had a seemingly uncontrolled fire in her room every night, but they were ignorant of the control R'hllor gave his faithful over his fires, so could be forgiven that.

In her meditation state Melisandre felt the deaths of her shadow warriors, some killed by the odd blue-gold fire, something she could sense was of the body but not, and others who had fallen to the fire of the young dragons controlled by their queen. As the last one died she came out of her trance and began to curse, rather inventively it must be said, in her native Asshai dialect.

Currently the ship was carrying her and Stannis to the Stormlands. At their back were fifty other naval galleys. They would make port in a few weeks' time at the nearest point along the shore of The Narrow Sea with Haystack Hall, the seat of House Errol. They controlled a third of the most fertile land of the Stormlands. With them allied to Stannis' cause, he would be able to feed his army in the field.

It would be a hard sell, since most of the Noble Houses of the Stormlands were happy with Renly's governance, even if the houses minor, landed knights and smallfolk were ambivalent about it at best. Still, if Renly had indeed retreated to the Reach rather than the Stormlands, it might allow Stannis to rally the Errols and others to his cause.

While twenty galleys had remained behind to guard Dragonstone (and spy on any naval movement in Blackwater Bay) a further ten had been assigned to head to Sharp Point then Stonedance in the Crownlands under Stannis' most capable captain, the Onion Knight, Davos Seaworth. The houses of those castles, Bar Emmon and Massey, historically had strong ties to Dragonstone, and Stannis had long cultivated those relationships. Both of them would probably rally to his cause quickly, which would give him a start on building an army.

At the moment Melisandre could not care less about that. What she cared about was that the Dragon Queen and the Wolf shaped man had escaped once more. While it would not matter in the short term she could feel, like a wind

across her skin, that in the long term it could prove disastrous.

She scowled. "I should have gone myself, the wolf would not survive against the fires of R'hllor wielded first hand. I let myself be swayed by materialistic, worldly arguments rather than following the path R'hllor set for me. I will burn twenty heathens in recompense for now, but I must act against the Dragon Queen and her Wolf Lord the moment I can." With that Melisandre turned, grabbing up her silk dress before heading out to find the Azor Ahai to tell him the bad news.

OOOOOOO

The aftermath of the battle was pretty horrible. Along with Captain Woolfield, more than half of the ship's crew had died, and at least a quarter of the survivors were injured in some fashion. This left the bare minimum necessary to man the ship, but luckily the rigging and sails hadn't been damaged in the battle, Aurane having not been interested in sinking the vessel since his orders were to capture the Dragon Queen alive. Better, none of the actual sailors had died, having intelligently stayed put in the crew quarters until the battle was decided. The sail-master, who was the one actually in charge of most of the actual sailing, also knew their route, and could navigate them to White Harbor.

Myrcella, Alayaya and surprisingly Sansa got to work on the injured, using the tiny hold as an infirmary. Daenerys, despite her protests went first, and under Myrcella's direction she placed a small poultice on her head covering the cut there. Her eyes were still barely tracking however, and the little princess sent her to bed down with Fenris and the draklings, taking with her food for all three.

Myrcella's own wounds weren't serious, the gashes on her arm weren't deep though many of them had required stitching, which Alayaya had done as the battle wound down. With Myrcella instructing her Alayaya stitched up what wounds she could, and the princess's poultices helped others, and together the three girls saved several men who would otherwise have died without a ship's surgeon.

Despite their aid however, eight more men died through the day, loss of blood and the severity of their wounds carrying them off. That evening, Ranma stood by as the bodies of the dead, which had been laid out on the deck, were consigned two at a time to the ocean as the rest of the men watched.

Outside he looked grim and somber, but inside his thoughts were not on the men who had died, but those who had lived and what they had run into. He was worried about Merry, but she seemed to have grown up not just in body since he left King's Landing, but in heart and mind as well. The death of Tommy had hardened her heart to mere physical discomfort. Her work with the wounded was excellent, and he was happy to see that too. Daenerys as well had come through the battle as well as could be expected given her injury, and seemed quietly ecstatic that the draklings had breathed fire for the first time.

Sansa had not been hurt thankfully nor had Alayaya or Eddard, though his strength had been sapped once more, and his leg was definitely crippled, as well as his arm. His father's leg wasn't dead entirely, but he couldn't feel it, or bend it at all, the leg just refused those commands from his mind. Domeric had a concussion, and a broken forearm. Brynden had come through the battle with only a few nicks, the worst being a gash on the back of his off hand. Fenris too was nicked up, but nothing life threatening.

The majority of Ranma's thoughts however were not on his family or the girls, but on the Shadow Warriors, those strange creatures of smoke and shadow. They had caused at least a third of the crew's casualties, including captain Woolfield, despite the fact that Ranma and Fenris had occupied most of them. Without the two he was sure the enemy would have surely won the day even with the fire of the draklings.

*By the old gods, where did they come from? I've never heard about anything like them before, not even in the tall tales I heard as child from Maester Luwin, and none of the books in Winterfell ever mentioned anything similar. Could they be an example of magic, I remember hearing about the city of Lys having a reputation for some kind of magic, but then, who created them? Who has Stannis allied himself with, and why? Is the man so ambitious that he would turn to any means to gain an advantage? And what's that mean for the war to come?*

Looking down at his bruised arms and side, Ranma knew whatever the answers to most of those questions was, the answer for the last was 'nothing good'. For now however, he put that thought aside, turning to the sail-master who had taken over as captain for now. The sooner they left Blackwater Bay and got far away from Dragonstone the better.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Ranma was dealing with the aftermath of the battle against Stannis's vessels, the news of the

battle for King's Landing had begun to spread.

Thanks to the queen's 'largesse', Hoster Tully heard the news of what would be called The Battle of Two Truths and of his son a mere five days after the battle ended. The news that his son was languishing at the king's pleasure nearly gave him a heart attack. If it wasn't for the fact his maester had stayed after giving him the raven's message, he might well have died then and there.

Maester Vyman shook his head leaning back gratefully as he finished examining his lord. And friend too, he had after all served here since becoming a maester, and Hoster was the only lord he had known in that time. "My lord, you do not need me to badger you to tell you this but..."

"I know old friend, I am old, and I am dying." Hoster said the words somewhat philosophically. He had led a full life, and had been sick for over a year now, one could only see the end coming for so long before losing fear of it. "I had hoped to live to see Edmure return, having finally come into his own at last. But that is not to be. How long do you think?"

"At best... I would say another half a year, possibly less." Vyman said sadly.

"So little time left, and so much to put right." Hoster sighed sadly, looking down at the missive in his hands from Queen Cersei fucking Lannister, thinking about what he could do, and what he had to do. "I cannot in good conscience let my son being held captive force me to forget that I speak for all of the Riverlands, not just Riverrun. Yet I cannot bring myself to act in such a way that would endanger him."

He leaned back against the pillows of his bed closing his eyes, thinking. Hoster recalled the talk he had a little over two months back with Lord Mallister about what might be coming, and knew they had both been badly understating the storm that was coming.

After a moment he opened his eyes and looked at Vyman. "Gather up writing material old friend, I have several messages I wish to send off. To House Piper, both branches of House Vance, Seagard, House Whent and House Ryger."

Vyman's eyes went up at the list of houses, all counted among the most powerful noble houses in the Riverlands for one reason or another, be it land, men under their command, or the position of their castles, like House Whent, which in other ways was the weakest listed. "Not the Freys my lord?"

"No, I do not trust Old Walder further than I could walk these days." Vyman laughed at the weak joke, since Hoster had been unable to walk for months. He smirked suddenly, though there was no humor in it. "Also prepare one to Winterfell. I wish to send a message to my daughter."

OOOOOO

Nor was Hoster the only one to be contemplating the outcome of the battle in King's Landing. Thanks to Cersei having sent off a message as soon as the battle ended, her father received the news almost as quickly as his fellow Lord Paramount despite the greater distance between Casterly rock and King's Landing in comparison to the distance to Riverrun.

*Tywin frowned down at the raven carried missive in his hand, thinking hard. Cersei has done as well as she could given the Stark's power grab. Hah, for all their vaunted honor, the Starks are as ambitious as any other family. Making a grab for the crown once the heir who they had the most influence over is dead, I wonder how they would have kept it after? Or did Stannis and Eddard have some agreement between them? Or Renly perhaps, though that doesn't make as much sense. This idea of Littlefinger that Cersei and Pycelle mentions is interesting, but I can't see any truth in it. Yet it will do for now, though I wonder how the Starks would have justified removing Joffrey from his position.*

For all his intelligence and insight, it never occurred to Tywin that the Starks were simply following the dictates of their own sense of honor when removing Joffrey. Nor would he even consider the blandishments upon Cersei and her children that Renly and Stannis spread as more than the two justifying their actions. This was a combination of two things. First he was projecting his own ways of thinking onto the Starks, believing Eddard's honor a front, it would never even occurred to him he was telling the truth about Joffrey's heritage, which neatly tied into his second reason for dismissing it. He simply didn't care if it was true or not, all he cared about was his family's influence that was all.

*The news of Tommen's death however means there is another player in this game. Varys perhaps, or his mysterious backer? He is the one I would assume would truly be connected to the Targaryen siblings, though I won't order*

*Cersei to try and come up with another reason behind the Starks actions. Or is it someone else entirely, Eddard was right about one thing, from all accounts the Sand Snake Tyene had ample opportunity but no motive to kill Tommen.*

*Someone worried about Stark influence? But that implies they are not worried about our own. Perhaps they think they can influence or predict our actions, where they could not do so with the Starks? That is worrying, yet until evidence comes up to point at who was really behind young Tommen's death, there is little I can do, save prepare for open war, both against the Baratheon brothers and House Stark, but against everyone else.*

With that thought Tywin summoned a servant to prepare messengers to send out, as well as to call Casterly Keep's measter. He had a goodly number of messages to send. Tywin Lannister, Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, was calling his banners to war.

Once they received his messages, the minor houses that looked directly to his house for lordship and the city of Lannisport gathered their forces at the Rock, along with the men of his own house. Within a fortnight, he was marching with a force of twelve thousand pulled from his family's lands, the city and those of the minor houses around them.

Tywin left his brother Kevan, who was grief-stricken at the death of his son Lancel in the battle in King's Landing, behind to rule from Casterly Keep with four hundred men of his house as a garrison. He left orders for the family's navy to be brought out of dock and placed on a wartime footing and the Lannisport city watch strengthened.

The ships would be manned from conscripts from the city, but would be kept in a defensive stance for now while they were trained up. After that though, Tywin wanted them ready for operations against his enemies in the Reach or Riverlands, or even the Iron Islands, who Tywin fully expected to see this chaos as an opportunity to revolt again.

The city watch in contrast was comprised of volunteers. These men were better trained, led and equipped than the gold cloaks, and would be strengthened further while Tywin rode to reinforce King's Landing.

OOOOOO

Thoros of Myr was a red priest of R'hllor, though he wasn't a fanatic like Melisandre by any means, nor had ever exhibited the powers she showed, assuming they were a sign of the favor of R'hllor. Really he was more known as one of the king's drinking buddies than a religious man, as well as a fairly good warrior. Still, though he would possibly have counted himself as an atheist more than anything else these days, some of his beliefs were still the same now as they had always been, and he hated rapists or child murderers. Which was why, several days after the events in King's Landing had begun to spread, his eyes were boring into the man across from him in the command conference.

Amory Lorch was a fat, choleric knight who had been Gregor Clegane's companion when they scaled the walls of the Red Keep and slaughtered the Targaryen royal family. He had also taken full part in the sack and rapine of the Red Keep. And like Clegane he had not been charged afterward. Unlike Gregor though, Lorch had the presence of mind to stay well away from King's landing so had not been present for the tourney where Gregor had met his end. But he had been chosen to lead the Westerlands portion of the anti-bandit force, which might have been a subtle warning by Tywin that the man was under his protection.

The man had brought 400 and then with him, adding half again to the forces Thoros and Lord Dondarrion could command against the wily bandits. But that didn't change the fact that Sir Thoros despised him with every fiber of his being. In his mind this man was just as complicit as the Mountain That Rode (and oh was it pleasant to mentally change that to the past tense) in the rape and murder of that horrible day.

He and his force had already been here, searching for the bandits on the Westerlands side of the border. There were several long crags and a few tiny trails that led to the other side of fortresses like the Golden Tooth and others, which guarded the only large scale entrances between the Riverlands into the Westerlands. The back trails and mountain passes couldn't allow a large force through them, but the bandits seemed to be managing very well by filtering smaller groups in or out one at a time, and Lorch and his men seemed a little ragged around the edges. But they had been able to confirm the bandits had not crossed back into the Westerlands, and had put smaller blocking forces in place to keep them trying to cross over again without battle.

It had taken them several days to even find the bandits, despite the size of the bandit's forces. They had been able to get to the border between the Riverlands and the Westerlands relatively quickly thanks to having brought along extra horses for every man even their infantry, so it had only taken them three weeks to get here. But it took six days since arriving on the border, their scouts slogging through the mountains and woodlands to find the bandits, who had retreated from the more populous areas for now into the mountain range but not across them.

"All right, we've finally found these bastards. I want no fancy tactics or strategy, simply encircle the camp and wipe them out." Lord Dondarrion, the overall leader of this mission stated.

The bandits had occupied the burned-out village they first sacked and had even repaired it to a certain degree. Beric wondered why the hell they had bothered creating a permanent base like this at all as it only gave their pursuers a target. Yet he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Besides, bandits weren't exactly known for thinking ahead. This group probably figured thanks to their recent round of successes that they were unbeatable. He said so aloud, then added grimly, "let us disabuse them of this notion." All the commanders nodded grimly at that.

The following day the battle began at dawn. As soon as there was light to see by the archers, about a hundred all told, considering there haven't been that many in the city to begin with, began to pepper the hold with arrows. In response the bandits rushed out en-mass. Waiting with the cavalry Thoros was surprised to see how many of them there were, he wouldn't have thought they'd be able to put that many people into that small a holdfast.

He smirked however as they crossed the distance they had cut out of the surrounding woodlands and the burned-out houses. "Sound the charge!" At his command two-hundred mounted knights and their retainers broke cover, lances couched as they charged the force of bandits. Their job was simple, break the bandits charging line of infantry, then let the infantry in.

The bandits however surprised Thoros, quickly breaking off their charge and retreating into the burned-out ruins around their fortress, which hampered his cavalry's ability to get at them. He scowled, pulling up his horse and wheeling away.

From where he was standing with the infantry Lord Dondarrion scowled. "Bring up the infantry. We're going to have to go in and dig those bastards out."

Nearby Thoros slid off his horse, grimacing as his stomach flattened against the horse's side. *I'll have to go on some kind of diet or something* he thought to himself irritably. *Getting too fat for this.* Yet despite his weight the red priest moved lightly on his feet after the infantry catching up with Lord Dondarrion w easily. "House to house fighting in a burned-out village." Lord Dondarrion said shaking his head as Thoros joined him. "This will not be pleasant."

"It's a small village." Thoros replied. "Won't be as bad as you think lad, there're too many of us, we can simply attack them from all sides as we wanted."

The bandits hadn't even bothered retreating to their Fort, simply making a makeshift shield wall within the burned-out rubble of what must've been a prosperous inn of some kind before the bandits' initial arrival, nearly as large as the small holdfast itself. With the rubble of that and the holdfast guarding their flank and back they were able to concentrate their forces on two sides, and force his men to come to them only from those directions.

Arrows began to hit the attackers from the holdfast and Beric cursed. These bandits were fighting far better than he expected, far more organized. "Bring up the archers!" he shouted

At his side Thoros frowned looking around in the mass of infantry as they surged forward despite the arrows falling among them. There didn't seem to be as many infantry as there should be, and Thoros began to feel uneasy.

Moments later he found out why. The runner Dondarrion had sent to the archers arrived back gasping looking over his shoulder in shock. "Lord Dondarrion, the Westerlanders, they..."

A sudden shout from behind him came, and the Westerlanders roared in from behind cutting into the Rverlanders and King's men.

Thoros didn't have time to wonder why the Westerlanders had suddenly turned on them. He suddenly knew that the archers were all dead, cut down from behind by those that should've been their allies. None of them had even worn more than simple leather armor, in hand-to-hand they wouldn't have stood a chance against the armsmen from Westerlands, all of whom were kitted out in chain mail wielding heavy weapons.

"Betrayal!" Thoros shouted, "Form up on me!" That was as far as Thoros could get before the battle reached his position at the back of their infantry line.

He slashed his sword forward quickly, slicing into one man's face, sending him down with a scream as his eye and nose were slashed open by the blow. The next instant he ran his sword through a second man's chest, piercing his chain mail before his shield took a blow from a spear that was coming for him from his right side.

Rage filled Thoros, rage at this treachery. Lord Lannister was obviously playing his games. He realized what this had



been, a trap set for someone, possibly one of the Starks, possibly even the king himself. Whatever it was it was barefaced treason, and he would not let it slide.

A sudden throbbing sensation filled him as his rage peaked, coursing from his soul to the hand that held his sword, the same sword he had used for years for the alchemists fire trick that had stood him in good stead in many a tournament. "R'hllor curse your black souls, I hope you **burn!**"

Suddenly the throbbing throughout his body intensified, flowing out of his hand into his blade. Thoros' sword burst into life without him having to coat it with alchemist's fire and instead of green this flame was bright red and white. It was blazing with so much heat that the metal should have begun to melt, but the blade itself seemed to be immune to its own aura.

Men stumbled back from him and Thoros roared as he charged to meet them. The flames of his blade were hotter and brighter than ever, slicing through his enemies' swords or even plate armor, sending five men to their deaths in the next few moments.

The overall battle however was turning quickly against the forces loyal to the king. The Westerlanders had simply planned things too well. Not only had they hid half of their force from the king's loyal men, always sending out their own scouts in that direction so that none of the others even realized they were there, but that half of their force was cavalry. While Thoros led his fierce rally, these knights had decimated the loyalists, sending only a few survivors reeling through the wood lands around the main battle. Once that had been done, they turned to finish the job, riding around the edge of the burned out village and killing any loyalist that tried to break away from the ruins.

Yet with Thoros in the lead and the fear his blazing sword generated in their opponents his men were able to break out of the trap for now, sending the Westerlander infantry falling back in disarray. But the bandits pressed them hard as they retreated from the ruins of the village in a controlled wedge. Thoros and his sword could only be in one place at once, and the victorious Westerlander cavalry hammered his other flank hard. Dondarrion's barked orders and his own example forced the men to hold and they continued on, unhorsing several dozen knights but at ruinous cost.

Dondarrion knew a moment of despair as he saw in front of him the Westerlander infantry Thoros had first spooked remerge from the trees. They took position at the edge of the clearing of the village, while the bandits and the cavalry closed in, each of them spreading to envelope his forces as he had hoped to do to the so-called bandits. Now he could see among them several men wearing the colors of the Bloody Mummies, a mercenary band known to be made up of murderers, thieves and rapists from all over Essos and Westeros.

Still he rallied his men, trying to make for the trees. With Thoros and his still burning sword warding away the cavalry on their flank the embattled force was able to reach the edge of the area, though they lost men of their men fighting their way across the open area around the former village. For some reason the ten men from Winterfell that Lord Stark had added to their force were fighting harder than any of the others, pushing towards the outer edge of the forest in a concentrated group.

At the back of the force Thoros knew that none of them would get away from this unless the pursuit could be drawn off somehow. He looked over several dozen men's heads toward Lord Dondarrion who was making his way through the melee towards him with two others guarding his back and flank. These two and several others closed in around both leaders, allowing them a moment of respite despite the mercenaries and traitors closing in once more.

"None of us are going to get out of this!" the younger man said grimly, shaking his head and wiping away some of the blood that had accumulated from a gash over one eye. Beric had been reckoned a handsome knight back in King's Landing, but even this brief brush with real battle had changed him, adding dark lines to his face.

"Some of us can!" Thoros replied nodding over to Jaryd Waterman, the leader of the Winterfell men. All of them were still on their feet, despite killing at least three times their number so far in traitors and mercenaries, but you could see that they were edging towards weariness now. "Take as many men as you can and get out of here." Thoros went on bluntly. "I'll hold these bastards off."

Lord Dondarrion's eyes widened and he made to grab Thoros by the shoulder, but the red priest shook his head and pushed the younger man away. "I've lived a full life already lad, you've got yours yet to live, and a fiancé to look forward to seeing. Besides, this is something only I can do." The red priest, who had long since devoted himself more to the wine bottle than his god, said.

He was saying this while looking down at his flaming sword, before looking up and around determinately, his lips forming a snarl. "R'hllor will burn you to ash!" With that bellow Thoros charged toward where the cavalry were about to strike the right side of their force once more.

"Baratheon!" He shouted. "For the king! Burn in the fires you faithless scum!" With that he raised his sword in both hands. With an effort of will the fat red priest somehow grabbed the burning power of his god he felt coursing through his body and channeling it further into his blade. The pillar of fire lengthened from the edge of the blade first becoming as large as a pike, then as large as six men, and wider besides.

He slashed the fire blade down in front of him, slicing over a dozen men in its path into pieces. The sight of this and their natural fear of fire caused the horses of the incoming cavalry to shriek with terror. They bolted turning away from the battle despite whatever their owners could do.

Thoros turned his mystic blade to the side slicing right and left, cutting or immolating another two dozen men as the remainder of the loyalist force ran off behind him. Arrows were still following around them, and the 'bandits' were still attacking from one end and the infantry from the other. But Thoros turned, slicing down several infantrymen before turning his attention to the mercenaries, his eyes becoming glazed over as the power that had been filling him started to wane.

He caught himself as he stumbled however, seeing Amory Lorch trying to rally his cavalry to charge around him. "LORCH! Come to the flame, child killer!" Thoros roared, barreling forward with sudden energy, unmindful of the arrow that slammed into his shoulder. He cut five other men down before Lorch turned in fear, finally realizing his peril. His fat face blanched, and he tried to turn away, tried to pull his horse around. But terrified of the oncoming apparition it bucked, throwing him to the ground before bolting away.

Lorch raised his sword desperately trying to parry, but even as the flaming blade began to splutter, the power Thoros had been using dissipating, it was still powerful enough for this. The flaming blade went through Lorch's sword as if it wasn't there, then went on to cut deep into his shoulder cleaving the fat man in a diagonal slash, armor and all. "Die traitor!"

As Lorch fell with a last despairing gurgle, Thoros turned at bay only to gasp in agony as someone slammed a spear into his back. He lurched forward, but desperately kept his feet. Thoros frantically raised his once again normal sword to block an incoming, but he had little strength left, and it was knocked from his grasp. The spear wielder pulled the shaft of it out of the red priest's back, causing even more damage. Thoros gasped, feeling all his remaining strength leaving him. He fell to his knees, barely even able to look up as a Westerlander brought his sword down. Thus Thoros of Myr, red priest of R'hllor, a man who everyone in court had seen as a drunk but who had proven himself a true priest of his god on this blood soaked battlefield, died.

OOOOOO

Thoros' self-immolating stand had given Lord Dondarrion and the others enough time to rally their men, bursting through the thin Westerlander line at the edge of the trees before rushing on, running through the trees. They ran and kept on running as far as they could, many even discarding their armor in order to run faster, trying to get away from the pursuers that would no doubt become.

After several hours Lord Dondarrion saw a spot up higher in the mountain side, a sort of shelf of rock about twice as tall as a man, continuing as far to either side as he could see. "Rally up there!" He shouted, pushing his way forwards and climbing up the sheer rock face.

It was tough going, especially for the exhausted and demoralized troops, but they eventually made it. Beric did not let them rest, sending a dozen men all around to discover if there was an easier way up than the one they had come. There wasn't, this little cliff continued until it shrank at both ends merging with the rest of the mountain face. With that confirmed, the Stormlands lord allowed his men to rest.

He went around, ignoring his own wounds, numerous but small, and his exhaustion. None of the heavily injured had been able to run away, and he sighed sadly. He only had about a hundred and fifteen men here, possibly a hundred and eighteen considering that three of the scouts had yet to return. He looked up as a shout came, and smiled on pleasure.

Coming towards them through the woods, looking somewhat better than the rest of his men were Anguy of the Dornish Marches and three scouts, each of them lugging a dead deer. Anguy had been one of the surprise volunteers to join the force assembled in King's Landing, but he had proven his worth as an archer and scout. Beric had thought him dead with the rest of the archer force, but evidently he had switched over to scouting just in time to avoid that fate, though right now the game he and his fellows brought with them were much more welcome.

Beric looked over at his squire, young Edric Dayne, his squire. The boy had stayed at his side throughout the battle, and even had slain one or two men in doing so. Now that the adrenaline was leaving him he seemed almost ready to

go into shock at either the betrayal or as a normal reaction after a battle. Beric's voice however snapped him out of it for now. "Get out flint and tinder lad. Let's get some food in us while we think of what to do next."

Jaryd had recovered by this time, and he went around as well checking on his own men first than the others. He came back shaking his head. "We've got about sixty five men able to fight here, and of them only my own men still have armor, about twenty others retain their weapons. Well I shouldn't say that." The Northerner shrugged his shoulders. "We have seven archers with us, all of them still retain their bows, and the scouts still have their short swords and javelins or small bows, but all of the other men are either injured, without armor, or both. The rest though don't have anything save for a dagger here and there."

Lord Dondarrion nodded, looking around at them thoughtfully. The venison was cooking under young Eddic's watchful gaze, and you could see the men eager for the sup, the promise of good food heartening them all, but they were still looking shocky. A battle lost could do that to any warrior especially one like that, even without adding in Thoros' amazing abilities. Beric realized he would have to think about those later. Certainly the red priest had never shown anything like that before, but right now it was unimportant. "We need to think about what to do now." He said looking around at them all.

One of the Crownlands lords spat to one side. "Survive." he said bluntly. "Those Seven-damned Mummies won't be interested in us, they've done their work. This was a trap." He said simply, looking around at them all.

Lord Davit Wendwater was the Lord of a very minor house, whose holdings were south of King's Landing along the river of the same name on the outer edge of the Kingswood. He spent most of his time at King's Landing because his younger brother was a much better land manager than he was. This way Davit kept out of his brother's hair, his brother got to look after their family interests, and Davit was able to have fun.

Despite his shortcomings as a land owner Davit was politically astute man, one who never took sides in any conflict if he could help it. He had been known as one of Robert's drinking partners and had decided to come on this trip to make certain his martial skills hadn't rusted.

He now shared his opinion on what had happened. "Someone's decided to take the game of politics to the next level, and considering how we were betrayed and who was leading them, it has to be Lord Lannister. That fat coward Lorch wouldn't have dreamed of doing this without someone higher up giving him the orders. I'd bet that this was meant to draw out some of the Stark men or their supporters, hell it could have been meant for young Ranna considering how long it would have taken to set up."

"Agreed," said Lord Dondarrion sighing sadly. "That means that something might have gone on back in King's Landing as well. Lord Lannister may be a traitorous bastard, but he's an intelligent one. This was probably just one arrow in his quiver."

"That doesn't matter to us here and now." Davit replied shaking his head scowling angrily through his wide bushy mustache. "For my part I would not have it be said we just gave up the fight."

"Look at us!" said another man, this time a Riverlander scout they had met near the border, a Whent man. Beric recognized him as one of the scouts that they had met upon reaching the border. "There's less than a hundred and fifty of us, and we're not well armed, or even in good condition." He looked askance at the Winterfell men, who were indeed all still armed and seemed to be recovering from the run through the woods better than the others. "Well some of us aren't anyway."

The winter fell men all shrugged their shoulders and he went on. "What are we going to do?"

"We were sent out here to fight the Bloody Mummies even if they were simply posing as bandits, I suggest that's what we do. We fall back for now, find some way to get ourselves some more weapons. Makeshift spears and the like aren't that difficult to make." Beric replied, smiling faintly, remembering many a time had to do the same on hunting expeditions when he was younger. "We can harass them, attack their supply lines, and create small ambushes and traps. Do what we can to protect the small folk in the area from their predations."

"So we will act like bandits to fight bandits? That's fine, but I demand we have a name. All the good bandit groups in history have had names." Jaryd said laughing lightly. For his part, he knew he couldn't get back to King's Landing in time to do any good, so he might as well do what he could to make the Lannisters uncomfortable.

Beric Dondarrion laughed looking at them all. "We are a ragtag bunch, all of us coming from nearly every land in Westeros. Borders no longer matter to us, and we are united in purpose against House Lannister are we not, like brothers should be?"

For a moment the men around him looked at one another, then one by one all one hundred and twenty of them nodded.

Beric smiled, nodding back. "Very well then, I name us the Brothers Without Borders."

OOOOOOO

Vargo Hoat, leader of the Brave Companions smirked, looking down at the body of the man who had been supposed to start giving him orders after this. Despite the red priest's astonishing power, the battle had been a resounding success. His own force had only lost about ninety men all told, though the Westerlanders had been hammered worse, and their cavalry had been unhorsed entirely. It would be a special miracle if any of the horses came back.

Well, it was a resounding success from Vargo's perspective. He knew though that none of the Stark men had died and he certainly hadn't seen the house's banner. So it looked as if Lord Lannister's plan had failed to draw out their real target. But the battle itself had been executed as well as could be expected even with the red priest's fantastical magic, and Vargo could see no reason why the fact their prey wasn't here would reflect on him.

After a moment's contemplation Vargo smiled evilly. He knew orders would be coming soon, the Golden Tooth was not that far away from here after all, and he had already sent a runner back to tell them the good news. Until orders came however, he was going to act as he saw fit. After all, his actual mission was over, and Lord Lannister wouldn't begrudge him or his men some more fun, would he? "Bring out the map." he said grinning evilly. "I think we should try to hit..."

OOOOOOO

Ranma stood by Brynden, the both of them leaning against the mast, watching a few of the armsmen accompany Domeric on some pipes as the bard led them through a lively dancing tune. Daenerys, Myrcella and Alayaya were dancing around one another and with some of the men. Many of the other armsmen were laughing and joking with all three, and Ranma smiled at the sight.

Normally the idea of highborn noble girls acting in such a manner with simple armsmen would have terrified or appalled Southern Lords and ladies, but this was a special circumstance. And there was no chance of any of the men trying anything with the girls, not under the watchful eyes of their fellow men, Lord Stark who sat nearby in a chair brought out for him, or Ranma himself.

But it was also a sign of something that amused Ranma when he realized it. These men respected him, and their own Lord and Ranma's father as their Lord Paramount, there was no doubt about that. But in the two and a half weeks since leaving Blackwater Bay behind them they had come to love Sansa, Daenerys and Myrcella.

Even with the knowledge of her questionable birth becoming a common secret as it were, Myrcella had befriended them all with her kind, gentle manner, her friendship with the Starks, and more importantly her work as the ship's healer. Many men here who might have died after the battle against the Dragonstone men were still alive because of her medical knowledge and Alayaya's steady stitching. She wasn't a maester, she didn't save all or even half of those injured, but Myrcella did the best she could with the tools and knowledge she had, which was enough for the men if not for her. The guilt she very visibly felt about her shortcomings had also helped the men come to love the little 'Baratheon' princess.

The men of House Manderly of course had already been prepared to love Sansa, so that wasn't nearly as surprising. The little gifts that she had shared and designed for Lord and small folk alike for years at Winterfell had made certain that the men knew 'the lady' behind the scarfs. Alayaya too was no surprise given her aiding Merry in her healer role. There'd been a few problems when her past profession had come to light, but Brynden and Ranma had dealt with them swiftly. Her dry, earthy sense of humor and her willingness to flirt back with anyone who approached her in the right manner was also a hit, even if she didn't let the game go too far.

Daenerys on the other hand... She was charismatic on a level that was simply astonishing. She had a caring manner toward her friends matched with an implacable fury towards her enemies, and a fierce courage as fiery as the flames her dragons had begun to routinely practice since the fight against the Shadow Warriors, both of which she had shown in that battle. Her intelligence was also easy to see, everyone could see that regardless of what the actual conversation was about. No one had said the word in Ranma's presence, but it was clear to everyone aboard that Daenerys was a queen in the making.

There was also something primal about her at times, a fact she shared with Ranma. They were both extremely honest and straightforward, and at times acted somewhat like the animals they were bonded with. Daenerys was

playful and fiery like her dragons with her friends, and at times that carried over into... other things. To say their flirting leaned heavily towards the physical rather than the verbal was an understatement.

Ranma couldn't take his eyes off her now as Daenerys spun around, dancing with Alayaya arm in arm in some kind of jig or other from Essos. Her silver hair flashed in the torches set here and there around the deck. Her leather jerkin and leggings, which were not exactly clinging to her, still somehow set her body on display at least for Ranma, and Daenerys' violet eyes were snapping with delight while she danced. After a final twirl she turned and saw him watching her sending him a small, yet somehow sultry smile that set his blood to racing.

"I'm happy for you." Sansa said, moving up beside him and sipping at a cup of water. Luckily the ship's stores had been fully stocked before leaving King's Landing, so there was no need to ration anything.

Beside her Fenris moved, Sunfyre and Rhaegon by his side. They had grown some since they had hatched, and now when they walked the two came up to Sansa's knee, and were slightly longer than they were tall. They got along with Sansa and Merry so long as Daenerys was nearby and would even let the two young girls touch them. For some odd reason they wouldn't let Alayaya touch them though, a fact that would have cost her a finger without Daenerys there to warn her.

Ranma turns to his sister to see Sansa smiling up at him, her lips quirked into an impish smirk. "Happy for what sister?"

"For you and Daenerys. She's an excellent match for you in temperament, though I don't think mother will be pleased. She had her heart set on a dynastic marriage between you and House Tyrell, but in my opinion she's far better than that bitch Margaery."

Ranma laughed, pulling her into a one armed hug. "I think that might be the first time I've ever heard you curse, can I ask what brought that about?"

"And may I ask you what your own opinion on Margaery is?" Daenerys said, stepping up to join them picking up a small cup of water and thanking the crewman who had brought them out. The man smiled a gap toothed smile back at her. Behind them the dancing stopped, though the music kept going, as Domic began to tell a story.

Daenerys wasn't paying attention to that just now. Her eyes were on Ranma's face one eyebrow quirked in query. She had subtly asked that question before but Ranma had never actually answered it.

To her faint surprise however Ranma now simply waved his hand airily. "nothing beyond friendship occurred between me and Margaery. We spent about two months getting to know one another in King's Landing, but because she was also ordered to make a play for Joffrey, I never took the courtship seriously, and she realized it too, and decided to stop trying to flirt with me, instead becoming a friend."

"I see," Daenerys said thoughtfully one eyebrow still raised and Ranma took her hand quickly. He shook his head wordlessly telling her she didn't need to worry, and the spark of something of what could have been jealousy disappeared from her eyes as she squeezed his hand. She was already beginning to be irritated by how Myrcella looked at her Ranma, she certainly didn't want to know there was another highborn lady out there who might have designs on him.

Nearby, Eddard laughed quietly but with feeling. Looking at Daenerys and Ranma was like looking at a switched, distorted image of some sort of when Rhaegar and Lyanna met one another. Looking back it was obvious to him that both of them were besotted with one another on their few meetings, despite Rhaegar already having been married to Elia Martell, and Lyanna being betrothed to Robert Baratheon.

That thought brought a frown to his face however as he wondered if the time had come to share some truths about that, and about Jon Snow's origins. He decided after a moment that no, the time had not yet come to say those secrets out loud. Jon deserved to hear it first after all. But Eddard vowed he would tell Jon about it the moment they got home.

He was jolted out of his thoughts when Sansa sat down on the deck next to his chair, looking up her brother. "Well I for one would like to hear one of your stories Ranma, rather than the ones Domic is sharing, those are all old bards' tales, yours are much more interesting. I would hear something new, something real. What about that story that you told Arya about your trip up to the Wall?"

Perhaps it was the convivial atmosphere or perhaps it was because of the thoughts Ned had previously been thinking, but he spoke up now, drawing all the youngsters' attention to him along with Brynden. "If you wish a true

story Sansa, I have one. It is one that started the friendship between House Stark and House Reed, though I'm afraid it only has romance on the periphery of it."

Sansa shrugged unconcerned of that, while Myrcella and Alayaya joined them, leaving the crew to their own devices. Ned smiled at the newcomers, then began his tale. Regardless of what began after that day, it was still a shining memory in many ways, when he gained a friend, when the world was still simple, before all the smiles died. "I remember it like yesterday. My sister and I had journeyed down with several dozen other men and women from Winterfell to a Tourney being held at Harrenhal by lord Whent. Others of the North came as well, most particularly Lord Reed, though he was not Lord at the time. As you know crannogmen are seemingly deformed, and this caused problems for Howland with many of the southern lords and knights. Well, Lyanna was not one to..."

Over the next hour Ned's simple yet heartfelt words drew them all in. That tale was followed by others from Ranma, and even Sansa as the wolves continued to welcome the dragon, the former whore and the possible stag/possible lioness into the pack.

Later that night, Daenerys and the other girls retired to their room, though Sansa remained behind for a moment to speak to her father and Ranma. They were going to compose a message to send from White Harbor to tell their family more about what had been going on most particularly Catelyn, informing her of what had happened to Sansa, and Petyr's part in it. To that end they wanted to talk with her to get her impression of the man, and what might be really driving him. They were in no rush, they were still a few days away from rounding the Paps into the Bite, but they wanted Sansa to be thinking about it for a bit.

This allowed Daenerys to broach the subject with Myrcella that she had wanted to speak to her about for several days now. As soon as the door closed behind them she turned to Merry and said "So tell me little lion, what are your feelings towards Ranma?"

Myrcella blushed slightly, but stared up at Daenerys defiantly. "I would ask you to remember I am still legally a Baratheon until it is proven otherwise, Lady Targaryen. And I think you know the answer to that question all too well." she smirked. "Why? Are you jealous, or worried?"

In response Daenerys simply laughed lightly, though her violet eyes glinted dangerously. "Neither, my position is secure, yours, as you pointed out, is quite up in the air isn't it? Though for reasons beyond your control, of course."

Myrcella flinched a little at that. Everyone aboard ship knew that her heritage was in deep suspicion, indeed it was almost certain that she was not a Baratheon or and therefore not a trueborn, despite Ranma's willingness to wait until it was conclusively proven. She still refused to believe that however, both for herself and for Tommen though that was simple pride and hope. Once Stannis and Renly spread their version of her mother's perfidy, Myrcella would no longer be able to protect Tommy's memory.

Still she fired back. "My position might not be secure, but I've known Ranma longer than you have. And regardless of whether or not my father's heritage is within me, my **mother's** certainly is, which connects me to one of the most powerful families in Westeros. You on the other hand only have your dragons to offer. A formidable force to be sure, but only on the battlefield, not in terms of money, prestige, politics or alliances. You might be ahead of me now, but don't get too comfortable, because I have no doubt I can get Lady Catelyn on my side." She wasn't certain of that, but wasn't about to back down either.

"I don't suppose." Alayaya said from where she had begun to undress for bed, cutting through the tension quickly (and deliberately). "That I should mention that I have a bit of a crush on Ranma too? It was rather easy to fall for him and his Rock Hurler persona, so mysterious so interesting, so **masculine** even through that invisibility technique of his."

Both Myrcella and Daenerys turned to glare at the Summer Island woman. She smirked a little at their expressions, then shook her head. "Of course I know now nothing can come from that, but a girl can dream. I think however that you two should stop this rivalry of yours before it actually begins. Ranma cares for both of you, he even cares for me in a way. You'll only put him in an untenable position if you keep arguing, keep trying to make him choose between you. Eventually you'll force him to choose sides, and whichever person wins he'll resent for forcing him to do that."

Daenerys frowned then nodded thoughtfully while Myrcella scowled for a moment before nodding in turn. With that Alayaya looked directly at Daenerys. "Daenerys, you have to realize that Ranma does feelings for Myrcella. They might be sisterly, I think they are actually, certainly he's never done anything to show anything otherwise."

Unnoticed by the other two Merry flushed a little, remembering the time the day after Sansa's rescue when she had hugged Ranma and could feel him reacting to her body pressed against his.

She didn't say anything though while Alayaya continued. "You might eventually need to meet this Dacey woman that he's mentioned having had a relationship with, you'll have to simply acknowledge it and realize it's no longer a factor. Your place is secure, so long as you don't grind it into Myrcella's or Dacey's faces."

With that she turned to Myrcella. "Myrcella," she said softly. "I hate to say this, but even if were a natural born Lannister, even if the Citadel gets back and says that yes there have been a few girls born with golden hair from previous Lannister/Baratheon marriage, you and Ranma marrying formally would never happen. Not with how he and the rest of the North will view House Lannister after word of what occurred gets out."

Daenerys knew that was putting it lightly considering their long term plans, which she and Ranma had discussed at length. What their policy going forward boiled down to was this: house Lannister had been built on treachery from the first, they were proud of the fact that they had tricked the previous owners of the Casterly Rock out of their wealth. They were a family of traitors, ruthlessness and cold ambition. In the Westeros that Ranma and Daenerys were prepared to build in the coming years such things in a house of power could not be borne. To that end the war would only end with the complete destruction of the Lannisters. Whether that meant all of its members would die, be sent to the Wall or otherwise dealt with was still up in the air and they only had some specific plans in mind for a few of them, but that was the long term goal.

Outwardly Daenerys merely nodded thoughtfully not knowing how Merry would react to that idea, then sighed turning to face the younger girl directly. "I'll apologize for what I said, I'm not..." she paused waving her hands as if she was trying to conjure the words from thin air. "I'm not used to **this**, I've never fallen for a man before. I've never even considered that love would be a major factor in my marriage, considering my brother's and my dire straits for so long. I knew I would have to have a dynastic marriage, it's just come as a shock to me how much... how much I have come to... to care for Ranma in so short a time. My jealousy got the better of me, and I apologize."

Myrcella looked up at the taller, though only just, Daenerys, then nodded. "That was well said, and I accept your apology. I, I'll try to stop flirting with him I suppose. I don't seem to have much of a knack for it since he certainly hasn't noticed, and though I hate to admit it Alayaya is right."

(Actually Ranma had noticed, it made uncomfortable and like in King's Landing he really how to deal with it. SO Ranma had fallen back on his old life's standby defensive response to anything female related: Ignore it and hope it goes away.)

Myrcella sighed sadly, remembering a few fond memories of her mother and wondering what would happen to her. Would she die somehow during the war, during a sack of the red keep or something? Things like that happened after all, and far worse she knew. Or if the Stark's faction won, would Cersei be exiled to some motherhouse or other, with naught but the clothes on her back? Myrcella couldn't say that the woman didn't deserve it, she certainly did if even the little bit about Joffrey alone being illegitimate was true, let alone herself and Tommy. But it was a harsh thing to think about your own mother.

"It's just..." she said shyly, returning to the current discussion. "It's just he's so, so..."

"Magnificent?" Daenerys supplied, laughing quietly and then reaching out to pull younger girl into a hug. "I know, trust me he swept me off my feet too. Rather literally actually, I don't think I've ever shared the story of how Ranma and I first met did I?"

From there on all three of the girls shared how they had first met Ranma. Sansa came just as Alayaya began her story, which caused Daenerys and Myrcella to laugh at the way Ranma had rescued her and the other girl from the corrupt gold cloaks. Sansa told them a few stories in turn, and the night ended on a high note.

Though as she fell asleep in her makeshift hammock Daenerys realized that Myrcella hadn't said she would be trying to give up her crush on Ranma, only that she would no longer act on it. After a moment she shrugged her shoulders in the dark, while the two draklings flew up from their bed beneath her join her in the hammock. For some reason they enjoyed the rocking motion. *If she hasn't, well there's nothing I can do there, and every girl is allowed to dream.* With that complacent thought, Daenerys put her arms on the sides of her two little ones, and began to fall asleep, still wondering what the future would bring them all.

OOOOOO

Jon finished reading the short message that had been passed on by Lord Manderly aloud, then looked around at Lady Catelyn, his siblings, master Luwin and Rodrick Cassel. He set it down gently, then spoke in a calm somber tone. "And so we finally have confirmation of treason in the south by the Lannisters, though the full extent of our losses isn't clear in this."

Luwin nodded, speaking his small piece before anyone else could. "Lord Manderly also said he had imprisoned his maester, who is a Lannister by birth. Lord Manderly intends to keep him under house arrest until this war is settled. He'll be kept in comfort, but isolation."

Jon nodded, wondering if that was what was in store for Tyrion. What else his brother could be planning for the little lion he had no clue.

Arya's reaction caught his attention then, and he watched as she slammed her fist down on the table, growling like their totem. Or like her own Nymeria, who seemingly had sensed her distress and was now prowling around the room. "How can you be so calm! All this says is that our family was betrayed! It doesn't say anything about their condition only that they're 'coming home'. Sansa and father could be dead for all we know!"

"I think not, else the message would have tried to warn of it in some fashion. Have some trust in Ranma, I have no doubt all three are alive." Jon said coolly, his tone a sharp contrast to his sister's.

It was only when one looked at Ghost however that they saw Jon's true feelings on the matter at hand. The normally calm, quiet direwolf was growling audibly, his eyes flickering, his teeth bared as if he was about to pounce on someone, for all his body was still otherwise.

Jon's ability to read between the lines of his brother's writing was better than anyone else's, and he could tell that there was a lot that had gone on in King's Landing, most of it bad. For instance Ranma would have mentioned at least a few of the guards by name, those whose families lived in Winterfell. He would've wanted to reassure them. And the fact that it came from **Ranma's** hand, yet signed Lord Stark, was telling. Ranma's handwriting was distinctive, far blockier than their father's more flowing style. That he didn't mention any of the guards probably meant that they were all dead. Whether or not that meant that just those guards were dead or all, Jon didn't know, but feared.

The rest of the message however, he didn't know what to make of. 'The Stormborn', did that mean he had brought back the Targaryen siblings? Their father had mentioned that in his last message, but why then did the message only mention the girl? And what was the extent of the Lannister treachery? Jon didn't know the answer to those questions, but he was looking forward to finding out.

To Jon's left Catelyn sat at the head of the table, reading the message silently for herself, her face a rictus of fury. Thankfully the babe was elsewhere with his wet nurse, else the face Catelyn was showing would've frightened him deeply. "So it was the Lannisters as I feared." She said coldly. "I wonder how far back their treason goes. And what exactly that treason is, besides Joffrey being illegitimate. I'll note that we haven't received anything from King's Landing, which probably means that whatever it is, they know we will not believe them, and that they are no doubt preparing for war against us."

She leaned back tapping the message with one finger as she tried womanfully to gain control of herself. That Ranma said all of the wolves were coming home was a delight to her, meaning that her husband, Ranma himself, and her daughter were all safe, Jon was right about that. Though possibly not whole since Ranma didn't actually mention their physical well-being, and the fact he wrote the message rather than her husband was telling. That was worrisome, but as long as they were alive she was happy. She was also concerned about what the part about 'Stormborn' meant, and feared given the task Ranma had been sent on she could tell all too easily.

There would be time enough however to worry about that later. For now Catelyn turned her attention to a well-worn topic. "I still think that Bran's near-death experience had something to do with the Lannisters. Perhaps you saw was the queen and her lover, my son?"

Bran, who was sitting next to Arya across from Maester Luwin, shrugged his shoulders. His mother asked him some variant of that question once a week or so, to see if his memory had come back. But it hadn't come back, nor had the feeling in his left foot. All he could still remember from that event was the words 'the things I do for love'. Still he didn't say anything right now.

Jon shrugged. "Personally I think that's rather far-fetched, I believe that incident was precisely what we thought initially, one of the Kingsguard with the queen's maid. Would Cersei truly have been so arrogant as to carry on with her lover in Winterfell, a castle of another Lord Paramount? I wonder though if all of her children are illegitimate. It says here that Joffrey is, but doesn't hint at the other two."

Catelyn waved that off. "We know that my husband and Ranma both had come to care for 'Tommy', and Myrcella is but a little girl." *Though perhaps a young woman by this point.* "You know your brother would not wish to denigrate the memory of someone he cared for, nor Myrcella if he started to see her as a surrogate sister as the messages



from King's Landing said." She still had every one of those messages and kept them in a small wooden box in her room. The whole family read each one again and again in the intervening months between messages.

Arya however scowled, then determinately shook her bad humor off. In the last message that Ranma had written part of he had hinted at the fact that he would much rather see Tommen marry Arya rather than Sansa marry Joffrey. It had been done in a joking manner but it'd still riled her up.

Easily able to discern what Arya was thinking Catelyn smirked at her daughter's constipated expression, shaking her head. "That would've actually been a good match I think. I think you would've been happy with him Arya, though I doubt you would have been happy as queen if he had been named heir over Joffrey."

"I have no doubts about that at all." Arya muttered shaking her head, the accompanying shiver a show of what Arya thought of that idea. She looked over at Jon then back to her mother. "So what are we going to do?"

Catelyn frowned looking over at Rodrick, whose face was set in stone. They both knew the same thing that Jon had realized; if Ranma hadn't mentioned the guardsmen that probably meant they were dead. "I can summon the Lords in my husband's name, though only a few would be able to get here before Ranma and his party arrive if they need to bring their hosts."

"I don't think we should ask them to do so, tell them to call their armsmen up, but we can't afford to send all our remaining forces south, not with what's been going on at the Wall. The force we send will be something we will need to discuss with the lords when they arrive." Jon allowed a small smile to appear on his face, looking over at Bran. "But it will be easier at least for some of them to get here than I bet even Ranma realizes. And it will be easier to armor them here as well."

At that Catelyn smiled proudly at her younger son. Bran flushed under their gazes, and even more when Arya slapped him on the back, but it was a fact that Bran's ingenuity had made a massive impact on two projects that in turn had impacted life in Winterfell, possibly for good.

The ongoing projects to prepare the White Knife to make the river a transportation hub had continued apace over the last few months, with every House whose land it crossed pitching in as well as they could. At this point barges could use large stretches of the river not only on its nearest approaches to Winterfell but even further north to its origin in Long Lake. The entire stretch from White Harbor north until the river forked where one half continued into the wolfswood moving past castle Cerwyn, and the other travelling further north to the Long lake, its nearest point within four days cart travel of Winterfell, was useable for barges. There were still stretches of rapids and of course dozens of small waterfalls, but many of them were marked and had winches in place to help barges up or down them.

This already had a massive effect on their ability to ship goods, most particularly in conjunction with another of Bran's creations, fed by Hathan's discovery on his new holding's land. His holding was near the edge of Stark lands, right on the White knife, and his find had made the small Shieldarm holdfast a very important one. Iron was always in heavy demand, especially in times like these, and an easy to work vein such as his find was an amazing find. But it was Bran's ingenuity that made that iron worth even more.

Even here in the main keep's hall you could hear the bellow of the furnace outside that Bran had helped design and the clamor of blacksmiths as they worked the steel coming out of it. In another universe the furnace that Bran had created would be called a double puddling furnace. There it was one of the first ways found to create large amounts of iron or smaller amounts of steel, and here it served the same purpose.

Bran had been very interested in the work Jon, Ranma and Mikken had put into creating Arya's sword. He had talked to the blacksmith about the process to create a blade, how steel wasn't a single ore, something found naturally in nature, and what other ores had to be added to produce good sword steel, what on Earth would be called carbon steel, and the difference between that and the steel that made the best armor. They both had several things in common, the need for coal to be added to add carbon to the steel, and for the iron of the steel to be heated in a continuous manner.

With the help of the original Bran the Builder's notes, Bran had come up with the design for a massive furnace that could, with the right ingredients, create true steel in huge amounts with far less in terms of manpower. Now besides Mikken there were two dozen blacksmiths and their apprentices working with it to create armor, swords, arrow heads, and pike and lance heads.

Iron, coke and coal flowed into Winterfell down the White Knife or from elsewhere on Stark lands, and weapons and shipments of raw steel flowed further down the White Knife to White Harbor. But the main work was being done here in Winterfell. The same hot springs that kept Winterfell warm gave them both steam to use to power the air pumped

through the furnace, and the water used to cool the steel being worked by the blacksmiths.

Needless to say this was a major force multiplier, in its own way just as important as Ranma, Eddard and Jon's pushing the teamwork training of the armsmen. Many of the houses minor in the North, and even one or two of the noble houses, still armed their armsmen with bronze or iron weapons. And even the Starks and more powerful houses couldn't armor the majority of their armsmen in more than hardened leather. Thanks to Bran, given enough time they could arm and armor every armsmen in the North

Rodrick joined the discussion for the first time, his voice gruffer than normal, preparing for the grief to come. "I would recommend that each of the northern Lords only bring about two hundred or so for the more powerful noble houses. That is enough for them to have representation, but not enough so they would be hindered on the road. Lord Stark can ask for more men to be sent when he arrives"

"House Glover should be informed and send a representative but **not** a portion of their forces." Jon said, nodding at Rodrick.

He and Catelyn shared a look, and both of them nodded minutely. Neither of them trusted the Ironborn further than they could throw Winterfell. The fact that Lord Stark had trusted them to honor their agreement thanks to Theon being a hostage was an example of him believing that other people were as honorable as he was. He never understood that such an idea was laughable.

Theon himself had proven trustworthy even to Jon as one of the wolfsworn, but the rest of the Ironborn? No, they were vultures, and would take the opportunity of all this chaos to strike at where they could. The North could not afford to appear to be an easy target for them, which meant House Glover, House Flint of Flint's Finger, and to a lesser extent House Ryswell would need to keep their strength at home.

"Very well, let's go with that for now." Catelyn said decisively already preparing going through the messages to be sent off. Hornwood, Cerwyn, Glover and Dustin are close enough that horse sent messengers would be able to reach them, carrying, letting the ravens be used for the more distant noble houses, and Catelyn would personally pen the message for Lord Cerwyn that evening. Being the closest Lord he would be able to get here the fastest, and would be able to call his men up faster for this and other reasons

She frowned as a sudden thought occurred to her. "The two Reed siblings are still here, they should have returned long ago but I think we need to send them home now. I'll send a message with them for their father. We'll want the Neck as prepared as possible ready for an invasion."

Jon nodded. "Only a fool or someone who really doesn't know anything about Westeros would try to assault Moat Cailin, but it is best to be prepared. We should also send word to the mountain clans, I feel certain their chiefs should be a part of this war council."

"Good." Catelyn nodded, carefully not noting Bran's look of relief at not having Jojen around any longer. "Arya, if you could go and get my writing implements, I'll need them in a moment. Measter Luwin, I would like to speak to you and the majordomo to make certain our supplies have enough reserve for a large amount of guests." Rodrick, Luwin and the others all nodded and correctly realizing this was a dismissal stood up bowing to Lady Stark before exiting the room.

As the doors closed behind them, Jon looked over at Arya who still looked miffed at the idea of her friend being sent off. She hadn't cared much for Jojen, but Meera was fun. It was always nice to have another tomboy around as Ranma had sometimes called her. "Arya, I'll want you to step up your training. I have no idea what Ranma will want to do with you personally when he arrives, but I think we both know it'll be something that will make our mother irritable."

Arya grinned at that nodding eagerly. Indeed, Jon had thoughts of his own about Arya, but it would have to wait until more of the wolfsworn were gathered to do anything about them. One thing was certain though, given her general attitude Arya would never allow herself to remain behind if Jon and Ranma went to war. It was something they would have to plan for.

With that Arya scampered off to do her mother's bidding and get her writing tools while Jon walked on, until he found a murder hole overlooking the training area and the Keep's square. Below him there were hundreds of men practicing, men armed with long pikes and shields, working in formation along with a few men with swords and others with bows and arrows. Everywhere organization and working together was being drilled into these men, and at the sight Jon smirked proudly. *We've been preparing for this for months. We're ready, let the southerners play their foolish games, let the Lannisters make their power grab and the other houses war with one another. Whatever else happens, we are ready. The North will rise!*

OOOOOO

Later that evening Meera and Jojen Reed were led into Catelyn's rooms by a servant. Catelyn was sitting at a small desk, writing up a missive for the Lords Umber and Karstark, both of whom needed special yet very different handling. She looked up with a smile at them both, though it did not match the grim look in her eyes. "Please, have a seat."

Over the next few minutes Catelyn explained what was going on and then said simply. "Because of this, I'm sending you home. You should be with your family in this dangerous time, and you can carry a message for your father for me. We'll also be sending a hundred archers with you, to help reinforce Moat Cailin."

Both of the Reeds stiffened at that. Meera looked at Jojen for a moment her head cocked to one side. Catelyn noticed the look, but didn't care to figure out what was going on there.

In point of fact she really didn't understand why the two of them had stayed in Winterfell for so long. Whenever she had brought it up before one or the other would always put it off by saying their father wanted them to bond with the Stark siblings. But this was really no reason for them to have stayed so long. And while Meera had made herself a place here as a hunter and a friend for Arya, the same could not be said of Jojen.

She had heard rumors of the servants having overheard odd conversations almost arguments between Bran and Jojen. The boy was certainly strange, and unlike his sibling hadn't volunteered to work on anything, or even try to fit in. Catelyn had seen the boy following Bran around at times. The look in Jojen's eye when he saw Catelyn's babe a time or two had been distinctly odd as well, almost as if he was seeing something he did not believe, a very odd look indeed.

For a moment Jojen merely stared ahead, not at Catelyn but over her shoulder, then he seemed to sag slightly, before shaking his head. "The builder has won, the wolves are coming home when only one should have, and a dragon is coming as well. Nothing is clear anymore, my sight is blinded."

With that simple statement he turned and left without even asking leave to go. Catelyn's eyebrows rose at this snub as well as the mention of a dragon since she hadn't mentioned the Stormborn mentioned in the letter. She looked over at Meera with her eyes narrowed. Meera shrugged her shoulders and tried to apologize for her sibling though she did not mention the fact that he had visions, something she knew most would not believe. Without that Jojen did seem to simply be an odd young boy.

The two siblings left the next day with the archer for Moat Cailin. Bran stood watching them go from a window, a sense of relief feeling him as he watched Jojen ride off. He sighed to himself shaking his head. *Whatever else I might become, my place is here with my family now. Whatever it actually is, the three eyed crow will just have to wait.*

OOOOOO

Margaery stood with her family as she watched Lord Renly Baratheon be led into the hall by her brother Loras. The two of them had ridden from King's Landing to Bitterbridge, killing several horse each, before taking to a boat there down the Mander to Highgarden. From Bitterbridge Renly had sent out messengers and ravens into the Stormlands, and they were already getting reports of the lords nearest the Stormlands borders rallying their troops at castle Fawnton. From there it was presumed they would join forces with the Reach's army, an assumption Margaery, for entirely personal reasons, wished was false, but knew alas to be true since Olenna had already decided what House Tyrell would do:

*Flashback:*

"Hah, Cersei's let her arrogance show, offering her son's hand without any other concessions. She doesn't seem to realize how tenuous her position is." Olenna scoffed, tossing down the raven carried message from the crown. "So, according to her, the Starks tried to make a grab for the throne as soon as Robert was dead, either as part of a plot with House Targaryen or for their own gain. What say you to that daughter?"

"I would say that it is a very neat lie, since it can't be disproven. I also note that the message doesn't say what happened to Lord Stark, or if Ranma has returned." Margaery said, frowning heavily. *Of course if Ranma had, I doubt Cersei would be in any position to write such a message at all.*

Margaery sighed sadly, trying to work things out in her mind, and coming up with a theory. They had learned of Tommen's death several weeks back, and she felt that might be the catalyst for this. "I think the king's death and Tommen's were interconnected. I think Lord Stark and the king had decided to name Tommen the heir over Joffrey.

Certainly the king was closer to him than either of the other children. So someone, possibly fearing the Stark's influence over the boy, had him murdered."

"You've said so before daughter and why you think Tyene Sand wasn't the one behind it, get to the point." Mace growled.

Margaery sighed. She had liked the young boy, even felt he had the makings of a decent king, and grieved his death. But her family was uncaring of that save Loras, who probably felt as she did. "I was getting to it father. I think that Eddard and Ranma later concluded that Joffrey was unsuitable. I've passed on some of the rumors about him, so maybe one of them had some basis in fact. Whatever the case, this became known to either the queen herself or other Lannister supporters, and they, in an effort to keep their chosen heir on the throne... took steps."

"Hmmpf, from all accounts Cersei has never been one to let anyone slight her. That sounds plausible." Olenna replied. "And so it became open conflict, with the northern wolves running away with their collective tails between their legs! There's no fool so foolish as an honorable one!"

Willas spoke up from where he was grooming one of his massive hunting hounds. The beast, a gravid bitch, stood docilely as he worked over her coat. "The North will march, such an affront to the honor of their Lord Paramount is something they will never condone."

"Bah, Eddard's no doubt dead or crippled in the fighting, that's the only explanation for his forces to retreat like that, and the Stark boy as well." Margaery scowled at that, but her grandmother rapped her hard on the knuckles. "Enough of that daughter, regardless of your own feelings on the matter, there's no doubt he died somewhere on this wild dragon chase. Without either Stark or his oldest boy the North lacks a rallying force. The Stark bastard certainly won't be able to."

Margaery wasn't certain of that, not after hearing how Ranma and even Sansa talked about Jon Snow. Nor was she sanguine about Olenna's belief in Ranma's possible death, but there at least Margaery knew she was too close to him to make an objective analysis.

Before she could speak however, though what she would have said Margaery didn't know, Willas replied, his voice still calm and thoughtful. "Brynden Tully is a survivor, and for any of the Stark men to escape someone must have led them in a retreat, which I understand is a most difficult task. Even if Eddard is dead, and we have no evidence of that, Brynden could stand as his niece's general to avenge him and her son."

Mace shook his head. "The North's population is too small to matter and too spread out, especially embroiled as they are on the Wall. Where is Renly and Loras in all this though?"

That question was answered several days later by another raven arriving from Bitterbridge. When it arrived, bringing with it both the real reason behind the conflict and Renly's assumption of the throne, Olenna had laughed, looking over at Margaery while Mace and Willas were still working through the ramifications of it. "I see we'll be putting a crown on your head sooner than I thought my dear!"

Flashback end

With that, Margaery's fate had been sealed. In exchange for their agreeing to help Renly secure the throne against the Lannisters, he was to wed Margaery binding House Tyrell to the royal family by blood, along with several concessions in trade laws and other areas. It was a good plan, it made a world of sense for both parties, and Margaery **loathed** it.

The thing was that while she and Ranma had not been in love, he had certainly been growing on her, and she had a few... tawdry dreams about their marriage after so many days spent watching Ranma practice with Tommen. Love no, not yet, but respect, friendship and a healthy smattering of lust, yes. She also knew Renly's preferences, and that any marriage to him would never bear fruit. Unless she invited Loras into bed with them, or got Renly drunk enough to overlook the fact she was a woman.

Margaery also realized when she looked at Renly Baratheon, resplendent in the finest clothing he could buy for this event, that she had indeed spent too much time around the Northerners. When she looked at his magnificent clothing and courtly bearing, she didn't see the perfect image of a noble lord. Instead she saw someone who had decided that taking the time to primp himself and prepare clothing was more important than getting down to the business of planning what looked to becoming a full scale war. What she saw was a man who had decided to run rather than take a chance, to do the honorable thing and stay and fight.

This new attitude even colored Margaery's opinion of her brother. She knew Loras was an excellent swordsman and all around knight but instead of standing up against the Queen's treason with Lord Stark, he had followed Renly's command and ran away.

None of this showed on Margaery's face however. She moved through the prepared panoply of the welcoming ceremony and the formal betrothal with the ease of long practice with such formal pageants. It was only when they were taking one of the prescribed, 'getting to know you' walks around the grounds of High Garden that she let her emotions out.

The two of them were followed by Loras and one of Margaery's maids as chaperone. Normally Nyesteria would have been there as well, but she had been called down into the city to aid in a difficult birth. Yet even if she had been there, Margaery probably would still have said what she did.

Margaery's voice came out as coldly contemptuous as she could make it. "So, Loras, Lord Baratheon, I have to ask, how does it feel to know you ran out on your allies? That you betrayed their trust to save your own skins?"

Behind them Loras flinched at his sister's tone and at her words. To be honest he had wondered the same thing after they had fled the city, but in the end had decided his love of Renly mattered more than aiding Lord Stark, whatever the upside. It still bothered him however.

Renly on the other hand took Margaery's words with aplomb, smiling faintly at her controlled outburst. "While I would not say I was friends with Lord Stark, he was an ally, and it was not a simple decision to leave him behind. But it was a decision I had to make. The numbers in the city were simply against us, milady. Oh I do not doubt that your brother, my men and his would have sold themselves dear, but that is all they would have been able to do. It would have simply been throwing good coins after bad, so to speak."

"And what about honor or loyalty, are those just words to you?" Margaery asked, looking at him with a small sneer on her beautiful face.

"Certainly they are not, but my duty is to my people, to the throne that Cersei has despoiled with her treason. I cannot meet my obligations to those if I died with the Starks." Renly replied, still calm, almost amused at Margaery's assault. "I think that your closeness to Ranma Stark is clouding your judgment lady, the father was not the warrior the son was. Make no mistake, if we had stayed, the outcome would not have changed."

"And do you think those excuses will matter to the Starks? I wonder what Ranma will think when he returns."

"If he returns lady." Renly said, though he was frowning now.

"When he returns." Margaery replied, with no doubt in her voice. "The man who slaughtered the Mountain like he was a babe-in-arms will not die easily, either by treachery or main force. And when he does, both you and my family now will pay a price for your actions."

"Perhaps it is as you say milady. For my part I will worry about Ranma returning when we see evidence of that return, and as for his family and the rest of the Northerners." Renly shrugged. "They would be fools indeed to come south past the defenses of Moat Cailin. Now, I believe we are expected back soon."

With that he took her hand, and led Margaery back into the castle. Margaery didn't resist, she had said her piece and she was powerless to change what was going to happen soon. Luckily she would have a few months to get used to the idea of marrying Renly, since it had been decided that their marriage would happen at Bitterbridge once the full combined army was assembled.

*Maybe by that point Renly will have discovered he can actually perform with a woman after all.* She thought harshly, not letting her feelings show on her face with the ease of long practice.

Nearby Willas pushed himself away from a shadowed tree in the garden with a frown. He hadn't decided yet what he felt about Renly, oh, he liked him well enough, but was he really king material? There seemed to be a softness to him, an eagerness to talk, but not to do. If Renly had the military aptitude that Robert had been famed for he might have already struck at King's Landing with the Stormlands forces on the border between them and the Crownlands. Instead he was building up a large enough army to simply crush any other army that got in their way. The safe bet rather than the quick yet risky one.

Willas was not like his grandmother, he understood there was more than politics or family influence in the world. Nor was he like his father, Loras or even Garlan in that he knew knights and the cavalry charge were not the only things

that mattered in war. Willas was slow, methodical, and reserved. He didn't know if Renly would prove himself however, so he would keep his own council for now.

What the Tyrell heir did know were animals. He was known as one of the best breeders and trainers of animals in all Westeros. His horses were highly prized both for their beauty as well as their intelligence and strength. His hunting dogs and even hawks were also highly prized, both for their strength and their durability.

Because of that he knew something about wolves. He had studied them, and had even painstakingly, with many fits and starts, added a strain from a wolf pack to his hounds to add to their sense of hearing and endurance. They were survivors, dangerous and much more intelligent in their own way than humans gave them credit for. A united pack was something to be feared by even giant mountain bears, and they were able to live through wounds that would kill a hound of equal weight, something he had not been able to breed into his own dogs.

So Willas added those observations to the absolute certainty in Margaery's stance, along with the knowledge of what Ranma had done to the Mountain and how good Eddard had proved as a general in Robert's Rebellion. With all that combined, Willas was worried that maybe his family was underestimating House Stark. *In which case, winning our way back into their good graces in some fashion might be necessary...*

OOOOOOO

Daenerys shivered, standing near the front of the boat with Ranma's arms around her waist leaning back against his warm chest. A single fur coat covered both of them, with only her head appearing out of it given the difference in their height. "I've never been cold before." She said, shaking her head, her hair rustling against his shirt, silk despite the colder air. Ranma didn't seem to care about weather, another thing she had added to the list of things that made him so unusual. "At least not like this, I've been cold at night, yes. That occurred many times when my brother and I were wandering Essos. But not like this, not so bone-chillingly freezing like this. I hope that it doesn't bother my little ones."

While others were moving their armies or otherwise preparing for the coming war, the *Fish's Scales* had been sailing for a little over a month since leaving King's Landing. Now the Paps were well behind them and they were into the Bite, which Daenerys felt was very aptly named considering she felt the wind was trying to bite her face off. The sail master said they had another ten days or so of good conditions before they were within sight of White Harbor.

"I think they've found a way to beat the cold milady." Ranma chuckled looking over to where the two draklings were buried under Fenris. Daenerys had kept them inside the ship since it had started to become cold out, but today they had forced her to let them out for some flying exercise. Daenerys had walked them through about twenty minutes of flying practice, directing them up to the crow's nest (cleared of the lookout for now) and back down twice. But evidently the cold didn't agree with them. After finishing the second flight they had immediately tried to burrow under Fenris, something they could still do despite their growth. Now only their snouts were visible from underneath his bulk to the direwolf's great amusement.

Fenris on the other hand had been ecstatic at the change in weather. The cold felt good, and it also meant that they would be coming to the end of this interminable journey. While not exactly claustrophobic Fenris was a direwolf after all, used to having room to roam and hadn't been able to hunt for nearly three months now.

"My little sister hasn't seems to have missed it either." Ranma said hugging Daenerys even tighter around the waist as his head to rest his chin on her hair, breathing in the mix of the cold biting air and whatever it was she put in her hair. How Alayaya had come up with any sort of soap for any of the girls he didn't know, let alone what she had done to make them all smell different. Such things were a mystery best left unsolved. Daenerys smelled of fruits he couldn't name, a hint of ash and burning, and something else some smell that was totally her. "What about you, are you cold? We can go below if you want."

The Targaryen princess smiled, leaning back against Ranma's chest as they watched the wake of the ship staring out over the Bite. In the distance Daenerys could see several large bits of ice floating along. There weren't many, but there would be more the further north they went. "As long as I have you here to keep me warm your highness, the cold will never bother me."

Ranma winced at her word choice, which she had chosen with malice aforethought. The two of them had talked about their overall plans for the future, but they couldn't make very detailed ones at this point, not for most of it anyway. In the long term they had a plan for the war, and Daenerys would cheerfully allow Ranma to control the whole overall campaign, but a plan for their own long term goals besides that? Daenerys had made no bones about what she wanted, but Ranma had avoided saying anything along those lines.

Now he sighed, pulling back enough so she could turn around and face him while still remaining covered in the coat.

"I would be much happier to simply be Lord Paramount of the North and remain in Winterfell if I could."

"I know that my poor, humble man." Daenerys laughed quietly, nuzzling into his chest for a moment before taking his invitation, turning around in the cloak's environs. It didn't look the most dignified way to have a discussion, but it would do for the two of them. "And I think that actually speaks better of you. But we still must take it. The alternatives are far poorer, not just for the North or for your family, but for all of Westeros. Stannis has proven himself an enemy of your house and of me personally at the very least, and those shadow fiends do not speak well of whatever allies he has been able to procure."

"And Renly and House Tyrell have proven themselves to not have enough backbone, and the others are even worse." Ranma said, shaking his head as they began to reiterate previous conversations. They had talked of the other noble houses, and Viserys, fearing what could be happening with her brother and with the Princess of Dorne. What those two would do was up in the air, but it would probably not be good for the rest of Westeros. Arianne had not, to put it mildly, impressed Ranma with her moral character or her understanding of what war was really like, so the idea of her acting as a stopper on Viserys' ambition was unlikely.

So yes, Ranma would probably be forced to try for the throne himself with Daenerys at his side, particularly with the Lannisters being in many ways the strongest of their opponents, and the ones who had started the war. Regardless of what else happened, the Lannister name would only be mentioned in the history books after the war. Ranma meant to break their power forever, one way or the other.

"Have I mentioned lately how amazing you are?" Ranma murmured, seemingly going off topic. "That plan you thought up for Tyrion, that's just a magnificent example of killing two birds with one arrow."

"Really, it seemed a natural progression to me given what you told me about the Imp. As well as what he is supposed to be doing on the Wall." She frowned shaking her head. "The Night's Watch must change, and this will be a wedge to do that. We need to solidify that front permanently, especially given what else is coming from that direction."

With a sudden move, Daenerys grabbed the end of the coat, pulling it off Ranma and stepping away with it now wrapped only around her own body with a laugh. "And you, Ranma Stark have tried to dodge the issue for the last time." After a second she shook her head, shivering slightly, but wanting to make a point here. She went on more seriously, her violet eyes locked on Ranma's ocean blue ones. "We both know the choice you will make, but I would have you say the words."

"I know." He sighed then shook his head, then decided to shock Daenerys in turn. "The iron throne is dead." He said blandly looking at her face closely. Daenerys's eyes widened, but then narrowed in thought. Seeing her not react as negatively as he had feared (or hoped at the moment) Ranma went on. "Your family may have created it as a symbol of unity, but you created it through conquest, through blood and fire. Your family retained control of it through similar the power of your dragons and your armies, and Robert took it using that same coin. You can never wash the Iron Throne clean of it, we'll need to start entirely over."

Daenerys smiled at the 'we' bit there and nodded thoughtfully. "Some new symbol of unity, rather than relying on the old one, which has come to be a symbol of brute force, with no real power beyond 'to the mighty go the spoils?' Yes, that makes sense."

Ranma nodded, grateful that she had agreed. He already had some ideas in that area, ways to unite and bring together the noble houses, based off the idea of the wolfsworn written large, and he suspected Daenerys had some ideas as to a proper symbol.

Moving forward, Daenerys sighed as she covered them both with the coat once more, relieved when she felt the heat or Ranma's body against her clothing through his silk shirt and her leather jerkin. "I know that it is a difficult thing to contemplate, but, when we join together formally, it will signal to everyone our intentions, and you need to be ready for it."

Ranma chuckled at her word choice there,. "I understand, and while i would not wish to be king, i will take burden." then he gasped smacking his forehead in affected shock. "But you know, we're forgetting something, something about that whole formal thing. A certain step we seem to not actually done yet." Daenerys looked up at him quizzically, and he pulled back slightly to look into her eyes, his voice becoming husky and deep. "Daenerys Targaryen, Avy jorrâelan. Ao ynoma dīnilūks?" What he had said in high Valyrian was 'I love you. Will you marry me?'

Ranma had decided he wanted to formally propose to Daenerys, something he had always felt was extremely romantic, and which was not part of normal courtship in this time and age. So he had gone to Domic and his father, and practiced a few words thinking that saying it in high Valyrian would have greater impact.

Which they had. Daenerys' eyes widened at the flowing Valyrian words, and they began to tear up as the meaning of those words hit her. For a moment she just stood there, still leaning against him, then she nearly shouted her response. "Kessa avy dīnilūks, Avy jorrāelan Ranma Stark!"

She leaped up lightly, her arms going around his neck as her lips sought his. At first both of them wanted to keep the kiss chaste, since they were not yet married and there were certain conventions that had to be followed.

However the moment their lips touched, and Ranma's arms went around her, their passion erupted. Ranma growled into the kiss, his lips opening, tongue tapping at Daenerys' lips, demanding entry.

Daenerys responded by growling in response, her sound more draconic, slightly more of a thrumming sound than a rumble, but just as primal. Her own mouth opened, and their tongues began to fight furiously, moving from one mouth to another. Her hands tightened on the back of his neck, drawing Ranma down, further into the kiss, while his hands moved down her back to grip her tight rear.

Thankfully for propriety's sake, they were not alone. This declaration of love, though occurring in an unknown tongue the body language was easy to read, had been witnessed by several of the armsmen aboard the ship, and Myrcella as well. She had come out to get a breath of fresh air, and seen the two of them. Sansa and Alayaya were more than happy to sit in their room around the brazier and try to forget they were going north into more cold, but Myrcella had fond memories of her time in the North, and the cold was making her remember them. They were bittersweet now with Tommy's death, but still precious, and she had come up to enjoy them alone.

Surprisingly Merry didn't feel much jealousy at the show the two lovebirds were unknowingly putting on. The chemistry between the two was obvious to see, and it wasn't like Ranma had distanced himself from her either. She knew deep down that she wasn't mature enough in body yet to interest him, but it was clear he respected her mind, he wasn't just acting that way because he saw her as a sister, but as a dear friend. It was amazing how empowering his respect was really.

Worse, she had come to like the Targaryen princess too. Oh, she still wished she was in Daenerys' place, but she wasn't egotistical enough to think she could take her place. Besides, the match between them made good sense, and she knew Alayaya had been right all those days ago, she and Ranma could never marry. *Of course*, a wicked part of her brain said, *that doesn't rule out... more unusual unions, does it?*

Myrcella ignored that little voice for now, it would just get her into trouble otherwise, and she had two people to embarrass the Mother out of right now. "Congratulations!" She shouted in a loud voice, startling the two almost-lovers apart. "It's about time you two made it official!" Her voice seemed to open the floodgates and all the nearby sailors, even the ones up the rigging at present joined in congratulating the duo.

The two tried to spring apart, but were hampered by still sharing the fur coat, and nearly fell to the ground as they tried to put some distance from one another as the crew and Merry laughed at them.

The fun was interrupted by a call from the lookout up on his perch in the crow's nest. "Sail Ho! Small sail off the port bow aft!" that made all the sailors nervous, since they hadn't yet reached the shipping normally used shipping lanes, the sail master having tried to cut off as much of the Bite as possible, cutting his course closer first to the Pebble then eventually to the Three Sisters than most were willing to do. And if it had been a caravel or a galley, the lookout wouldn't have specified small sail.

"At's a smugglers sloop," the Sail master, an older grizzled man covered with tattoos said, spitting to one side. "Probably out of the Three Sisters. I'd thought they'd let us alone since were flying the flag of house Manderly. The last time they tried to rid one of my lord's vessels we sent back the heads of all those involved, and threatened to burn out their ports."

Ranma frowned angrily. "I wonder if someone sent word to them about us. This seems too much for it to be random." The Sail master nodded, and the two remained there watching the sail until it got too dark out for them to see it.

For the next few days there was always a sloop shadowing them while the *Fish's Scales* sailed on, just barely within sight, but always there. It made the crew very nervous, they knew how understrength they were. Ranma took their mind away from it by drilling with all of them, both one at a time and in groups, as he had been doing for much of the voyage only much harder, running them into the ground. He'd decided to trust the sail master's prognosis, about the ship following them, or ships whatever the case may be, having come from the Three Sisters, which meant they would wait until the *Fish's Scales* came closer to those benighted islands before jumping them.

The moment that a small sliver of land was sighted, indicating that they were coming near one of the Sisters he



stopped the practices. He then gave the men the rest of the day off except for their sailing duties, and ordered their rations doubled for the remainder of the journey, to better keep their energy up.

He was so busy with the men he hadn't taken time to be around Daenerys or the others. He was unsurprised however to discover that Myrcella had once again taken control of the other girls and several of the walking wounded, those without a working arm or other injuries that kept them from their duties. With their help she had prepared a portion of the crew quarters to act as a hospital area.

Daenerys had been busy in her own way as well, exercising personally with Ranma, but also forcing her two little ones to continue their flight exercises despite the cold. They would take breaks curling up around a brazier between each flight up to the crow's nest and back down to keep warm, and she was always communicating mentally with some throughout the exercises. She was continually controlling, directing, often times even explaining to the little ones that their fires might be needed soon. That idea seems to excite the drakings, but the cold was hindering their mental facilities, which weren't exactly pronounced just yet in the first place. Yes they were smarter than Daenerys had expected, but that wasn't saying much.

On the second morning after that initial sighting of land on the southern horizon, the look out once more shouted that a sail had been spotted as usual. Then a second later the now mundane report changed, the man in the crow's nest shouting it out at the top of his lungs. "Multiple sails, multiple small sales off the port bow!"

Ranma quickly joined the sail master up in the rigging, looking out over the incoming ships, his breakfast forgotten on a handy barrel below them. "It looks like you were right." He murmured to the older man, who laughed grimly.

"I wish I were wrong lad." He said, spitting to the side. "Even with you and the dragons, this is going to be one hell of a hard fight."

Coming towards them were over a dozen small sloops, each not more than fifty feet long, and with barely enough room across for five men to stand abreast. Their sails were small looking, mobile, but it was obvious they were only there for small movements, the oars sticking out of their sides was what really drove those ships. As Ranma watched, they switched over entirely from sails to rows, streaking through the water toward Fish's Scales as fast as they could from both the port and from directly in front of their route. They were so spread out now the galley had no chance of evading them all.

By this point the crew had finished readying themselves for battle. Leaping down, Ranma grabbed up the large bow that he had commandeered. It had the heaviest draw he could make it, but even so it was almost flimsy in his hands.

As the ships closed, Ranma began to fire at one ship in particular, one that seemed to have better armored and armed people on board, if the glint of gold and silver was anything to go by. His first target was the man who was at the front of the ship. His back was turned to their target while he extorted his men to greater efforts on their oars.

Ranma loosed, and between one word and the next he fell forward with a scream, Ranma's arrow having taken the man straight in the back, punching through his armor even at this distance thanks to Ranma's strength. The rest of the men on that ship seemed to gape for a moment, and by the time they had recovered, two more men died under his arrows.

While Ranma was attacking that ship, the rest continued on, but then a few of them faltered, the men in them pointing up into the sky. Daenerys had come out on deck at the first shout, and with her, came her two little ones. Both of them had grown to the point where they could no longer rest comfortably on her shoulders, looking almost like small to medium-sized dogs next to her, and they were not nearly as graceful getting into the air from the ground as they had been from her shoulders.

But they could still fly, and no matter that dragons had not been seen alive in living memory, any idiot could tell you what they were. At the site four of the ships turned around entirely, heading back the way they came. The others came on however.

Now standing next to Ranma, Daenerys closed her eyes, concentrating on the link between her, Rhaegon and Sunfyre, directing them into an attack on one of the ships that was still heading their way. Even before they attacked she could tell they both getting a little tired. In response she only allowed them to shoot out a single stream of flame each at the ship before ordering them to come back. Even so, they had barely reached the ship before they collapsed onto the deck exhausted despite the days of exercising.

That ship however was no longer advancing. While their flames hadn't improved much yet, those little fire attacks had immolated two men, and they were running around screaming while their fellows tried to push them overboard.

Several of the men packed together on the sloop had been set alight, their clothing igniting like the sail above them. As the burn victims ran around trying to get their fellows to help, they were subsequently pushed into the sea. Only one of them had died, but with that and the fact the ship's sail was also on fire that ship decided that that was enough, and turned away joining the fellows who had already retreated.

Ranma paused in his own assault to nod at Daenerys. "Good job, but keep Rhaegon and Sunfyre close for now. Head to the back of the ship, and see if you can hit any of the ships that try to circle around that way. Don't send them out to far though."

"Teach your grandmother to suck eggs!" Daenerys barked back at him, already kneeling by her dragons, caressing their heads and holding out small goblets of food, while sending feelings of encouragement, pride and love down their link. She lifted them with difficulty in her arms as they began to eat, already heading aft. "I know how to best utilize my little ones thank you, you just take care of your own targets."

Ranma laughed not taking her tone or words seriously but his eyes were cold as he turned back to the oncoming vessels of which there were still seven, all of them packed from end to end with men. All told they had her to be have at least four to five hundred men spread out over them, and he only had something like 52 armymen to meet them.

By this point however, several of the ships were close enough for the rest of the crew to take them under fire. While only a few men among them were trained archers, thanks to their losses they had been able to put a bow in one out of every three pairs of hands.

What they couldn't do with aiming, they made up for in numbers. Concentrating as Ranma had on one ship, with the few remaining fire arrows mixed in with other types, cutting down several dozen men even as the fire arrows did their work.

"Sail ho!" said the man up in the crow's nest. "Two sails, both galley type coming from forward starboard."

Ranma groaned aloud, wondering what the hell was going on now even as he put an arrow in another man's eye. His ship was still coming on though why that was he didn't know, but they were. After a moment however the look-out continued, this time sounding jubilant. "Galleys, naval galleys flying the colors of House Manderly!"

The men all cheered, and Ranma let out a whoop. "You hear that boys, all we need to do is hold them, helps on the way!" He was answered with a roar, and Ranma grinned, dropping the bow and picking up Ice.

The attacking ships were now close enough to throw over grapnels, and unlike in the last battle, this group had enough ships to spread out around the larger vessel trying to attack from all sides and spread the defenders out. Daenerys stopped that, her dragons attacking the two ships that tried to get around the aft of the Manderly ship. When grapnels began to fall around her she called back her dragons, and the three of them cut or bit through the ropes trying to tie to the aft of the ship.

Fenris and the rest of the men did the same along the port side, and several men were hit by arrows from the pirates, who were trying desperately to protect those ropes so their fellows could climb up. The smuggler's sloops were much smaller than the *Fish's Scales*, which meant the men had to climb up the ropes, and they were very vulnerable as they did, so the archers were trying their best. But thanks to Fenris and the men attacking the ropes, they weren't getting anywhere.

Up front Ranma allowed the grapnels to bite in. So Ranma let them come up, then cut the ropes all around him at near Amiguriken speeds, Ice slicing through the ropes easily. Dozens of men fell back onto their fellow, into the freezing ocean or onto their ships bulwarks with bone breaking force.

The assault continued for another twenty minutes with no real change. If the pirates still had their full complement of ships, they could have overwhelmed the defense with sheer numbers of grapnels, or pushed it back with their own arrow assault, but not anymore.

The retreating ships had taken that advantage away from them, and now they were too embroiled in the assault to get away when the two navy ships got within ballista range. Before the embattled pirates realized they were there a shot from one of the navy galley's ballista smashed into the back of one of the sloops attacking the fore of the *Fish's Scales*. The shot was tough, but it killed several smugglers before slamming into and through the bottom of the ship, holing it.

That target quickly began sinking, and the men on it tried to scramble into their fellows boats even as those boats tried to turn away. They didn't make it. The two navy galleys moved around the *Fish's Scales*, taking each sloop

under fire from what amounted to knife range for their ballista, so close they couldn't miss, which heightened the hitting power of their massive bolts as well.

It took another twenty minutes, but only one ship at the back was able to even turn away before it too was struck. Ranma looked around, smiling at seeing only five men down with arrow wounds, all of them alive too, and laughed. "Well that was anticlimactic wasn't it?"

Soon enough the two galleys moved to either side of the *Fish's Scales*, and Ranma used a bullhorn to bellow out their bonafides. His voice, and Fenris at his side was enough to make the captains of the two Manderly galleys believe Ranma was who he said he was, and the ships fell into a guard position, leading the way to White Harbor.

Thankfully that was the last bit of excitement on the voyage, and the rest of their time passed uneventfully, with the Northern shore becoming more and more visible on the starboard bow every day. The ship continued into the large inlet that held White Harbor at its tip, where the White Knife entered the ocean, for another few days, and then White Harbor itself was in view in the distance

One of the galleys left them then, racing forward on oars to inform the city of their arrival. Soon they were able to make out the Sea Rock, the massive stone island that sat in the entrance to the harbor. On top of that fort was a ringfort, full of scorpions, spitfires and even trebuchets, along with a full complement of three hundred armsmen of House Manderly. The colors flying from the fort dipped in response, and as the ship passed under the gaze of the fort cheers could be heard coming from the men up top, so loud they disturbed the seals that routinely rested along the lower edges of the stone.

Daenerys stood with Ranma, Sansa and the others, with Eddard leaning on his son to take his weight off his bad leg. As the sound of cheering reached them, Sansa laughed aloud clapping her hands in glee before grabbing Myrcella and spinning around with her in sheer delight. "We made it, we made it!"

This caused the whole crew to break out into cheers, and for a moment it was all the sail master could do to make certain his men kept on their tasks, as the ship passed the Sea Stone into the outer harbor of the city. It was a stark contrast to the busy but disorganized port at King's Landing. Every ship had a dock, and at present all those ships had been forced to remain there while the *Fish's Scales* continued on, passing a thirty foot wall that separated the outer and inner harbors. The inner harbor had better anchorage and was protected both by that wall and the ancient holdfast called the Wolf's Den.

Daenerys gripped Ranma's hands tightly as the ship began to maneuver nearer the dock prepared for it, knowing that the next few moments would mark the end of one chapter of her life, and the beginning of the next. Looking up at Ranma however, her worries left her, and she smiled as he looked down at her, his eyes alight with the same delight that had caused Sansa to start dancing. "Welcome to the North, my lady."

End chapter

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I deliberately did not show the creation of the Shadow Warriors. I will show the creation of one in the future, but I want it to be somewhat different from the original. I want it to be sexy and disturbing as fuck, which is a very tough target to hit. Oh, and sorry Gendry fans, but he is dead, on Gendra or whatever in this story. I have other plans for her. And yes, I know the original name was Brotherhood Without Banners, I changed that too.

This chapter is how I will deal with travel times from now on: showing something else going on except for important/funny bits. I have also decided I will not introduce a POV to show the Ironborn until combat is joined. I have never understood what was so interesting about them, let's face it, at bottom they are rapists, reavers, slavers, the worst sort of scum, and their Iron Price and their following their Drowned God is simply a way to justify it all. I realize Asha Greyjoy has something of a following, but I will only be truly kind to her if the writer of the story *The Icy Tide* comes back and continues to write his story. If not, then she might live, but then she might not. Certainly she will not become a main character. I also never understood why no one was ready for the Ironborn to try to rebel, it seemed obvious to me given their national culture the moment Theon's past was explained. So they will face a Westeros divided, but also ready for them.

This chapter also showed one thing that I have never really done before: that there will be a hierarchy in the pairing. I have tried to make an equal relationship in *ATP*, and in *Warrior's Way* and all my other stories, the 'harem' is more of a family, where they all love one another with only an informal hierarchy if that. In this story, Daenerys is most definitely the alpha, with the others below her. They won't join only at her sufferance, but they will only join at her agreement, and that can range from happy to irritated but resigned. Of them all, while Ranma will love the other girls, he will LOVE Daenerys, as his true equal in every way. Hope that makes sense to you all.

Also, Westeros geography is weird, and I would kill for some real travel times from the original. Enough said.

In the next chapter we see what Dacey has been up to, what Hoster Tully has set up, and if Tywin will be having things all his own way as he begins his march into the Riverlands, the North's reaction to Daenerys and the events in the south, and some other stuff as well. Heh. See you then, and as always, please review.

## \*Chapter 10\*: Chapter 10

I do not own Martin or Takahashi. Such a pity, they both need some reality readjustment.

Thanks go out to [Anthony444](#) for his help in betaing this chapter as well as being a major source of information about Westeros.

First a plea, then a warning. Please, my fellow ASolaF writers, please, for all that is holy, stop trying to out-drama or angst the original. It doesn't really work, and frankly its getting old. I am still looking for a story that concentrates on the warfare aspect, stark centric if possible, but I'm getting desperate enough that no longer really matters. But I haven't found any. I realize Martin sucked at the warfare aspect as well, but come on, prove you can do it better than the lazy one!

Now the warning here: some bad things happen to a few characters who I think have a certain following here, as well as my first lemon in this story. It's marked so you can avoid it, but this is A Song of Ice and Fire, and sex is just part of that universe.

### Wild Wolf Chapter 10 Opening Moves

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At the same time that the *Fish's Scales* was rounding the Paps into the Bite, Dacey and her party had finally reached the edge of the Gorge, the incredibly deep cut through the mountains that would become the Frost Fangs as they kept on going further north. Forged millennia ago by glacier runoff, the Gorge marked the far western edge of the wall. That was marked by a bridge over the expanse guarded by a castle called, rather unimaginatively, Westwatch-By-the-Gorge. It had previously been abandoned like most of the others, but Dacey knew that it was manned now by men of House Umber, if she remembered correctly.

Yet where Dacey and her party reached the Gorge was quite a ways down from the end of the Wall, the Gorge going by the Wall on a wavy diagonal down towards the Bay of Ice. Over the edge of the Bridge of Bones, the Milkwater was visible below it. Here it was so far below them they could barely make out the frothing torrent as it moved down through the bottom of the gorge. It was an awe inspiring sight, an amazing example of what running water could do over time to even the hardest granite.

But after the last two months of travel through the mountains Dacey was in no mood to take in the sights. The going had been tough from the moment Dacey reached Norrey territory, giving her a whole new respect for the Mountain Clans who survived up here, and that was just the start of it. The further north they got, the colder it got and the more snow there was on the ground. The cold shouldn't have been anything she wasn't used to having been to the Wall, however up here in the mountains it was even colder than it had been on the Wall. Dacey was uncertain why it was colder at the higher altitudes, but it was. This, the steepness of the going for so much of their trip, and the fact they had to move around large drifts of snow to make any headway had made the trip as irritating as it could be.

Thanks to her mother's preparations no one had lost anything to frostbite just yet, be it limb, finger or other appendage, but one of the men had come close after having taken a piss one night. Dacey had found that amusing, but the other Mormont men had been appalled so she hadn't let her amusement had been the only humorous thing to happen though.

"Told ya." Wilhelm Stonegrinder said, pulling down the bit of wool cloth covering his mouth to spit to the side. He was the leader of the band of fifty Norrey men, some relation or other to the clan chief, and he had been against the entire journey, seeing it as a pointless exercise. If the wildlings were scaling up and down the Gorge, they surely weren't doing it this high up, nearer the Wall was somewhat believable, though even that wasn't really, not with Westwatch-By-the-Gorge manned once more.

When his woolen face mask was back in place Wilhelm went on. "It's too cold up 'ere, way too 'igh for anyone, even wilders to try climb the Gorge. They'da 'ave ta use magic or have someone on this side ter help. Even then it'd be l'possible, de Gorge is too wide 'ere."

"Does it become thinner anywhere else along its length?" Dacey asked after deciphering the man's accent, her voice muffled by her own scarf. Two months and she still wasn't used to the way the man mangled common. Still, she wasn't quite ready to give up on this mission just yet, but it did look to be a dead-end at this point.

The senior Norrey men conferred for a few moments then Wilhelm came back. "It does nearer where the mountain's

start ta go down agin. We can follow the Gorge for a bit, if that's what ya want. But it be too cold up here fer us to be here long, and there ain't no game up here. We'll be eatin' our supplies from here on."

"Not what I **want**." Dacey replied, shaking her head. "But I think we **need** to do a thorough job here. Four days, we'll follow the gorge down to the bay for four days, and if we found nothing by that point, we'll turn back."

Around her the men of House Mormont and the mountain clansmen all nodded.

The next few days they followed Dacey's command, moving from their starting point down towards the now heading somewhat further down the mountain, albeit in a very slow and roundabout manner, each day was colder than the last, and even the mountain men were worried about it. Wilhelm finally said it was bizarre, that it should have become a little warmer at least, not colder.

Dacey kept her own council but her eyes were watchful, her body tense as she stared into shadows, and she always took two watches each night, realizing that this mission might actually bear fruit. It was debilitating, but she was determined to be awake if anything happened.

On the third day they got away from the sparse covering of the very top of the mountains into a small forest, the trees giving them cover from the wind and some relief from the cold because of that, though not as much as anyone had hoped. That night they camped under the eaves of the trees there and it was almost as if they had been watched, because Dacey had just gone to bed when a worried shout from outside.

She dashed out instantly, not having bothered to change. None of them did at night, simply pulling their bed rolls over themselves for further warmth with a heated stone for their bed rolls thrown in first. On her way out she grabbed up her sword, giving thanks once again for the good fur-lined leather gloves her mother had gifted her. A few of the mountain men couldn't handle anything better than a spear, needing to wear large, clumsy mittens rather than gloves that could give them the gripping ability of their uncovered hand.

She wasn't the first one out, several other men had bolted out of their tents as well. They all raced towards where the watcher that shouted, a Mormont man, was pointing. "Blue lights!" He said, his teeth chattering with the cold almost making the words unintelligible. "I saw blue lights, something is out there!"

Dacey scowled, her fears confirmed. No longer caring about seeming to be jumping at shadows, she barked out orders looking at the men around her. "Rouse the others. We'll have half on half off for the rest every night."

That meant fifty men would be awake for every watch with fifty off for the rest of the night, with the watches broken into two rather than the normal three. It would tire them out for the next day, but it would also allow them to have a large enough guard force that maybe they wouldn't be to be taken by surprise.

Moments later the men who would be joining the watch were awake grumbling but not complaining overmuch. The men of House Mormont, able to read Dacey's concern in her voice and eyes over her face covering, knew something unusual was going on. The clansmen had legends about blue lights, they didn't know what they meant, but they knew bad things followed them.

Both groups were given another clue to this when Dacey pulled out her pack, then began to unwrap the six dragonglass daggers Jon had given her. After unwrapping each one she handed them to the two best swordsmen among her House's men and the three most senior clansmen, keeping one for herself. "Just in case." she said grimly.

The man looked at the small, primitive looking dragonglass daggers and back to her wide-eyed, then around in the woods. "Are ya sure?" Wilhelm asked, his voice trembling in what in anyone but a clansmen Dacey would have called Fear. She would still have called it that in this case, but not aloud, such would have been an insult answerable only in blood. "Ya really think, ya really think there's some'at unnatural out dere?" He didn't want to outright say what might be out there, none of the Norrey men would use those words. It was a known fact that naming an evil was to invite its attention.

"Hopefully not." Dacey replied grimly. "But better safe than sorry."

The men, even her own who hadn't been able to make the connection just yet, all nodded, breaking up into groups. Many of those on watch looked around for places where they could hide with their backs to the fires so that they wouldn't destroy their night vision of too much while being invisible to someone out there. Only a few were successful, but the others hoped that a visible sign of readiness might ward off whoever was out there.

Dacey, still tired from having been on watch for most of the night already, retired back to her tent. Thankfully for

Dacey despite her concerns the next few hours passed uneventfully, allowing her to get some much needed sleep.

It was approaching the first blush of dawn when that changed. One of the guards was pulled out of his position in a small dugout underneath a tree by monstrously powerful hands. Before he could shout his throat was opened from one end to the other, and he was tossed aside like trash. Another man died with nearby in a similar fashion. But another hidden guard had caught the movement and shouted "Alarm, man down east side of camp!"

Dacey and the others woke up quickly, their weapons always close to hand. It was this and the fact that half of their number were already on guard duty that saved the entire party. One moment that shout had been the only warning, the next all of the guards were under attack from **every** direction around the camp.

Their attackers were men who looked almost like smallfolk, dressed in the same manner as the men of the north had for centuries, with only one or two wearing actual armor. But their faces were uncovered as were their hands, as if they didn't feel the cold, their breath did not mist in the nighttime air and their eyes were glowing, deep ice blue. Their strength was far more than most mortal men as well, evidenced by a scrawny one who looked as if he should never have been even able to wield a rake lifting up one of the guards and throwing him backwards against a tree. They also were using weapons, makeshift ones but deadly all the same.

"To arms!" Dacey bellowed, jumping forward and grabbing up a large cob of firewood, smashing it into one wight's face, while her sword took another through the brain box, slicing the top of its head clean off like it was a loaf of bread. "Use fire! Toss fire on them, they fear it! If not that, chop them apart, it will make them easier to deal with, but be wary of the limbs! Back to back, no man fights alone!"

Nearby one of the men she had given a dragonglass dagger lost his primary weapon, his longsword to getting stuck in an overhanging branch. He quickly jumped away, whipping out the dagger from his belt. Ducking underneath a hoe's blade searching for his head he stabbed the former farmer in his chest with the dagger, high and to one side. It was a killing blow, but the creature should have been able to keep going given its undead status. Yet instead it screamed, and the blue light in its eyes faded as the dragonglass somehow destroyed the magic animating him.

The man, one of House Mormont's men, pulled his blade free from the overhanging branch, staring in shock at the body of his former enemy. Turning slightly, he raced over to aid another man, longsword in one hand and dagger in the other. "The dragonglass daggers work, they stop moving if you kill them with the daggers!"

Soon Dacey's roared instructions had the men all working together with their fellows, trying to guard one another's back. Despite her orders and the dragonglass daggers it was touch and go however. The undead kept coming, and Dacey and her party kept killing them, but they definitely weren't having it all their own way. Men were down and dying, their bodies steaming in the nighttime air for a few moments before freezing. Other men had lost limbs, one man had lost his eye to what looked like some kind of miner's pick, along with the rest of his face, but was still fighting miraculously. Slowly however the flow of undead began to trickle out.

Dacey ducked under a charging blow from one man wielding a long scythe then used her shield to block another wight's arms from trying to grapple with her. She had dropped her sword in favor of her dagger, which greatly impacted her reach, but even so she stabbed over her shield, catching the second undead warrior through its eye. The magic that drove it died, and it collapsed like a puppet losing its strings.

The scythe came back with a whistle through the air, but even off balance she blocked it, her shield thrusting aside in a show of strength that few could match. "RAAH!"

Even the undead beast was surprised to see its blow battered aside, but that surprise didn't last long because Dacey quickly stepped inside its arm reach, and slammed her dagger through its chest right over where its heart was. "And stay dead!"

As the blue light faded from its eye, Dacey turned slamming her shield into a wight who had gotten one of her house's men down on the ground and was trying to get around his shield, which he had raised to protect his chest and face. Her dagger took it in the back of the neck, and the man threw it off before grimly grabbing up his own sword. "My thanks Dacey," he said before raising his huge greatsword, roaring his battle cry as he charged toward the nearest wight. "Here we stand!"

He brought it down with both hands, cleaving a wight in two throwing the body aside, and the two of them forged onto the next snarl of combat, adding more and more men as they went along, while behind them other men, mostly those who had either lost weapons or been injured, quickly grabbed up faggots of burning wood, tossing them onto the bodies of the wights who had been cut down by swords or chopped to pieces.

Thirty minutes later, just as suddenly as it began the battle was over, the remaining wights fading back into the darkness beyond the fires of their camp, their blue eyes slowly disappearing into the darkness. Through the canopy of the pine trees small flickers of dawn light could be seen.

Dacey growled, looking around angrily before glancing down at her once more battered and met almost mangled shield. "Why do people not like my shields?" She shook off that whimsical thought. Looking around she noticed that everyone was looking shell-shocked, the brush with the macabre and mystic breaking through even the normal rash mountain clan courage. Knowing she had to break through that or else their unity would be lost, Dacey began to bellow orders pointing to the nearest clump of men. "You lot, grab up hatchets, chop down some trees, we need to make some kind of barricade for ourselves. You men," she said pointing to a band of Norrey men who were looking at the bodies with wide eyes. "Grab up the bodies, all of the bodies and toss them on the fires."

The men she had first pointed to jumped to obey the voice of authority, grateful for something to do to keep thoughts of the horror they had just faced at bay. They pulled with hatchets from their packs, using them to cut down a few nearby trees, working as quickly as they could with the frenzy of the truly terrified.

Thanks to practically every man having a hatchet, which they needed to make snow boots for several legs of this journey (plus the Norrey men felt they were good for in close work) they were able to cut eight large trees down within the next few hours. While this was going on Dacey had figured out how many men she had lost.

Her family had sent fifty men with her, and the Norrey men had added another forty to guide her and her men through their territory up to the Gorge. Out of that ninety she had lost thirty four men tonight, twenty of her House's men, and fourteen Norrey men. A grievous account, but much less than it could have been if she hadn't prepared her men as best she could.

At the men finished their work Wilhelm and the other Norrey men had finally recovered their courage. He strode up to where Dacey was helping the men toss severed limbs onto a large pyre set well away from the burgeoning fort, his eyes over his face covering narrowed in anger. "Is dis what ya thought you'd run into, is dis what we're up here looking fer! You never said aught 'bout, 'bout anythin' unnatural!"

"Would you have believed me if I had?" she asked archly, tossing the last arm she could see onto the fire. With that done she pulled out her dragonglass dagger, cleaning it before placing it back on her belt next to her broadsword. She didn't like the dagger, it was too light even for its size, and the lack of reach had almost killed her several times during that fight. *But it worked, Jon was right about that. Still, best to leave that for after, unless we can figure out a way to create obsidian swords that won't shatter in combat.*

That caused the mountain men behind Wilhelm to mutter to one another, but it was an argument they couldn't exactly gainsay. Certainly her own men couldn't, they merely nodded, shrugging their shoulders now, having moved beyond their terror to wandering about some things, such as the vast mustering on the Wall, and what the wolfsworn had really run into in that ambush nearly a year ago now.

Eventually Wilhelm broke off from his men. "We might've, our legends say much about t'e forces o' the ever death. Ya coulda told us Mormont, ya had no right to be keepin' it from us."

Dacey looked at them thoughtfully then nodded. "Alright I'll apologize for that, I didn't think you would believe me without proof."

Another, older clansmen shrugged, pushing Wilhelm in the shoulder when he looked as if he was going to yell at the Mormont woman. "Least ya brought the daggers. Dragonglass, fire and swords of ancient Valyria're the only things that can stand against the might of the ever death."

"So we're turning back right?" Stated one of her family's was a young man but outspoken and rather more arrogant and chauvinistic than most of her House's men given the role women had always played in House Mormont. He was also visibly spooked still, unlike most of the others.

"We haven't finished our mission yet." Dacey said, rooting around the pile of weapons and shields taken from the dead. She picked up one shield, shaking her head at how light it was but it would still be better than her own battered one.

"I say we turn back now." Luke said angrily. There was a murmur of approval from Wilhelm and some of the other clansmen, but the rest of her House's men backed away slightly from Luke shaking their heads.

"We go back when I say we go back." Dacey growled, sounding very much like the bear on House Mormont's banner,



standing up to tower over the younger man. Luke was tall and heavily muscled but not as tall as she was or as heavily muscled. After a second he quailed under her glare and she nodded. "Jon Twinblade gave me this job, and I will find out what we need to know, how the White walkers are getting their creatures around the Wall."

Dacey looked at him then around at the others before deciding to fill them in on what had happened on the trip up to the Wall. There were some exclamations of shock at that, and more than one man prayed to the old gods for protection when they heard about the strange ice giants. But none of them disbelieved her words after what happened a few hours ago.

"So you think they're getting forces around the Wall somehow? They never did that in any of the stories from the Age of Legend's I ever saw." One of her family's men muttered. He was an older man named Stefan, and he had originally trained to be a bard before becoming an armsman when his older brother died in the Ninepenny Kings War.

"They **have** changed their tactics somehow, or something else changed, though I have no idea what." Dacey replied.

The Flint men conversed for a few moments then Wilhelm turned back to Dacey, nodding. "We said four days, I say we stick ta tha'. One more day o' searchin' the Gorge, then me an' mine turn for home. We're at least two week's fromme clan's nearest outpost, and the rest o' me clan needs ta be warned o' this."

"Agreed." Dacey said with a nod. In fact, this had already been worth the trip in one way. Getting this many witnesses, witnesses who wouldn't believe anything but what their own eyes had seen, were invaluable to truly prepare the North and the Wall for this incursion. *Of course, Dacey thought, the Others probably know that too. If they can direct their troops with any kind of control, they'll try to kill us all before we can get the word out.*

"All right, here's what we'll do. We'll rest here for the rest of today, making this fort as good as we can make it. Then we'll head out tomorrow as far as we can go and still get back here before the sun starts to fall. We'll retreat here for the night, then the next day send out scouts on a run down along the Gorge toward the ocean. It'll be up to them to decide if we go on, while the rest of us remain here then on the way back we'll go slow, forwarding up every night like this just in case until we're back in territory your clan patrols." Dacey said decisively.

Wilhelm looked rebellious, but the older Norrey man pulled him aside to speak to a few others again, speaking to him in low tones. After a moment he nodded with a jerk of his head, scowling, evidently overruled.

With that the impromptu planning session broke up, pitching into the work of making this defensive position stronger for more than half the day. It was very close inside the makeshift palisade but there was enough room for the survivors of the attack to get their tents into the open area inside the triangle, along with one large fire in the direct center. In a fit of inspiration Wilhelm ordered the men then to pile up several other bits of wood, creating a shelf for the men to stand on, which would allow them to have a height advantage on anyone who tried to get over the small four feet tall wall. It wasn't exactly a holdfast, but it was still amazing how much building it helped the men's morale.

"Well done everyone." Dacey said, looking around with a satisfied expression. As her men and the Norrey men all smiled she went on. "Warm meals for us all now and tonight, take the rest of the day to see to your weapons, then we'll set off early tomorrow." The men all nodded, some with enthusiasm, whether at the prospect of moving on or the food Dacey didn't know, and others warily.

While her men rested throughout the day, Dacey stayed up, getting by on short naps, then stayed up the entire night, anticipating an attack that did not come. It tired her out, but this wasn't the first time Dacey went without sleep, she would deal with it. As soon as the sun began to rise she roused her men in turn.

About an hour later the party was on its way again, leaving behind ten Norrey men along with their wounded to protect their temporary dwelling. With the scouts in the lead they swiftly found the Gorge once more, and then began to follow it through the forest towards the ocean again. After that however they slowed down, not because they were running into trouble moving through the forest, it was thankfully somewhat less snowy in here thanks to the overhead canopy of the pine and fir trees. No, they moved slower because they all subconsciously knew without even talking about it that they were in enemy territory.

Several hours after they had stopped for a lunch break the scouts spotted something through the woods a ways ahead something that glittered as if there was some large band of ice reflecting the sun. The scouts called for a halt while they rushed forward, keeping to the shadows of the trees as much as possible while they moved. Behind them the others prepared themselves for anything, a shiver of anticipation going through all of them.

A moment later the scouts came back, their faces once visible showing awe and fear despite their coverings. "You will **not** believe this!" One of them stammered, in good common for all of that. "but this... I-I mean, there's some kind of

ice bridge! It goes across from one side of the Gorge to the other. It, it looks sturdy, and I mean, but it's, it's ice!"

"Show me." Dacey ordered, moving forward already.

The two of them showing her how to move through the forest and soon they were overlooking the bridge. It was in a small drop in the land, invisible from a distance thanks to the walls of the tiny drop, which was a single tree length maybe. The bridge itself was a single span of ice thicker than most trees in diameter, with the top flattened out. "Well, I think that's what we've come up here for." Dacey said thoughtfully. "Now, how should we destroy it?"

"Fire does for ice." The Norrey scout said grimly.

She and the scouts returned and seven men swiftly raced off into the woods to gather wood. Moments later the men returned from all around, placing it in a large pile. Other men grabbed up as much as they could carry before moving forward, while the rest gathered around, weapons ready.

They were all almost within sight of the bridge again when they were once more attacked. Much like the night before last, one moment everything was fine then the next the wights were on them from nearly every direction. It was as if they could hide in small bits of snow and shadow like the best wildling raiders. Whatever the case, despite the Northerner's being prepared surprise was almost total.

Dacey immediately bellowed orders, her broadsword already swinging. "Scouts and four others, light up the wood and start tossing at the wights for now, everyone else protect them, but keep heading for the bridge!" Dacey hoped that destroying the bridge would cut off the White Walker's ability to send more forces across the Gorge. If, after all this time they could only sustain a small bridge like this and couldn't put across massive numbers of wights, then it represented a major target. One well worth the lives of Dacey and all the men with herso long as they destroyed it.

With the wights in their way and all around even that final fifty meters took time to cover, and they lost ten more men fallen and two of the dragonglass daggers had shattered by the time they reachedthe bridge. Night was falling by that point, but even so the moon was high up in the sky helping the fires now lighting up their gathered wood to give the humans enough light to see by, even if the smoke was becoming an issue to visibility.

Still, the great swords of her clansmen, the longswords and heavy hatchets of the Norrey men were able to hack the wights into pieces even without the obsidian daggers. It was just there were so many of them, not nearly as many as the wolfsworn had faced, yet even now at least three wights for every man Dacey had with her.

Despair and exhaustion began to tell, and even while Dacey slammed her claymore through one of the wight's bodies cleaving it into two from shoulder to thigh, two more men went down to the weapons of the wights. Another fellow had the obsidian dagger he had been using in one hand shatter, leaving them with only three. Dacey pushed to her right side, protecting a Norrey man who had just lost his longsword when a particularly skilled wight disarmed him. Dacey's sword took the thing in the side, cutting it nearly in half while her fellow warrior scrambled at his back for his hatchet.

With Dacey at their head the Northmen forged on, but they did so more and more grimly, more and more slowly. Eventually they reached it, able to somewhat concentrate their defense more thanks to putting one portion of their defensive circle against the drop of the Gorge.

Dacey roared out orders to the men who had been lobbing random pieces of burning wood at the wights. "Concentrate on the bridge! Get that bunch of wood on it and melt the fucking thing!"

As the men obeyed Dacey shouted a wordless battle cry. "RARGG!" With that she charged forward leaving the line of her fellows, trying to break up the assault on her men, who were visibly flagging was a calculated move, but she knew it was a move of desperation as well. There were simply too many of the wights.

Her strength and speed were so great Dacey actually succeeded in clearing an area around her, killing five of the wights or at least chopping them to bits with her claymore. Her shield was once more mangled, and she tossed it away, flinging it at a wight with such force that when the sharp edge of it took the man in the neck it cut his head clean off.

This show of strength won a roar of approval from her fellows, and the miasma of despair that had clung to them lifted a little as Dacey roared her family's battle cry. "Here we stand!" This was answered by her House's men behind her, and she roared out again. "Here we stand! Come get me you undead fuckers!"

She cut down two more wights then suddenly found herself sword to sword with another one. This one looked like a wildling, one whose bronze armor was of extremely good quality. Unlike with most of his fellows there was no outward

sign of his death, but his eyes blazed with that blue power that was keeping all of the wights alive and in his hand he held a wasn't like any kind of sword that Dacey had seen before, it was all edges and cruel hooks. And it was made of ice, the same kind of ice that made the bridge.

Her claymore withstood the blows of the strange ice weapon but each blow seemed to send shivers of cold through the sword and into her hand. It began to hurt even through her gloves. Dacey roared in agony, buttook up her blade with both her hands, adding to the speed and strength of her strikes.

This wight however was different from most of the others, he was a tried warrior or at least the wildling equivalent, and used his sword expertly. Worse, Dacey was already tired from the ongoing battle, and staying up for two full days with only small naps to sustain her. That was making her slightly sloppier than she would otherwise be. Even a wolfsworn like Dacey had her limits.

Suddenly her sword shattered, and she screamed in shock when some of the shards went backwards, cutting into her arms, one of them sticking out of her bicep and another her side while a third cut her cheek as it went past. She hurled the broken stump of the blade at the creature, leaping backwards and keeping her hands up and ready for any kind of opening, but for just a moment, Dacey knew true despair.

"Catch, Dacey!" shouted one of her men from behind her.

Dacey looked over in time to see the man throw one of the two remaining dragonglass daggers through the nighttime sky, and she reached up towards it, barely able to see the flash of the red cloth that made up its hilt. At the same time the wildling swordsmen charged, slamming his sword into her plate armor which gave way under the blow as if it was butter. It stabbed into Dacey's flesh, taking her high up near her armpit along her side. The blow missed any vitals but it was still a horrendous wound.

At the same time she was struck Dacey reached out, grabbing the dagger with one hand out of the dark. Her other hand clamped down on the thing's shoulder, keeping it from pulling out its blade, forcing it to stay put, and stopping it from creating even more damage to her side by pulling the blade out.

The thing only had a moment to flick its eyes sideways and see the threat before she stabbed it through the neck with the dragonglass wight creature collapsed at her feet and Dacey gasped too, going to her knees, clenching her teeth in agony.

Around her more men had died during her one on one duel. Now there were only twenty two men left, almost all of them injured. But it seemed as if they had finally killed all the wights. There were more than a few bits and pieces of the undead creatures on the ground still scabbling at them, but even so, the battle is over.

Dacey forced herself to her feet, looking around her as men began to drag bits and pieces of corpses into a center area to light on fire with faggots taken from the blaze already set up at the end of the tiny bridge. The ice was tough, but against its natural enemy fire it was slowly giving way already. As she watched a few droplets fell down the side of the gorge and Dacey nodded in satisfaction.

"You're hurt lady." Said one of her men, a would-be healer named Oris, running up to nodded grimly, trying not to move her arm and shoulder along above where the ice sword had punched through her.

Oris pulled her aside, ordering her to strip, glaring around at the men when they began to leer at her bare back visible in the firelight. They all suddenly found other things to do rather than gawk at her, and Dacey laughed at the older man quietly. He snorted at her, then pulled the jerkin underneath her armor to reveal wound in her side. The healer probed the area around her wound for a moment then nodded and said. "By the old god's favor you didn't hurt anything important lady." He growled in his worst bedside manner. "Once the, the blade has melted away, I'll stop the bleeding. But you'll not have full ability in that arm for months, any movement of the shoulder will aggravate the wound."

She nodded, ignoring Oris now while he did as he could while the ice sword that had done so much damage through the metal of her cuirass the sword was already decomposing somehow which was no doubt something built into the magic that created it. As she looked over at the bridge, which was now melting freely then at the wights, who were slowly also being burned to ash, she smiled. *Not this time, she thought grimly. We know you're out there you bastards, and as soon as I can get in touch with Winterfell, I'll make certain all the North knows to be ready for you.*

Unfortunately, while this would help the North prepare for the great enemy, all their preparations would prove to be facing the wrong direction, exactly as the White Walkers had hoped if their first way around the wall was found. Plans within plans, and if they couldn't keep the first way around the Wall a secret, then at the very least, they had baited

the trap well enough.

OOOOOO

At the same time that Dacey was fighting for her life, Tyrion lounged back contentedly on a heap of cushions. Reaching down, he patted the head of the working girl who was at work on his lower regions even now while he swigged a bottle of wine. He and his men had finally finished the first twenty siege engines, and Lord Commander Mormont had allowed him and his men three day's rest and recuperation. Needless to say Tyrion had made for the brothel that was now part of Castle Black, and hadn't come out since.

Normally the very idea of having whores on hand constantly near men who were, to put it bluntly, rapists, murderers and thieves despite being covered with the veneer of redemption in their Night's Watch garb, would have been unthinkable. However that was before. Now they needed them here, and the Night's Watchmen were a small percentage of the forces on the Wall in comparison to the Northerners who had been ordered up there.

After a few examples had been made there was no longer any trouble because any infraction against the women was met by immediate execution. The same penalty was given to those found drunk on watch up on the Wall if the evil bastards on the other side of the Wall didn't do it for you. The nighttime raids were still going on, but the attackers lost upwards of twenty men for every one Northerner they killed. That was no doubt painting an ugly picture of the number of defenders available, but they had yet to catch a glimpse of Tyrion's little toys.

He smirked over at a few of his men who were using a few cushions and cubicles to have an orgy, one, though he didn't know it, that wouldn't have looked out of place in a Roman senator's house on Earth. A few of the mercenaries were good men and he had bought a few of their services. Bronn was the best swordsman among them, and he had saved Tyrion's life twice since coming to the Wall. He, his fellow Chiggen and a few others were here on his tab now rather than their pay from Lord Manderly because of that.

*Pity that the fat man couldn't have found any of the mercenary companies. I doubt he could have gotten the Second Sons, or the Golden Company, but surely a few of the others wouldn't mind the easy work, though perhaps the Wall's reputation scared them off.* The fact of the matter was that even with the massive influx of troops that Stark had begun before going south the Wall was so long that it was all they could do to patrol it all. He had no idea what the numbers of wildlings were going to look like when they actually launched their full assault, but he was beginning to paint a very bad picture, and if they found a weak point, it would be very bad indeed.

He had first protested that the wildlings couldn't muster that much strength, but the old hands of the Northerners told him he was wrong. The land beyond the Wall was huge, unmapped for the most part but still probably as large as the North or even larger. What was worse, the wildlings nomadic lifestyle and the fact that they bred as often as they could meant their numbers were higher than most people would think. It was the knowledge of logistics Mance Rayder possessed that would allow them to keep such a large force in one place without needing to move on. Their full host was still gathering, and probably wouldn't be ready for another three months, but it was pretty obvious that once the full host assembled they would attack right away.

Tyrion was actually looking forward to it, eager to see his little toys in action. *Or not so little toys in this case,* he thought, smirking evilly. The size of the Wall had allowed him to place equally large siege engines in different positions along it, and thanks to the turn aisle concept they could be aimed too. In fact he doubted that the wildlings would be able to bring anything that would be able to range on them without being hit in turn well before it could get into range to loft a projectile that high. As such, well, they were utterly screwed, even without the alchemists and their own addition to his toys lethality.

The girl that was servicing him noticed that Tyrion's mind was elsewhere. Feeling a bit of professional pique, she scowled and used her teeth on him just slightly, biting down slightly. He growled, grabbing her hair and pulling her mouth away. "God's girl, my bodies short enough as it is, I can't afford to lose any inches no matter where they are. Let the teeth out of it down there!"

"That'll teach you to let your mind wander so much Lord Imp. A girl likes to be appreciated you know." The black haired woman replied saucily.

He laughed, pulling her head back down to work as he began to rub her head apologetically.

About an hour later he was finishing up, well finishing with that whore anyway. He was draining the last of his wine when the door to the warehouses door opened with a looked up to see Theon striding in. "Ho, Greyjoy!" he said laughing. "Astonishing, **you** found a whorehouse, that's amazing. How long have you been in the Castle for, 2 minutes? Pull up a girl and a couch, then tell me about the pirates, are there any more out there?"

Theon Greyjoy had changed somewhat since Tyrion had last seen him. Gone was the cocky somewhat touchy young man from Winterfell, now Theon walked with a tried and true confidence and self-possession, not to mention armed. From his long dagger at his side to the large composite bow made from lizard-lion bone on his back, he was dressed for business.

There had been four more battles at sea since the first one. The last had been two weeks ago, and evidently the harsh manner with which the pirates had been dealt with every time they attacked the convoy had gotten through to the idiots at last. Theon was pure death to the pirate crews, and his favorite tactic would terrify anyone who made their living at sea. Fire arrows were an evil thing at the best of times but after you've watched every officer on your ship die, everyone who could in theory direct a response to such, they were even worse.

One ship had gotten away after the last battle to report on the disaster to their fellows, and suddenly no more pirates regardless of where they were coming from dared to attack the convoy. Theon had first thought they were coming from that Skagos, an island with a truly horrible reputation, with the men there being rumored to be anything from cannibals to monsters who wore the skins of their kills for power, both men and animals. But after the last battle, Theon ordered two galleys to split off from the rest of the convoy to chase after the pirates. He found that they came from Skane, a much smaller island slightly further north from the giant island of Skagos.

Theon had written up a request for a land expedition to go in and burn them out, but doubted it would happen now since the pirates had finally grown a set of brains. It had been speaking about that to Mors Umber and the local Night's Watch commander that kept Theon in Eastwatch-by-the-Sea long enough for the orders about Tyrion to arrive there, otherwise he would have missed it.

Now his smile was grim as he nodded at the Imp. "Lannister, get dressed. You're wanted down at White Harbor."

"What?" Tyrion said shaking his head. "Why? Did my father finally get word I'm up here, does he want his so-called heir back under his thumb?" Tyrion was heir to the Lannister name in name only, and the entire family knew it. Tywin blamed him for his wife's death, again no secret, and had long lamented the fact that Jaime was removed from the line of succession when he joined the Kingsguard. That had actually been one of the main reasons why the Lannisters had been so ready to rebel against the Mad King.

The old man was simply using Tyrion as a fill in until one of Cersei's three brats showed enough promise to let the old man swoop in to train up as a real heir. That hadn't happened yet, but Tyrion felt he probably had four years or so until he was removed in favor of Tommen or even Myrcella.

"We don't know all the facts yet," the young man replied, but his eyes were still locked on Tyrion. Behind him Daryn and Smalljon entered the room, also dressed for war. The mercenaries who had changed to Tyrion's direct employ now looked nervous, keeping their hands away from where their swords were placed nearby. Even alone any one of these three young men would've carved through them like they weren't even there and they all knew it. Indeed most of them had trained against Smalljon or Daryn at least once, and you only had to lose a few times when you have a four or five on one advantage to get the idea that you are overmatched. "All we do know is that the queen has performed some kind of betrayal, the King is dead, and Rannar and his father Lord Stark are returning by sea to White Harbor. They want you down there, I don't know why, but I'm going to deliver you whatever the reason."

Tyrion's face blanked at that, he couldn't stop it as he wondered if maybe someone had figured out what was going on with the three Royal brats. He had long suspected what might be going on there, but he didn't have any proof, certainly he hadn't seen his two siblings in the act. But even without that he wouldn't put it past his 'loving' sister to do anything she could to retain power.

"That sounds interesting" he said standing up from his bed of cushions, quickly pulling on his breeches. "Do I have enough time to pack? And what about my men? I've started to pay these four out of my own pockets, will the Lord Commander take up their bill?"

"Fifteen minutes," Theon said simply. "We'll be heading along the Wall back to Eastwatch-By-The-Sea and then down from there to White Harbor. And yes, they'll stay here. I don't think they'll be able to keep up with us unless they brought a train of horses with them?"

Bronn laughed harshly at that then nodded at the Imp. "We'll still be here when you get back. Besides, if we take over making the next batch of siege engines, maybe we'll be paid more by the Lord Commander than you pay us Lord Skinflint."

Tyrion laughed, then made for the door, waving farewell to the whores.

"I'll help you pack." Smalljon said clapping the much smaller man on the shoulder. Over the past few months he and Daryn had come to like the Imp and the siege weapons he had designed for the wall were magnificent. They didn't trust him of course, he was a Lannister after all, but Smalljon liked him well enough. The big man leaned over as the two of them exited the brothel, whispering. "Don't worry, I doubt Lord Stark or Ranna will paint you with the same brush as your sister, but they'll want to make certain that you can't take her side."

Tyrion scoffed a little at the very idea. Cersei certainly wouldn't thank him for that, she had hated him for years for some reason, possibly the same reason their father did. Jaime was the only member of his family Tyrion liked at all, but if this was truly about what he feared, well he couldn't protect his older brother from his own follies any longer. It would be impossible to even try alone like this in the North. With the proven abilities of the young men around him there was scant chance he could even escape his own predicament right now. He also knew not to try to talk them around to his side, their loyalty to House Stark was unshakeable. *Still, as long as I'm alive I can try to talk my way out of this and if there's one thing I'm good at, it's talking my way out of things.*

Soon enough they were prepared, and Smalljon lifted the Imp onto a horse, one of a dozen that had been brought up onto the Wall for the trip along it to the east. "We'll ride for now, then when the horses get tired we'll walk. I'll carry you if I have to." Smalljon said somewhat grimly. "Speed is the thing now."

"In that case we should grab one of the invalid transports." Those had been designed by Tyrion in one of his off-hours, a way one person could transport an injured man on his back.

Daryn grunted, racing off to grab the carrier and place it on another horse which was the pack horse for the first leg of this trip. He nodded at Theon who was sitting on his own horse at the head of the column, and away they went, the horses hooves clattering on the stone of the Wall.

No one spoke for the first few hours, and Tyrion got the impression that whatever was going on was much more serious than Theon's brief sentences could relate. After a time however he regained his normal insouciance. "You know, I just thought of something, your families ordered both you and Daryn up to the Wall, won't you get in trouble for leaving your posts?"

Smalljon chuckled setting his beard to wag. Theon laughed too, while Daryn responded. "Get in trouble, that's a laugh! We are the wolfsworn, our places are with our leader! Our families know that and will understand."

Tyrion nodded. He understood that kind of loyalty though he had only seen it a few times before and only felt it toward his brother. The rest of the family could go hang for all he cared though he would feel sorry for the kids.

With the speed they were going, and Smalljon's endurance in carrying Tyrion they were able to cover the entire distance along the wall in five days. Not even an hour later they were boarding ship, which told Tyrion even more about the urgency of what was going on, with Theon and the others not even thinking of spending time in a brothel before going aboard ship.

As Tyrion boarded the ship he hoped he would be back to the Wall. Despite the hardship of living that far north, he would much rather be there with his new friends and allies than down south in luxury with his family backstabbing him and one another trying to get closer to his father's lordship.

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"I am sorry Lord Lannister, but I can't let you pass. My Lord Tully has sent word to all of his noble houses and told us to act as we might to defend our lands and as our conscience dictates in relation to the crown. I personally believe Lord Edmure would sooner cut off his hand than commit treason, and as such you have no right to march your man across the Riverlands!"

The man who bellowed this from the top of his keep's walls to Tywin Lannister was a youngish man, who had been a squire during the Ironborn Rebellion. Despite this he had no real experience with battles, much like all of his age group much to Tywin Lannister's contempt. *Summer knights and this boy is no exception*, he thought sardonically. *Your personal winter has come if you think you can stop me.*

Knowing that the Reach would rise up for Renly because he retreated there first, Tywin had decided to go through the Golden Tooth down the River Road. He calculated that if he acted quickly he could meet up with some of the Riverlands families that would back his own: those whose loyalty he had purchased with good gold in the past and through blood or could influence through other means. They could then keep any expedition from the North from threatening to interfere with the southern campaign, and keep the Riverlands from rising as a united power for his enemies. That this would force the battles to all occur in territory not his own was also a factor.

As such, he had split his initial twelve-thousand strong force. He personally was at the head of ten thousand men, mixed cavalry and infantry, which he had led through the Golden Tooth. He had hoped that Lord Vance and his family, which controlled Wayfarer's Rest, would see reason, giving him a hold on this side of the mountains to secure his logistics. Evidently that wasn't going to happen without a fight.

The other two thousand, all of whom were mounted infantry, that is infantry with enough horses to keep going at a decent pace to cover distance faster but not trained to fight on horseback, had turned southward Deep Den to meet up with Lord Lydden and Lord Serret's forces there. Those forces, about eight thousand strong would force-march to King's Landing as fast as they could. Once there Lord Serret would become Hand of the King for now, and with that army and the remaining defenses of the city would secure it against all comers.

That was a calculated risk, much like his march into the Riverlands, but one he felt had some merit. Renly did not impress him as a possible general, he lacked any real combat experience and didn't seem able to act quickly. If Lord Stark lived however, Eddard became the more dangerous of his foes, a tried and tested general who had fought in two wars already and acquitted himself well. He wanted to goad the northerners out from Moat Cailin, then crush them in the open field.

Right now however he had to deal with this young and soon to be dead fool. *Still, it was a shrewd move on Tully's part. Simply sharing the information of both sides of the conflict in King's Landing can't be seen as piling on further treason and telling his nobles to simply follow their conscience isn't anything that could be repaid on the body of his heir. Plus the Riverlands are excellent territory for small unit tactics, which can hold up my advance.*

"I see," Tywin said coldly, staring up at Lord Vance from where he stood on the River Road where it wound by the Wayfarer's Rest. The sun glinted slightly on his shaved head, but it did nothing to diminish the power of his green eyed stare. A flag of truce flew overhead, and he was surrounded by armed guards just in case the fool proved pragmatic enough to take a shot at him regardless. "So you believe that you and your paltry force and that equally paltry castle of yours can stop me? Amusing."

"My men are ready and willing! They fight for justice Lord Goldshitter, whereas you fight for your own ego and to keep that bitch of daughter and her baseborn child on the throne. Whatever lie you have convinced your people to swallow, their morale will never match ours!"

"Of course..." Lord Lannister said slowly as if he was talking to a particularly thick child which he was beginning to think he was. "Pardon me, of course your belief in the rightness of your cause will make up for the fact that you only have six-hundred men or so under your command. Whereas I have ten thousand, most of them veterans, something that your men probably cannot say given the sheer idiocy I am hearing from their Lord."

He watched in amusement as the young man's face flared up with anger and one of his hands went to the hilt of his sword despite the talks occurring under the owes of parlay. "I've said my piece!" The young man shouted. "If you think you can take my castle, then do try!"

"Very well." Lord Tywin responded, turning away, shaking his head internally. The moment he reached his army encamped around the keep he nodded to his second-in-command, motioning over his head. "Begin."

His cousin Stafford Lannister, nodded, raising a horn to his mouth and blowing the attack command. All around archers began to fire up at the keep's ramparts, protected themselves by large wooden walls carried by other men. This gave them an advantage against their opponents despite said opponents being on top of the keep's two-story palisade. A simple wooden battering ram with a simple roof was also brought up, with twenty men underneath it rushing towards the gate.

"That young fool in there is an utter moron, I have no doubt the battering ram will take all of his attention. Wait another hour then send the men around his puling little keep, spread the defenders out and then scale the walls." Tywin ordered, looking at the action from a safe distance.

His men all nodded. They were all veterans, most of them from at least two wars. They weren't as experienced as he would've liked in siege warfare, but his own knowledge of that was decent enough, and the advantage in manpower was superlative in this case. It wouldn't be if he had to capture Riverrun or one of the more serious castles in the Riverlands, but Wayfarer's Rest wasn't a real threat.

He turned to look at one of his men, the one in charge of building any necessary siege equipment. "You said you would be able to build a catapult quickly, how quickly?"

"Half a day Lord." the man said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Getting the timbers cut for it won't take very long, but

putting it all together and getting the weights right will."

"Don't bother then." Tywin said staring over at the keep, where his archers were beginning to win their duel. Sheer weight of numbers was doing for that considering he had more archers in his army than the defenders had men. Wayfarer's Rest was not a large castle, nor a very modern one, more of a keep rather than a true castle. Certainly it was no Golden Tooth. That, Lord Lannister knew was a sign of his triumph in controlling the local economy. He had carefully made certain that house Vance and other houses along the routes into and out of the passes into his kingdom were not rich enough to pay for any kind of upgrade to their castles.

*Of course if Lord Tully had decided to he could have given them the money for it, but he didn't and despite his recent clever move, that is going to cost him and his nation.* Lord Lannister thought to himself.

With a final glance up at the castle he turned away, moving through his army's camp to his command tent. Pushing inside his servants bowed him in, one of them already holding up a glass of wine which he took sniffing it suspiciously for a moment before sipping at it and moving on. His map was laid out on a desk, far lighter than his normal one back in the rock, light enough to be put on one of the cars that made up his baggage train.

Behind him his commanders entered, and he frowned at them. "Lord Kenning, take command of the overall battle, follow my orders and take that keep."

Terrence Kenning was a large barrel chested man, who liked wrestling and fisticuffs over swordplay, and his face showed it. A descendant of a castaway Ironborn family, he had some leanings in that direction so grinned evilly, bowing swiftly.

As he was turning away Lord Lannister's voice called back him back for a moment. "Kenning? No prisoners. We don't have time for them, and an example must be set early for it to be given time to sink in before we move on."

The man's grin widened noticeably and he bowed again before leaving. As the other men in the tent muttered to themselves very quietly, they didn't want to draw his ire, Lord Lannister turned to his map, staring down at it thoughtfully.

*If this had occurred even a year ago, I would be rushing for King's Landing with all of my forces as quickly as I could, but my daughter has proven herself to be quite dangerous on the political battlefield, and my son at least can defend the city well enough. He might be untried on a greater campaign, but sieges are ridiculously easy. No, my initial estimate was correct, my time will be better spent in the field. That will only become more certain when Josef Serret arrives there,* Tywin thought.

While he was reasonably happy with his two children's leadership in King's Landing, Tywin was concerned about the type of accusations flying around now. They were as polarizing as he feared they would be, and he knew that both of the surviving Baratheon brothers would be striking out. *If Stannis has already struck for Kings landing, I couldn't arrive there at any time to do anything, I need to deal with what I know, not with what I fear. If I can keep the Riverlands out of it, I can crush Stannis with my larger forces when my second army begins to move. And as for Renly, he'll be able to field the largest army, but if he tries to lead himself, hah!*

"Now if Randyll Tully is in command, that is a different kettle of fish." He thought aloud, something which made some of his men look at him. One of them stepped forward before being waved back. He didn't need their minds on this, it wasn't as if they had any new intelligence to add.

*Still, raising that large an army will take time, time enough for my own second echelon to arrive at the borders and start their march. Plus my orders to house Clegane and the mercenaries there will no doubt draw off some of that strength. Until then, I can be better served by smashing the Riverlands, stopping their forces from joining Stannis or Renly and preparing for the Northern incursion.* He counted off names in his head of the various lords and noble houses in the Riverlands, going through how they would respond to the current events one by one.

Eventually he nodded, then began to pen some more messages to a few of them. One or two he knew would cause issues, but he also knew that without Tully to rally them, they would lack the ability to meet him in open battle. And as for the ones who were already his agents, they knew him well enough to know what would happen if they tried to double cross him.

Outside there was a roar, and the thundering of feet. Lord Lannister frowned and turned to gaze over at the youngest man present. "Go see if that's the attack going in."

The man nodded and scuttled out returning quickly. "Yes Lord, our forces have finished surrounding the keep and are



now pressing in from all sides not just this one. Lord Kenning reports that it looks as if the assault at the back was repulsed, but the defenders are spread so thinly now our forces are getting up on the wall in numerous places. We haven't made much headway beyond that, but it's only a matter of time."

Lord Lannister nodded, turning his thoughts back to the future but a sudden thought occurred to him. He turned back and said "Tell Lord Kenning that I want the maester of the keep taken alive as well as all of his ravens. I will need them to send words to King's Landing of what has occurred here, as well as some orders back to my brother and children."

Tywin wanted to preserve the number of ravens in his army, and doing this would allow him to stretch their numbers nicely, though of course he couldn't be contacted from elsewhere in the same manner. The younger man didn't seem to understand his reasoning, but he nodded obediently and ran off.

Two hours later the battle is over. He had lost something like three hundred men, but house Vance was done, their Lord, their heir, the lady of the house, and her young daughter put to the sword, after Lord Kenning and a few of his men had fun with them of course. Their land would be incorporated into either the Westerlands itself, or Tywin would later give it over to someone else in the Riverlands one of their neighbors if he they proved more intelligent.

"We'll stay here for the night." he said looking up at his commanders. "Tomorrow, we'll leave Damon here with a thousand men to retain Wayfarer's Rest and hold the pass open. The rest of us will march further into the Riverlands and sack any castle that doesn't bend the knee to the King."

As his lords cheered at the idea, Tywin smiled thinly. *If they don't bend the knee, they will all learn why the Rains of Castamere is so well known in the Westerlands **personally**.*

OOOOOOO

Five men there had been to take on this single target, and now only two remained alive. They had made the mistake of assuming that the target was drunk and come up on him in the night as he slept by the roadside under a tree. Sandor Clegane had been prepared for treachery, the first man being gutted by his heavy longsword showed an example of such preparation.

But two of the others had bows, and four arrows had slowed their target down, though not before he had slain a second of their band. The third died when he got too close to what should have been a corpse, only to find the man's plate mail had stooped the arrows from fully penetrating. Still, the third man had near to chopped his arm off before going down with their target's dagger in his throat, and the archers had simply filled the man with arrows until he looked more like a pincushion than a man.

After that the two archers had taken the time to bury their fellows, ruffling through their money pouches first of course. After that the man they had been hired to kill was also buried there by the road, not the first and certainly not the last. Sandor Clegane, the man called the Hound, was buried there, his unmarked grave barely a weeks' travel away from the keep he had hoped to call his own soon.

OOOOOOO

The dockworkers and other smallfolk were cheering as Ranma stepped down the gangplank, followed by father, then his sister and his uncle. Daenerys and the others waited onboard for the moment, with Fenris there. That was actually Brynden's idea, he felt Daenerys needed to make an immediate impression.

In front of the wharf a carriage had pulled up moments before. Now Lord Manderly himself got out with his entire family around him. That wasn't surprising though what was, was seeing Theon, Smalljon and Daryn there as well grinning at Ranma as he walked down the plank, Ice in its sheathe on his back (it was a greatsword after all, and too tall for him to wear at his side).

At the sight of his friends Ranma laughed, leaping forward. They pulled them into hugs one after another as they thumped and pounded on his back amid demands from all of them to hear what had happened.

Eddard shook his head resignedly at his son's complete dismissal of all decorum, leaning on his daughter for support at the moment. "Lord Manderly." he said bowing slightly. "I thank you for your service and those of your men. Without your forethought, the Fish's Scale's and the men aboard, I would not be here today."

Lord Manderly chuckled into his goatee at the boisterous greeting going on to one side, bowing his head to his Lord. "You trusted me to provide you with an escape route my Lord, it behooved me to provide you with the best one I

could."He frowned looking up at the ship. "Where is captain Woolfield, did he fall in battle?"

That question broke Ranma out of his joy at seeing his friends after so many months. "He and many others Lord Manderly."Ranma said moving over to shake the man's hand in a warrior's clasp before doing the same to his two sons. Both younger mansmiled at him, clapping him on the shoulder in return for the gesture which he returned, before turning back to Wyman. "It's quite a tale to tell, since he didn't die in King's Landing but after."

Lord Manderly shook his head. At first Wyman had thoughts to offer one of his daughters to lady Catelyn for Ranma to marry. But frankly he was too wild, and Ranma had never looked at them with favor much like the Karstark girl Alys. Since then, he had made other plans for them, both of which in this time of chaos made even more sense, and Alys had been promised to Daryn nearly two years ago. The two young people had apparently become besotted with one another after a few meetings, and their mothers had pushed to solidify the arrangement despite Lord Karstark's hope for his daughter to marry Ranma, something Wyman could have told him would never happen given how Ranma treated Alys like a sister.

Still despite his wild nature Ranma was a good man, and would make an excellent Lord. Indeed, Lord Manderly was happy with all of the children of Lord Stark that he had met, and the only one he hadn't was young Rickon and the latest babe.

"I see." he said, now, looking at Ranma and then to the ship. "Well, we can speak about that later I suppose. But this surely cannot be young Sansa!" he exclaimed looking at the beautiful young woman before him. "By the Seven child, it's only been a few years since I've seen you and look at you now!"

Sansa blushed a little, but leaned upwards, kissing Lord Manderly on the cheek and then moving over to hug his sons and daughters. "It is good to be home in the North my Lord." she said, turning to him again, her voice trembling a little.

She had loved so many things about the South, but when it all been ripped away by war she realized that all of what she loved was so shallow. Some of it was simply a lie, some of it was just the trivial desires of a young girl and it was time for such things to be put aside for what really mattered; integrity, being able to trust those around you, to be safe and to be loved.

At that point Sansa turned back to the ship and looked at the sail master who had come down the gangway to formally greet his Lord. Stepping towards him she spoke in a loud, clear voice so that his crew up on the ship could hear along with the crowd around them who were still cheering. "Ser, thank you for your aid in getting us all home to the North. Without your sea knowledge and leadership we would not be here. Please, take this with my thanks."

With that, Sansa pulled out from her small sea bag a heavy coat of wool, dyed in various colors of green and sea blue. It was a magnificent work, and one that had taken up quite a lot of her time aboard ship for just this moment.

"A gift from the lady!" someone shouted from the crowd, causing Sansa to blush. The sail master also flushed in happiness at the gift, almost like a young boy before reaching out and taking it with gentle hands. "Thank you Lady Stark" he said bowing to Sansa. "And I am glad that we succeeded in returning you and your family to the North where you belong."

As the crowd cheered watching the gift be given, something that had spread Sansa's name far and wide, Lord Manderly smiled at the display but turned back to Ranma and the others. "You wrote in your note something about having the Stormborn with you? Might I ask what that was about?"

"Your answer is before you." Ranma said laughing lightly, waving his hand at the ship. At her cue, Daenerys appeared at the top of the gangway. Suddenly the crowd silenced itself, staring up at her.

Fenris padded down first, as if guarding the Targaryen girl. Daenerys followed, her head held high, her long silver hair flowing in the wind coming off the harbor, her violet eyes flashing with delight as she looked around the city. Behind her, not caged or chained in any way came her two dragons, now the size of medium sized dogs, walking on all fours, their wings furled against their backs, looking around with seeming as much interest in the city as their one could look at those animals or Daenerys and not realize what they represented.

While House Glover would have a problem with Daenerys's presence, the present Lord Glover having lost his brother to the Mad King's insanity having been Brandon's squire, he was the exception to the rule of how the return of the dragons would be seen here in the North. The North had never felt dragon fire not even in the Targaryen's conquest of Westeros since King Torrhen Stark had bent the knee rather than subject his people to that threat. They had remained mostly untouched by the rebellion, and for the most part the smallfolk had good or ambivalent memories of

House Targaryen.

Say what you would for how they went about it, but House Targaryen's forced unification of Westeros had stopped much of the internecine warfare that went on all the time between the different nations. True, violence had flared up occasionally but that was better than the almost constant warfare previously. The Riverlands fought the North, the Vale fought the North, the North fought them both and the Ironborn occasionally, and of course each other. It was long thought by the smallfolk that it was the coming of the dragons that had truly brought a semblance of peace to the realm.

Because of this most of the North hadn't blamed the Targaryen family for the Mad King's deeds. The slaughter of the children in particular had infuriated many of the northern lords seeing it as dishonorable in the extreme. Lord Bolton might not have thought that way, but he was dead, and anyone who thought like him kept their thoughts to themselves.

Behind Daenerys and her dragons came Myrcella and Alayaya. The two of them almost disappeared in the crowd's cognitive perception however as the men and women all stared at the dragons and Daenerys Stormborn.

Smiling Ranma waved his hand towards the three girls to come forward. "Lord Manderly, be known to Princess Myrcella Baratheon. There are some questions there, but treat her as such for now." He said in a lower voice, before going on in a more normal level. "The lady behind her as Alayaya and last but certainly not least, this is Daenerys Targaryen, my fiancée."

Lord Manderly's eyes widened in shock then narrowed in speculation as a small smile appeared on his bearded face. "Interesting, very interesting on many levels."

"Truly, you have a gift for the understatement my friend." Eddard said. "Still, her dowry is something no one else can match, and it will add legitimacy to our future plans."

While Smalljon and Daryn were silent, simply staring, Theon burst out in an awed tone. "By the Drowned God Ranma, when you go hunting you hook the best game of all!"

"Eyes back in your head Greyjoy," Ranma mock-growled. "Or I'll tell her about how I finally changed your attitude to that Iron Price crap."

Theon gulped but Daenerys laughed. "Oh, don't bother, Sansa has already mentioned that one. You didn't think there weren't any witnesses to that episode did you? I don't suppose though you have any equally embarrassing stories about this one?" She waved a hand at Ranma, laughing quietly.

Lord Manderly frowned for a few silent seconds, then smiled. He reached back into his coach, and pulled out a large flowing cloak made of bear and wolf's skin. Fenris growled a little at seeing it, but then ignored it with lordly disdain.

"I had anticipated something like this, though the fiancé bit through me." Wyman said dryly to Eddard. "My lady, the North is cold, might I present this cloak to you for your convenience?"

Turning away from Theon's scowl, Ranma took it from him as Daenerys nodded, smiling faintly at the large, fat man. Ranma had filled her in on Lord Manderly, and how judging him by his looks would be a mistake of epic proportions. Indeed, she could see there was something very shrewd looking out of those twinkling eyes of his and rather liked that. "Thank you my Lord, the North is rather cold in terms of weather, though I feel there are more important things to a nation than whether or not you can go around in silk shirts, and your welcome has been as warm as I could ever hope."

She looked up at Ranma from her smaller height, not coquettishly as so many girls had done over the last few years, but challengingly with a smirk on face as he put the cloak around her shoulders pulling it tight. She licked her lips a little bit, knowing that drove him wild and saw the spark in his eyes before he turned away, causing her to chuckle under her breath.

Ranma took two more cloaks from Lord Manderly's carriage. These were made of mink furs and he put them over Myrcella and Sansa, pulling them both to him in one-armed hugs before he helped them into the carriage, then his father. Daenerys however refused to join them. She instead took on one of the horse prepared for them, while the two young dragons rode Fenris, a rather amusing sight if she were honest.

The crowds gathered everywhere they went through the city up to the keep, to stare at Daenerys on her horse as they rode past, with the two dragons curled up on Fenris' back beside noise of the crowd was beginning to get to

them both, but Daenerys was fully connected to them both mind to mind, calming them down with words of affection love and commands to remain calm. Fenris too seemed to be irritated, but nowhere near as much as Ranma had reported he had been in King's Landing.

*The smell certainly is much better than that of king's Landing is supposed to be*, Daenerys thought, looking around. The city was also different from any of the cities in Essos she had seen. Those were such a hodgepodge of new and old, organized and disorganized, small and large and well-kept all the way to just falling apart. This city was organized in a way that she hadn't ever seen in a city before, very clean and it was obvious to see designed for defense as well. It was almost as if the whole city could become a fortress, not just the outer walls but everything, which was in fact the case.

Lord Manderly and his ancestors had planned everything about White Harbor and defense was always foremost in their minds. Even the interior of the city was like would've missed one such idea and its significance if Ranma and the others hadn't pointed them and there were a few four stories tall houses, all of which were made of stone like small keeps or holdfasts, with flat roofs for the walls were ever lost the defenders could pull back to them and keep fighting from these houses. Each of them was within bow range of the ones near it, and commanded a view down into the city around them.

After Theon had finished explaining that Sansa stuck her head out the window of the carriage. "Ignore them. Ranma and his friends only care about military stuff. You should come and see the bazar here, the markets and the shopping stalls are a lot of fun, and they have some very interesting jewel work, and this local bread, it has some kind of local oil mixed into it, and its lovely. Oh, and I can show you some northern dress styles!"

"I doubt we'll have time for that Sansa." Daenerys replied laughing, leaning over to cup the younger girl's face for a moment. "Besides, I'm afraid I am not as fashion-conscious as you are. Indeed, you'll have to be in charge of my wardrobe once we get settled into Winterfell."

"I'll hold you to that." Sansa laughed, already turning back to talk excitedly to Myrcella about it, who rolled her eyes. She wasn't as much of a fashion butterfly as her friend, but she wasn't going to ruin her friend's parade by interrupting her.

Later that evening Ranma, his father, uncle and Daenerys (who had spent most of the day in a bath, along with Alayaya and Myrcella) met with Lord Manderly, his sons and the wolfsworn. They were joined at Daenerys' behest by Domic, and also a surprise guest: Robin Flint, heir of Widow's Watch.

Robin was a thirty something man who had traveled down to the city to take part of this discussion before heading back home, unwilling to take the time to go all the way to Winterfell. He didn't even want to be here in White Harbor, or anywhere at all away from his lady wife. Limira Lightfoot was the firstborn daughter of House Lightfoot, who held Ramsgate, a normally healthy and cheerful woman, but she was recovering from a very bad miscarriage. It was an emotional and physically trying time for her, and Robin was unwilling to be away from Limira for long.

Knowing that Robin and Wyman would not make the trip up to Winterfell, Eddard laid out what had happened in King's Landing, as well as the act of treachery that had sparked it. He made certain to underscore his guards and the Riverrun men's acts of heroism, how well they had fought, and in particular Ser Jory's heroic rescue of Eddard himself from the Kingslayer, going into his own wounds and thus explaining why he was stepping down for his son. Then when Ranma showed no signs of doing so Eddard told them how Ranma had gone into the city to rescue Sansa. That feat had everyone but the wolfsworn astonished while they simply clapped Ranma on the back for the deed.

But then Ranma told them what Sansa had said about the prisoners being executed, and the feeling of the meeting nosedived. After that Ranma looked around at them all, his eyes dark as he looked at their grim faces. "I don't know if they have other prisoners from the tower fight, but we can't let that effect our actions going forward."

Brynden nodded. "Besides, if Joffrey was willing to kill Greentree and the others in a fit of pique, he might have already done worse to the other prisoners after Ranma rescued Sansa. Regardless, they all fell in battle, and their families need to be told and rewarded for the loyalty of their men."

After that Ranma took up the tale once more, filling them in on what had happened with Lord Stannis' attempt to take the ship, the horror of the Shadow Warriors, and his own thoughts on what that would mean in the near future, as well as their own plans. Ranma's decision to march down into the Riverlands to help Lord Tully and the Riverlands lords was met with approval.

Lord Manderly however was rather pragmatic, and he came to what he saw as the crux of the matter quickly. "I have no issues with the war you are beginning to prepare my Lord, and agree with the fact that it should only be a medium-

sized force we send, especially with what's been going on up on the Wall, and the reality of the threat beyond." He ignored Robin's raised eyebrow, staying to the main issue. "However, such things will take money. Should we start forging a new currency now? Based off of silver perhaps?"

"Yes." Ranma said nodding sharply. "When the time comes, we'll start issuing silver coinage to our men. I won't be paying our men through what we take in battle, that will be bonuses divided out after the fight at times, then possibly sent back north since on the march there won't be much for them to spend their loot on, though in the Riverlands such will be scarce unless we are on an opposing lord's land, and even then I won't allow any pillaging of the smallfolk. Order, discipline and speed will be watchwords in my army. But that's not all I want from you Lord Manderly, your city or yours, Robin."

"I presume you mean something other than sending some of my men with you?" Robin asked before Wyman could respond. "I refuse to leave my wife for long as I said earlier, but I can send some men under my master-at-arms."

"Hold off on that Robin, I don't want your men with me, I'll want them here to deal with the other issue I have for both of you. I will want some of your heavy cavalry though, Wyman"

"My city and my house are at your disposal, of course." Wyman replied, cocking one eyebrow.

"I know that, but it's good to hear anyway." Ranma said with a smile. "My idea for both of you is about Sisterton."

Eddard looked up at him sharply. "We didn't discuss that, what do you intend Ranma?"

It was Daenerys who replied. The two of them had talked about this since the smuggler attempted to attack them. "If the Vale cannot control those smugglers, and at present the Vale is splintering thanks to the weakness of its ruling family, **we** will."

Ranma nodded. "The smugglers have always been an obstacle to trade here, this attack on us was just the last straw, besides the Vale's control of them has always been tenuous at best, more a thing of law than reality. I want the Three Sisters captured, their lords removed and either arrested or executed depending on if they try to fight back and were connected to their smuggling and pirate activity."

He turned to his friends. "Theon, you'll be in command of the naval forces. Given what everyone has told me about how well you led the defenses of the convoys heading up to the Wall I doubt any of the captains will have an issue with that."

Lord Manderly and his two sons both nodded firmly, while Theon flushed slightly at the praise as Smalljon clapped him hard on the back. None of them had any doubts about Theon's ability to command at sea. For his part, Theon was slightly unhappy to be sidelined like that, but he could see the reasoning behind it.

Seeing that, Ranma smiled at his childhood friend then went on. "Wylis, you'll command the invasion forces, made up of your own men and those of your family Robin. I trust I don't have to tell you my views on discipline, or the treatment of female prisoners?"

While he was not a wolfsworn, Wylis and his younger brother Wendel had spent quite a lot of time around Ranma at one point or another, and knew his views on rape. How that could be stopped during a sack of a town was another question, but Wylis was also a true knight and had his own views on such, so was determined to at least try. Thus he simply nodded his eyes hard. "What about male prisoners?"

"If they are willing to live under Northern rule, let them retain their current lands and possessions. If not, then they will need to be shipped up to the Wall or be forced to be of use on other projects going forward." Ranma shrugged philosophically.

"Is there anyway we can send supplies down to slightly beyond the Neck?" Daenerys said looking at the map that was on one wall of Lord Manderly's study. "I would presume that such would allow us and the army to march down much more quickly if we don't have to carry all our supplies with us."

"We don't have enough lift capacity in the city to lift an army of any appreciable size just yet, but yes we can transport foodstuffs and other items easily. I believe there's a small fishing village on the edge of Lord Reed's territory that sometimes bring up items from the Neck, ingredients for medicine and other things, though they sell most of that down in the Riverlands. It will take a few months but we could enlarge it and make it into some kind of supply depot." Wyman replied, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully at the 'we' part of that sentence.

"Excellent." Daenerys replied enthusiastically. "That could also allow us to bring in reinforcements somewhat quickly if

we need them. I would think House Locke could send troops down that way much faster than overland for example."

Ranma nodded, smirking a bit, though his eyes were still hard. "I want the whole of the Bite under our control. If we have the Bite locked down we can then use portions of the Navy to reinforce us elsewhere further south, which'll be needed if we have to take the fight to Dragonstone in particular, and could come as a shock to the Vale if Lysa or whoever replace her comes in on the Lannister or Baratheon side of things. But behind that, what kind of force can you send with the army?"

"I will send Wendel here with a seven hundred heavy cavalry and six hundred heavy infantry straight down to the Moat within four days' time." Wyman said decisively, Wendel nodding in agreement. "I'll start working on creating a silver-backed currency as well."

Wylis smiled. "You'll be traveling back to Winterfell up the White Knife most of the way. It's slower going up the river, but is still faster than on foot. Well..." He laughed looking over at Ranma. "For most of us anyway."

While his son and Daenerys laughed, Eddard leaned forward eagerly from where he had been propped up on some cushions by the table. "Tell me about that. How are Bran and Catelyn doing, what have they been up to the past few months? We'd gotten some news of Bran's work on the White Knife in the monthly messages I shared with my lady wife before everything went to the crapper in King's Landing but I crave current news of my family."

Lord Manderly smiled gently at the other man, knowing how important family was to Lord Stark, despite his stern appearance. The rest of the night was taken up by discussing Bran's work on the White knife, the issue of steel and how it would pertain to the coming campaign and the pay for the men who would be joining the army, and other sundry items throughout the night.

Later that evening, after everyone else had gone to bed Ranma bid good night to Daenerys, then stayed up with his three friends, talking about their own adventures. He was pleased with most of what he heard, though he hoped that Theon wouldn't be needed in command of the convoy system for a while, since Theon would be needed to command the fleet against the sisters. The waters around the sisters were nasty to anyone who didn't know them, the reason, along with them bending the knee to the Vale, which explained why the Lockes and Manderlys hadn't gone in and wiped them out long since. Theon's ability to control a naval action and anticipate his opponents moves would be needed there, hence his appointment.

As for the wildlings, well, Ranma thought complacently, they were just screwed. They would've had trouble fighting the Night's Watch alone with the Wall's aid, it was so good defensible position, now through they had no chance. It remained to be seen however if the King Beyond the Wall realized that, or indeed had any alternative to simply try to bull rush ahead. The wildlings were not like any army of civilized people, they were a fractious horde, one that would sooner rush headlong into a slaughter than simply give up and go home.

Worse, Ranma was certain Mance and his people knew about the threat rising behind them. No, Mance would have to at least make a real, concerted effort to get past the Wall to save his own position, and to attempt to save his own people from the White Walkers. But if he did, their losses would be hideous. Still, that was a problem for the future. For now, he had human issues to deal with in the south first.

As Smalljon and Daryn left the table to get some more ale, with Smalljon ribbing his friend about his upcoming marriage, Theon turned to Ranma. "I had a thought by the way."

"Oh no!" Ranma said shaking his head and coming out of his own thoughts. "That's never a good sign."

"Shut up." Theon said pushing his shoulder lightly. He sat there silently for moment then looked over at Ranma again. "The Ironborn. We could get them on our side you know. They've got a fleet, and they've no doubt recovered from their rebellion against the throne, and they'll have no love of either the Lannisters or the Baratheons. If you sent me..."

"No." Ranma said emphatically shaking his head. "For one thing, I need you right where you are. You've seen it, the fleet of White Harbor isn't very experienced, they need someone who knows how to use them in a fleet action leading them, and right now that's you. I was serious, I want the entirety of the Bite under firm Northern control, regardless of the outcome of this war **that** is going to be a done deal."

Ranma and Daenerys were envisioning that as being part of a transportation renaissance for the North, and maybe even for the Riverlands if some of Ranma's other plans down there worked out. Daenerys had waxed eloquent on how much the ability to trade with one another had influenced the Free cities, making them all rich and trade could be the lifeblood of a middle-class, which in turn could fuel innovation going forward. Ranma was incredibly happy with

what Bran had done so far, but he would love to see Westeros start taking its first steps beyond the Middle Ages in his lifetime. He just wished he personally could do more, but he had been a middling student past, and that had come back to haunt him here.

"For another, Theon none the other Ironborn have gone through your epiphany, I haven't hung any of them out a window after all."

With no girl around to try to impress Theon simply shook his head with a faint smile. It had been an interesting experience, though at the time it had been terrifying too. Yet for all his fear at that moment, it had marked the turning point in his relationship with the rest of the wolfsworn. He stopped carping about the Iron Price and the honor of his people, and, while one or two of them still saw him as an outsider, most had welcomed him after that.

"But surely as allies," Theon began again.

"The Ironborn are no allies of anyone Theon." Ranma interrupted him, his voice gentle, but still stern. "They burn, they pillage, they rape. You think I can win the hearts and minds of people if I align myself with a force like that? Besides, they would never agree to it. Not even if we sent you." he said holding up a hand when Theon went to speak. "They'll strike wherever the rest of Westeros is weak, so long as that isn't us it's something that'll work in our favor, and we don't have to ally with them to get that. Indeed, if we sent you to them, it might be seen as a sign of weakness regardless of anything else."

Theon actually paused to think about that for a moment then nodded unwillingly. "All right, I can see that. I just thought..."

"I know." Ranma replied, clapping him on the shoulder. "It's a hard thing to turn your back on your people, but you have to realize, they weren't worth your allegiance in the first place."

Theon nodded slowly, though his face still showed turmoil but Ranma's next words wiped that out of his mind. "After you're done taking the Three Sisters, if Daenerys and I haven't called for the fleet to move further down into the rest of Westeros, feel free to burn out that pirate Island of yours, Skane was it? In fact, depending on conditions on the island you might have earned your own title there."

"What?" Theon said coming out of his maudlin and rather self-destructive thoughts. "What do you mean?"

Ranma shrugged. "We know that the wildlings and the enemy beyond them can get around the Wall somehow, maybe they're doing it by the Gorge, maybe they're doing it by sea. Regardless, having a fortress on that island to control the Bay of Seals would be a good idea. It could be the northernmost outpost of our fleet, which means it would need its own lord. I can't think of anyone else for that, can you?"

Theon grinned, the last vestiges of ill humor leaving him as Smalljon and Daryn returned with the ale.

OOOOOO

That night Myrcella shared a suite with Daenerys, something both of them and gotten used to over time and something Daenerys wished to continue if Myrcella was going to become her official handmaiden. Not only would it be difficult on campaign to have more than a single tent devoted to her, Daenerys wanted to keep Myrcella around to help with her dragons. The two draklings had surprised Daenerys by allowing Myrcella to touch them and even to feed them occasionally. She had been extremely helpful after the two little dragons molted the first time. That was a very touchy time for them all, with Daenerys and Myrcella helping Sunfyre and Rhaegon remove the dried bits of scale.

Normally it would have been an impossible task for anyone of Non-Targaryen blood, but the young draklings were on their best behavior with Fenris giving a continuous warning growl from his place nearby. Fenris had no hesitation where Myrcella was concerned, she was pack, that was all there was to it in his mind. The two flyer-cubs were pack too, but they were young, and sometimes the young didn't realize how strong they were or when play fights became real, a problem made worse by how weak some of the two-legs were. It was the job of the elders to teach them this, and he was happy to help.

Myrcella and Daenerys woke up the next morning to a knock on their door, followed swiftly by Ranma poking his head in. "You two decent?" At Daenerys's nod he came in followed by a harried looking maid carrying a tray of food. Ranma had attempted to purloin it from her, but she had beaten off the Lord Stark's attempt at being helpful, certain in her duties, but it had been a near run thing.

The two girls didn't know that, all they knew was that the maid brought with her the most magnificent thing that Myrcella had ever tasted, mulled cider with a tiny touch of cinnamon, a major export of the Cinnamon Straits. It was extremely expensive here in Westeros, and Myrcella had only been allowed even a hint of it before on special occasions. Here in White Harbor it was even more expensive given the distance and it was a sign of the regard Lord Manderly held the ladies and Lord Stark that it was available at all.

Daenerys sipped appreciatively at her mulled cider, though she had added bit of honey to her portion. For a moment there was silence save for the appreciative noises of the ladies broken when Daenerys let loose a last approving hum of pleasure before speaking. "I might have to keep you Ranma," she laughed, laying her head against his shoulder for a moment as he sat on the bed beside her.

At her mental okay the two draklings scooted over to their plates from their places by her bed, eating daintily but quickly. Their manners had improved as the weeks went by, something she was very happy to see.

Ranma looked over at Myrcella, one hand grabbing up a bagel and spreading some fresh churned cream cheese over it, slicing it in half for him and Daenerys. "So, are you going to be up to helping us with Tyrion, Merry?"

Myrcella finished chewing a bite of fresh bread, then nodded. "I've always liked Uncle Tyrion, even if my mother didn't for some reason. I honestly have no idea why the two of them were so at odds, I don't think the Imp ever did anything to hurt her, embarrass yes but not hurt or humiliate. But my mother was strange like that. I won't say he was very close to any of the three of us, but he was kind at least." She sighed sadly as she always did considering her mother. "He'll believe me about Joffrey I think, the rest of it..." She shrugged.

"Do you..." she went on hesitantly looking up at Ranma. "Do you think I could contact my mother? I, I would like her to know that I'm safe at least."

"I told her you were with us when I rescued Sansa." Ranma replied then bit into his own fresh bagel. After a moments chewing he went on. "She asked me to take care of you, something I was going to do anyway but she'll know it without you telling her. I won't say no you won't ever be able to talk to her Myrcella, but, and I know you don't want to hear this, she's the enemy right now."

"I know, and I know, I mean I know I have you to thank for keeping me safe, but it's still a hard thing to think of." Myrcella said shrugging her shoulders. "She and I, we were never, we weren't as close as I think Lady Catelyn and Sansa are, but there was never any doubt that she cared for me. It was a possessive sort of thing, but at least it was there. Joffrey!" she spat the name like it was a curse. "He can go to the Stranger, and I hope I'm there to see it."

Ranma nodded, not saying anything but merely reaching across the distance between the larger and smaller bed (brought in from another room for Merry at Daenerys' request) to rub her hair consolingly. "If I can swing it, you will be. Joffrey has a lot to answer for." *They both do*, he thought grimly, but refused to say it. Whatever his own feelings toward the queen he knew she was the instigator of the current crisis, and thus had to pay for it.

The meal passed for a few moments silently then Daenerys asked "Do you think we'll have time after the meeting with Tyrion to send a raven up to Castle Black? I wasn't aware of it, but last night Smalljon said that the maester there is a former Targaryen. I would like to talk to him, if only by raven."

"We can do that. White Harbor's almost like Winterfell, it's got ravens trained to home in on practically every Castle on this side of the North, and Castle Black as well. Though I'm sorry I missed that. I only met him for a few minutes and his hair is so gray you can't tell what color it was originally. If I had, we could've asked Theon to bring him down to meet with us here."

"I doubt that would have happened. He's so old he can't get all around very well, and very rarely leaves his rooms in Castle Black at all." Daenerys said with a shrug which did interesting things to her night dress.

She smirked as she noticed Ranma's eyes flicker downward for just an instant, and was tempted to tease him further but decided against it for now. She wasn't going to rub their relationship in Myrcella's face like that, and had been careful not to do that since the two of them formally got together. Daenerys had come to genuinely like the younger girl, regardless of her parentage or how much she looked like a Lannister.

"Hopefully he'll be awake and still alive by the time we turn our attention that way. But if not, I would like to at least talk to him via raven if nothing else."

Ranma nodded, though he wasn't as hopeful about that. He knew the campaign down south would take a minimum two or three, maybe even five years, by which time the White Walkers might actually be at the Wall. He hoped the



magic's in the Wall were still keeping them at bay, though it was obvious that they had weakened considerably going by the ambush he and the other wolfsworn walked into.

With a sigh he stood up. "I believe Tyrion will have finished his own breakfast by this point, let's get this over with one way or the other." Myrcella looked at him sharply with that last word, which had come out much more grimly than the rest of the sentence, but didn't say anything. Instead she stood up, and looked at Daenerys. "Do you want to go first in the bath or might I?"

"Me, I believe rank has priority in such things." Daenerys said laughing quietly at the other girl's pout. "Besides which I think we can both fit in that monstrosity." The fact that this would be their third bath since being given this room was not mentioned, baths were a magnificent luxury after more than two months at sea, potable water being so precious on any ship. In fact all four of the girls had delighted in the baths here since arriving in White Harbor, and Sansa had waxed eloquently on the baths in Winterfell as well. Those were heated from the Hot Springs that made Winterfell such an amazing place when it became colder out, but these were good enough for them all for now.

"I'll wait outside." Ranma said. "Unless," he whispered in Daenerys' ear, his hormones getting the better of him for once. "You want me to wash your back?"

She laughed smacking his chest for a moment and pushing him away. "Away with you, you cad!"

Ranma laughed standing up and motioning to the trio of animals who were watching things it with various degrees of understanding and amusement. After looking at their mistress the two draklings followed un-biteable two-legs out of the room with four-legs elder.

OOOOOO

About an hour and a half later Ranma led the two ladies into the suite that had been given over to Tyrion. The Imp jumped up from a pile of cushions where he had been reading a scroll of some kind, and bowed grandly to Ranma. "I see you survived the south young Stark, and come back with in strange company." He said musingly staring at Daenerys. "I hadn't actually believed the rumors I've heard since coming here. Lady Stormborn, I can't say you're welcome in Westeros, because I'm certain my family for one would not do so. Indeed, I'm sort of confused as to why the young Stark and his House are so wishful to see your family and your particular brand of flame-based insanity return. Tell me, have you already developed the pension for burned human flesh, or does that come later?"

"Your tongue is as sharp as rumored." Daenerys said smiling thinly. "Yet tell me why I should care one way or the other about the word of a man whose family condones child killing and rapine? Is there such a difference between us, that one of my family members did that through madness, whereas yours father ordered it through cold calculation?"

"A hit, a very palpable hit!" Tyrion replied grandly, holding his chest as if struck by an arrow, though his eyes did not lose any of their seriousness despite his playacting.

He turned to look at Ranma and then at Myrcella bowing his head. "Princess. Are we then to be two hostages together? I have to inform you that my father at least would not care a jot about me, and my sister may well pay you to kill me if it comes up. The Princess though, she might at least be a good bargaining tool."

"She is not a tool!" Ranma growled, stepping forward and putting a hand on Myrcella's shoulder protectively. He didn't even realize he was doing it, but the very idea of someone treating anyone he cared about as if they were a pawn in the game of politics infuriated him. It would never even have occurred to Ranma to use Merry in that manner. However now it had been spoken he knew that his mother at least would assume that such could be done, and maybe one or two of his other lords.

Myrcella looked up at him with adoration in her eyes, loving him all the more for that while Daenerys smiled, shaking her head at her paramour's innate goodness. He was too honest and too good to play the politics game, and if Daenerys was honest with herself she loved that about him. She could play the game of politics though admittedly it wasn't exactly natural to her. She too liked to be direct in her own dealings.

"What you are Tyrion, is either a dead man walking or something else, to be determined by this discussion." Ranma said coolly. He gestured Myrcella and Daenerys to sit. He then explained in clipped, simple sentences what had happened in King's Landing, including Tommy's death apparently at Joffrey's order. Myrcella cut in at that point with Joffrey's admission of guilt.

Tyrion kept interrupting the tale with questions, trying to see if there was any break in Ranma's story, anything to indicate it was all a lie. If it had been, there would be hints, something, anything to hint that Ranma wasn't telling the

truth. But from the moment he said that the three royal children might not be legitimate, Tyrion knew the rest was true. He wasn't about to sell out Jaime, but he knew who the true father of all three children were, and that made everything else make sense.

After Myrcella time in about Joffrey's admission, and Ranma described the battle from what his father had told him, Ranma fell silent looking at Tyrion. All three of them let Tyrion soak it in, though it didn't take nearly as long as Daenerys had expected. Tyrion was indeed as intelligent as they had been told he was. He turned to Myrcella and said. "I'm sorry this had to happen to you, and I'm sorry that Tommen died."

Then he turned to Ranma "For my part I agree that my sister has committed treason, and that my father might know something of it since he was already planning against you or was moving against you for his own reasons, notably the loss of influence in King's Landing. Those bandits on the borders you said, I'll agree that they were probably his men, and that there's no doubt that he's already moved into the Riverlands by this point. But what does that have to do with me? You said I'm not to be your hostage, so what am I supposed to be, or is this some elaborate way to make certain I don't head south on some stupid quest to aid my family?"

"That depends on you." Daenerys said entering the conversation for the first time. "Even before all this began, you were seen as separate from your siblings or your father, not just because you were the Imp, and all that entails but because you distanced yourself from them purposefully. Added to that the way your father treats you is well known. Just how loyal are you to your family Tyrion?"

"I am as loyal as anyone can be to a bed of scorpions who would do their best to kill me. My father's lack of respect has long since opened the way for the rest of the extended family to assume that they are one Imp's corpse away from being that much closer to his Lordship." Tyrion said bluntly. There had been a time when he had still hoped to become lord of Casterly Rock, and before he had been to the Wall.

He noticed Myrcella flinch at his statement, but didn't offer the girl any consolation. She would learn, the Lannister family was a den of treacherous bastards. Oh, they were quick to close ranks against any outside opponent but that didn't make the backbiting any less deadly. They could all go hang for all he cared. In that family backstabbing and fighting for position was second nature, else Tyrion would never have spent his time at court.

The only one he cared about was Jaime, and he had literally made his own bed in this case. There was no way Tyrion could see for him to get free and down south to protect Jaime from himself. *If I wanted to do that, I'm about 16 years too late anyway.* He thought morosely. *And how exactly would I have done that in this case? 'Now remember Jaime, don't listen to anything that bitch says', or 'remember to pull out Jaime'? Or 'whatever she wants after Jaime, force-feed her some moon tea'?*

Daenerys smiled, thinly but with an edge of actual amusement if not warmth in her expression. "That is precisely what we wanted to hear. Yours is a mind we would hate to see wasted, and that was the other possible outcome of this meeting." Her eyes hardened. "Make no mistake, while we will extend mercy to those who deserve it, your family in the main has not proven worthy of it. Your family is built on betrayal, on ambition and dark deeds. We mean to smash House Lannister's power, to either scatter it or break it for all time."

"You'll not get any argument from me." Tyrion said shrugging. Oh he liked, hells he **wallowed** in some of the trappings of his name when he could, but he had become used to simply being Tyrion, master of siege-craft in the past half a year. He had built himself a life up on the Wall, one where he was respected and listened for his own merits, not for his family's connections. He didn't have to watch his words, didn't have to watch what he ate or who he talked to or the shadows for his sister's servants always ready to rat him out to her, or his father's machinations. "So am I to take the Black?"

"Not quite." Ranma said smiling now. This was going better than he had hoped. "You've been doing exceptional work on the Wall from what Smalljon and Daryn reports, along with what Lord Commander Mormont sent via raven. The siege weapons you've created up there will be to the wildlings or any other threat from that area."

Tyrion pounced on that. "Any other threat? This wouldn't happen to have anything to do with the secret that Daryn and Smalljon were keeping? Odd pauses, odd silences, something the two of them talk to your uncle and old man Mormont about but no one else?"

Thanks to his very nervous life The Imp was very good at watching people, and had noticed that those four seemed to have a secret, one that was connected with but separate of the wildlings issue. He had never tried to ferret that secret out, but it was there and seemed to color their response to the wildling threat. Frankly the siege engines on the wall were overkill in the extreme if they were just facing normal wildlings. A King Beyond the Wall's ability to galvanize the wildlings to overcome the Wall even without it being as well manned as it was now, let alone his little toys.

Ranma paused thoughtfully and looked over at any. The two of them communicated silently for a moment before Daenerys cocked one eyebrow and shrugged her shoulders slightly. Ranma nodded then turned back to Tyrion. "me, how educated are you on other threats that come from the north?"

Tyrion frowned going through his memory. "I've heard ancient bard songs about giants, mythical beasts, like your direwolf, and..." he paused thoughtfully and then went on much more slowly. "And something about the undead coming alive, and mystic beings that came with winter, the forces of winter alive in some fashion. I can't remember the whole tale."

By this point his eyes had widened significantly and he was looking between Ranma Daenerys and Myrcella in shock. "W-what exactly are we talking about here?"

"White Walker" Daenerys said coldly. "Ancient enemies of all life, and apparently no myth."

From there Ranma took up the tale, explaining what he and his friends had run into, explaining what the Wall had actually been built for by Bran the Builder all those millennia ago, the true threat that was once again rising to threaten all of Westeros.

By his side Myrcella listened attentively, having only heard snippets of this story before in particular the ambush the war wolfsworn had run into. She hadn't connected the White Walker's to the building of the Wall at all, and by his face, unguarded for just a moment, Tyrion hadn't either.

"I see why you were so anxious to get the Wall reinforced." Tyrion murmured. *Even if it was just the Night's Watch they could have defended the wall from the wildlings, but from the White Walkers? If the magic of the Wall really is weakening, maybe they couldn't. I need to read up on them as much as I can, what works on them, what doesn't, anything.*

Already Tyrion was making plans thinking of ways that his little toys could be used against the White Walkers. The alchemist's fire that had been delivered some weeks back, and its accompanying alchemists, all young, eager and willing to get their hands dirty, would make them deadly beyond anything else the defenders had in their arsenal.

He came out of his thoughts shaking his head. "That's interesting, and I applaud your forward thinking in getting your Northerners up there even if you couldn't share the true reasons with them. Still, and again, what does this have to do with me?"

Daenerys took up the conversation again. "The Night's Watch has truly lost its way in a fashion. It was always supposed to be a haven for those running from dishonorable past, but it was also supposed to be an honorable profession open to those men who saw the duty of the Night's Watch was one they could follow, but now it is seen as simply another recourse to prison for those who have no honor, with fewer volunteers every year. I have no idea how long the White Walkers will remain a threat, but we need to change the Night's Watch in a way, or perhaps I should say augment it, and through it the image of duty on the Wall."

Taking over smoothly from Daenerys, as if they had practiced this dozens of times, Ranma went on. "You asked if you would be joining the black, and in a way you will be joining their duties on the Wall not as a Night's Watchman but as a knight of a new knightly order. We'll be calling it the Order of the Ardent Defender. The order will hold land in the Gift, which will be gifted to your Order at the end of a five year probation period, where they can move from the Wall at will, have dependents or whatever. Your only objective will be to defend the Wall from any exterior threat, maintain it, and in particular the siege engines."

Daenerys' smile widened slightly as she took up the thread once again. "You will be this Order's Knight Commandant. You can name and raise anyone to it from the forces already at the Wall, providing they agree to it. And of course the order will have a knightly image to uphold. Not celibacy, but a certain way of acting, and no rape whatsoever will be tolerated."

Tyrion was in shock but that shock didn't stop him from thinking, and his eyes narrowed speculatively. "You would need to declare yourself queen to be able to create a knightly order, and to effect the Gift or the Night's Watch or the Wall in any way other than reinforcing it."

"It has been millennia since a king cared about the Night's Watch" Ranma said with a shrug. "Only the Lords Paramount of the North even noticed the Gift or the Wall at all. In any event we may be jumping the line a bit, but we will be declaring that soon enough. As it is, our independence and that of the North from the Iron Throne is already accomplished. I'll send the Raven to the Lord Commander, but I doubt he or anyone else on the Wall will have any issues with this. If there is, you'll be able to handle them, because you will answer directly to Lord Commander

Mormont. Whether or not the Order succeeds or doesn't will be totally on you, we'll send a war chest up with you, but that's all. What you do with it, is up to you."

"One thing you will need to do be worthy of this honor is to give up your name." Daenerys said, once more taking over from Ranma with a smoothness that left Tyrion wondering how long the two of them had practiced this. It would have shocked him to learn they hadn't done any such thing. "You will leave the Lannister name behind, and everything that comes with it good or bad, and take up a new one of our choosing." She smiled slightly wider. "Don't worry, it won't be demeaning or humorous or anything of that nature."

Tyrion blanched at the very idea, but after a moment he realized that this was their side of this agreement. He could walk out of here with a new last name and this Knight Commandant of the new nightly order (and he did like the name Ardent Defender), or he wouldn't be walking out of here at all. Ranma's stare told him that. Nor was there any way to finagle his freedom either through oath given under duress or demanding to a trial by combat through champions. If Ranma was the teacher of Smalljon and Daryn, no one he could call on here in the North could match him.

*And in the end what will I be leaving behind my name? One person out of the entire my family that I love, and I can't help him anyway. He would help our sister, that leaves me with nothing.* This plan would also force Tyrion to finally let his admittedly naïve dream of being Lord of Casterly Rock go completely. He had known intellectually that such was a pipe dream at best for years, but he had held out hope for a long time. Now that particular hope was gone, but another one had taken its place. This one however was one that he could grasp through the use of his intellect rather than one mostly controlled by another.

*And at least this way I will do some good, and my name will be remembered!* It was astonishing how fierce he wanted that just then. He wanted Tyrion, the Imp to be remembered as more than a jester, as more than the little lion, as more than his father's son, unwanted or not. "I agree." he said blurting it out, not realizing how much of those last few thoughts had shown his face to the three across from him.

"Good." Ranma said smiling. Your new name then, will be Brightwall. Alluding to both your place on the Wall, and that you're quite bright."

"Leave the jokes to other people." Tyrion said shaking his head sadly. "I'll agree to the name but please that, just, no."

Ranma and the two ladies laughed then Ranma stood up. Daenerys stood up as well, and while Ranma leaned down to help Myrcella to her feet Daenerys addressed Tyrion again. "We'll have a formal renaming ceremony and a ceremony to inaugurate the commission of the order of the Ardent Defender in a few hours. Lord Manderly will be sending a few servants to prepare some clothing for you, but be aware Lord Commandant Brightwall, this was a one-time deal." Her eyes narrowed and suddenly Tyrion shivered not seeing the madness of her line there, just cool, cold purpose, worse than even his father's glare. "If you try to cross us, there will be no second chances."

Tyrion nodded mutely, and Ranma led the two ladies out of the room. True to their words, there was indeed a full ceremony done in the throne room of Lord Manderly several hours later, with Lord Manderly's able assistance after Ranma had told him the outcome of their discussion with the Imp.

After that, group started travelling up the White Knife, which was much slower than travel down river, but still faster than traveling overland would be. Upriver travel depended on paddlewheels, worked by oxen bought down in Runestone in the Vale. They were expensive, and all of them were owned by either House Stark, like this one, or House Manderly, but they were large and powerful able to move almost as much tonnage as a barge could down river.

The paddlewheel barges had been designed by a well-to-do farmer from House Stark lands, whose holdfast Bran and his guards had to use when two of their horses came up lame. Bran had immediately befriended the man, and when the farmer hesitantly offered his design based off a water wheel he had seen once, Bran jumped on it and immediately began to pay the man to teach others how to build them. Now Bran had several other smallfolk working for him who had similar ideas for how to build things, which Ranma was quietly ecstatic about when he heard. From that seed he hoped to see many things, and he definitely wanted to see it continue.

They had been joined by a few 'new' faces. Wyman's firstborn son Wylis went with them to represent him in the conclave that Catelyn had called in her husband's name, and Smalljon and Daryn of course went with them. Smalljon was looking forward to seeing if he could be fitted for his own lizard lion armor from the remaining skin of the beast that Ranma had killed in the Moat before heading south. Daryn had his upcoming wedding to Alys Karstark to look forward to, though Sansa had insisted on getting to work on creating a formal outfit for him on the trip. The amused glances of his friends did nothing to help Daryn become accustomed to Sansa's eagerness.

But while the next leg of their travel was beginning, elsewhere events were ongoing.

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Beric nodded over at the archers, who silently raised themselves up from their position in the shadows of a small, almost imperceptible rise in the woodland, aiming down at the fires of a medium sized camp of the Lannister men who had betrayed them. They had split off from the Mummerns, the Mummerns making for deeper into the Riverlands while the Lannisters skirted down the mountain range towards the Deep Den, the nearest of the real entrances into the Westerlands, presumably unwilling to act further without orders.

This maneuver had allowed Beric's men the time to regain their morale, retreat to the Stony Sept, and rearm before coming back out after them. The walled town was rather famous for being the sight of the Battle of the Bells in Robert's Rebellion, where his victory or defeat had been tottering on a knife's edge, where he was rescued by Eddard and his army. The Mummerns, having no wish to be bogged down in a siege or the numbers to storm it once the city had been warned of their coming, had bypassed the Stony Sept, and were somewhere deeper into the Riverlands. But they were still too many of them for his men to take on just yet.

The Lannister forces that had betrayed them however, had taken the brunt of Thoros's last stand, and without horses were too slow to get away. They had barely four hundred men left, and were not the best equipped for a battle in the woods. Especially one where he and his people had been given the time to seed the woodland with various traps ahead of their advance.

Arrows flashed through the nighttime woodland, impacting several figures curled up by the fires, their dying gasps cutting through the normal nighttime sounds. A cry rose up, while more arrows flew, downing more men. But soon a response was formed, and fifty men from the camp barreled into the woods, torches and swords in hand.

They ran into prepared pitfalls, trip ropes, rabbit snares, and anything else Beric and his men could think up. Beric and the rest of his men moved forward quickly, cutting throats or overwhelming the odd man who hadn't been so caught, before at a signal from Edric, set up a tree as lookout, retreating further into the woods.

Even so, a force of twenty formed men caught up to them, only to run into the ten men of Lord Stark who fell on them howling like the wolves Northerners were often derisively called. The numbers were against them, but the Lannister men were rattled, and no match one on one with the men from the North. Soon they too fell back, moving through a area of the traps with a few scouts leading the way, letting the traps cover their retreat.

Beric led them on, stopping to clap Edric on the shoulder when he shimmied down his lookout tree. "That's the way lads, nip in and out, bleed them here and there, we have at least another two weeks travel through these woods to bleed them before they reach the Gold Road pass. With time, we'll have our justice."

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"So while House Cafferren is still recovering from my brother's rebellion, they are willing to use their castle as a rallying point for the other Storm-lords."

"Twelve thousand men pledged to your cause already." said Loras shaking his head as he looked over at Renly, who had just finished reading the message from Lord Fell. "I knew the Stormlands Lords were always quicker to muster than those of us in the Reach, but that much quicker?"

"Well they have to be quicker," said Lord Ashford, laughing. "There aren't nearly as many of them after all."

"Now, now." Renly interjected mildly looking at the other young man. The present Lord Ashford had come to power several years ago when his father the former lord had passed on, and he was of an age with Renly and Loras. "Stormlands lords tend to have somewhat better trained armsmen than your infantry here in the Reach, though not up to your magnificent cavalry of course. But even there, the lack of cavalry makes it quicker for us to muster. That is why Grandison, Fell, Swann and Selmy were able to muster their forces so quickly, though it will take Swann's forces time to reach Fawnton. Since the rebellion, my family has had no firmer friends than Grandison and Fell. Say what you will, we all know that horses eat more than men, yes?"

There was some laughter and comments about 'but a man on a horse is worth ten on foot' from many of those from the Reach, but that was all.

Renly laughed, hiding his relief with ease. Evidently his idea to retreat to Highgarden had been the right one; his Stormlands lords knew him well enough and most would respond to his call to arms even without his presence to

emphasize the need. Here in the Reach though, his presence had been needed to solidify the agreement between his family and that of House Tyrell, and it too was bearing fruit already. "Besides, do not think that I belittle you or the rest of the Reach by saying that you are in the main slower. We've heard from Harvest Hall, your own men Lord Ashford, Fossoway, and Merryweather as well."

Those were the houses that Renly had passed by on his continued trek down towards High Garden, stopping in on the river trip to send out riders to them as he went on his way. In turn, most of those families, all of whom either had heirs or lords who he was friends with, had already begun to march toward Bitterbridge to meet with Lord Lorent Caswell's men. Being the northernmost castle Lorent had offered his castle as gathering point for the Reach's portion of the army Renly was calling up. He was a rather sickly, weak young fellow, who saw this as a way to gain Renly's favor without much cost to himself.

"Nor is that the only forces from the Reach that have been quick to answer our call to muster, the Marcher Lords, for all that you were unable to send us all your forces, have also responded heroically." Loras said, nodding to Randyll Tarly, who was seated two spaces down from Renly himself, on the other side of Lord Mace.

Randyll was an older man of Mace's generation, with a bald head, wide shoulders, and a grim, weathered expression that went well with his dour demeanor. Even here in the heart of Highgarden the old general went armed, his family's Valyrian blade, the longsword Heartsbane strapped to his waist. He was one of the most dangerous military minds in the Reach, who, despite Lord Mace taking the credit for it, had won the few loyalist victories in the last war when the Reach backed the Targaryens. And it had been Lord Randyll who led their forces in the Ironborn rebellion, what little forces they used in that war outside House Redwyne's navy.

Taking his cue the older man nodded sternly, looking around at the others. "Lord Renly already knows this, but none of the Marcher Lords are willing to release all their forces to action elsewhere. The death of the Sand Snake in King's Landing has spread, and regardless of whether or not it was justifiable will not matter to her father Oberyne. If Dorne does try to rise, the Marcher Lords must have their forces at home to meet them. We decided to only release a third of our forces, but those forces were already assembled, and will be marching to Bitterbridge even now."

Well, it was more like Randyll had decided, but even if the other lords besides Mace realized that they wouldn't have said anything. Randyll continued. "We even have scouts down the passes, and our forces are ready to march to block any assault coming out of the Prince's Pass, or even reinforce House Dondarrion in holding back any force coming out of the Boneway. Your back, Lord Renly will be secure."

Renly nodded gravely. "Baseborn she might have been, but the daughter of Prince Oberyne nonetheless, and bastards are not looked down on so much in Dorne."

Where she was seated near the table but not at it, position between and back of Renly and her father Margaery frowned, wondering why none of them had asked her oldest brother Willas his insight. Despite what his family might think of the friendship, he was firm friends with Oberyne and could have offered his opinion on what the man would or could do. While Oberyne commanded the armies of Dorne, it was well known that his older brother was much slower to act. If that was the case, Oberyne might strike out on his own for justice's sake rather than Dorne as a whole.

*Hopefully grandmother has already thought of asking Willas his opinion on Oberyne and Dorne's response to Tyene's judicial murder.* She thought, keeping silent. She was here to be seen, the visible connection between her family and Renly, not to actually speak. War was man's business, and her grandmother had been very implicit with that command. While at the same time ordering Margaery to keep her eyes and ears open in preparation for relating everything that happened in this meeting between what Renly was calling his small counsel back to her. That she didn't trust her son-in-law to do so was implicit in that comment.

Margaery kept the scowl that thought generated from showing with ease, but it was heartfelt nonetheless. Renly was a thinker, which was good, but he did not respect Margaery as a thinker, and did not even attempt to ask her for advice. He feared her grandmother and often at least listened to her, but did not think to look to Margaery for any advice despite that. Politics and influence was her area of expertise yet they were also Renly's and after she had disagreed with him a few times he had ceased to listen to her.

She felt he should have immediately sent word to Winterfell and to Dorne, informing them of what really happened in King's Landing. In that manner they could put the Tyene's death squarely at the Lannister's feet. But he felt that the Dornish would not listen to him, and one way or another had already made their decision as to how to act. Implicit in that statement was that he felt that Dorne and its ruling prince would keep waiting for an opportunity that would never come so long as the Marcher Lords were visibly prepared for war even as the rest of the country ignored his nation and got on with things.

As for sending word to Winterfell, he had agreed to do that but only after his army was marching out of Bitterbridge and had won a few victories. He wanted to use that to offset the fact he had retreated from King's Landing without giving battle. In the north especially that information would be deadly to any attempt to bring them to his side. But if he won a few battles then his understanding of warfare would come to be seen as truth and his retreat simply good sense, rather, as Margaery thought it, cowardice.

Worse in her opinion was that he had made no allowances for the Riverlands lords or the Vale one way or the other! The Vale it was easy to see wasn't really an offensive force, so that could be explained away. But the Riverlands could raise an army as large as the Westerlands. They should've sent overtures to those houses but Renly and her father both disagreed, saying that the Riverlands would be out of it because of the capture of Edmure and how old Hoster Tully was. None of them felt that the Lords of the Riverlands would act independently, which Margaery thought was foolish, since they too had their hotheads and those of ambition.

"I could wish that we had heard from a few more Stormlands lords, but the distance is such that it doesn't worry me save in House Buckler's case, but Ralph has always been slow to act. No doubt it will take him time to decide how much of his forces they send." Renly continued. "And on that same note House Dondarion's refusal to march isn't that surprising." He shrugged his shoulders. "Their Lord isn't there, and so there's no one to give the orders for a muster. We haven't had any word about him, or the expedition sent against the bandits on the Riverlands/Westerlands border."

Her father spoke up then. "I have some bad news for us all. Lord Lannister is already on the move. He's already marshaled a force of twelve thousand before his full muster and from all reports of our agents in the Westerlands is almost to the passages through the eastern mountains. As of the time they sent this message to us it wasn't certain which way they were going."

For just a moment Renly looked worried to Margaery's trained eye, but then the moment was gone and he said confidently. "Well that's good then, if he's alone with such a small force, we might be able to catch his army out in the open before they are reinforced! Without Lord Lannister to rally them the rest of the Westerlands will pull back entirely. If we can do that, we can march on Kings Landing quickly, and end this war before it becomes any worse."

There was a lot of murmuring at that, most of the youngsters around the table thinking it a grand idea. They were all examples of what Margaery's grandmother called summer knights, youngsters who weren't blooded yet, not really. They knew the tourney, the joust and perhaps the melee, they hadn't fought in either Robert's or the Ironborn Rebellions. Margaery however noticed Randyll didn't join them, even if her father did.

She had to chance it. "Lord Tarly," Margaery said, her soft tones quieting everyone as all the men at the table looked to her. "Could we have your thoughts on how Lord Lannister ranks as a general? I am curious how his personality affects how he acts in the field."

Randyll looked at her with respect and nodded his head at her. "As in all else milady, Lord Lannister is pragmatic, calculating in all things. He will first reinforce the defensive points of the Westerlands no doubt. Deep Den, Golden Tooth, certainly Cornfield and Crakehall, possibly Clegane Hall, though it isn't as defensible. Or he could possibly not reinforce them and merely let them retain all of their forces."

Renly looked at both Randyll and Margaery then shrugged internally and went with it. "Where do you think this small force will be sent then Lord Randyll?"

Internally Margaery sighed with relief as Renly went with the flow of conversation rather than trying to change it. At least he recognized that Randyll was an asset above and beyond the men he could bring.

"I am uncertain." Randyll shrugged. "As I said he'll leave enough manpower to defend the Westerlands. I can't guess if they'd march straight for King's Landing, hoping to get there before we finish our muster, or if he'd send that army into the Riverlands to stomp any rebellion there out and take over castles to put in place against the northern incursion, which it's certain he knows will be coming, then meet up with his second force before moving against us."

Margaery noticed that Randyll wasn't nearly as dismissive as the others of the occurrence of the North joining the war.

"If he does that he could use the River Road as a more secure, if longer, line of supply for his armies. The Gold Road is too easy to cut off from the Reach, and beyond the pass has no natural defensive positions until you get to King's Landing. He might think he could draw us into the Riverlands, fight on neutral territory. That would actually be a good outcome for us as well. Certainly better than letting him take the initiative and march into the Reach at any rate." Randyll continued. "Lord Rowan's Goldengrove is the only real castle we have anywhere near the border with the

Westerlands, and even then isn't very close to the border."

The discussion continued from there, and in the end it was decided that it didn't really matter which Lord Lannister tried to do. If he tried to make for King's Landing they had a good chance of catching him, he couldn't clear the eastern mountains without word getting to them, and the armies already gathering at Bitterbridge and Fawnton might be able to intercept him in the open. Or if not, bottled up in Kings Landing twelve thousand men wouldn't matter much to the Army that Lord Renly was starting to put together.

"Indeed." Renly said laughing lightly. "Let Lord Lannister get to the capital, in that case we can besiege the city with the forces from the Stormlands, while the Reach forces find and smashes the second army the Westerlands will be certain to send. With that second, larger force destroyed, Lord Lannister will lose any ability to reclaim the initiative in the war."

Margaery closed her eyes, shaking her head internally. That, she thought, was thinking far too ahead, and far too positively. *After all, this isn't like a game of conquests, your enemy is trying to win, he's not there just for you to smash. I would have sent Randyll and the forces already gathered here to meet the forces at Bitterbridge before sending them on to hunt down Lord Lannister or at least cut off the Gold Road from King's Landing now. Lord Lannister is too good a general to allow him to allow him that strong a position. And if Renly thinks that's finding and crushing the second army sent out of Westerlands will be simple, he is an idiot.*

*Besides, where in all of this is Stannis? Renly hasn't made any allowance for him, at least none I've seen. Admittedly with only the forces of the navy and Dragonstone to use he's no real threat, yet we haven't heard anything about him. That's worrisome, as is his reputation as a general. His command of the siege of Storm's end, the siege of Dragonstone itself, and his crushing the Iron Fleet is proof of that.*

But she said nothing, remaining silent throughout the rest of the meeting until it became time for the council to break up. Renly and the other young men went off quickly, eager to fetch a few hounds and go on a hunt together. Mace went with them, always happy for an excuse to hunt and get away from his mother-in-law for a few hours more.

Randyll however was not a man to enjoy such excursions. He was going to retire to his room to compose a message to send back to Horn Hill, but Margaery caught him in the hallway outside the council room. "Lord Tarly a word if you would?"

He turned to her nodding his head slightly to the young woman whose one contribution to the discussion had been an extremely well-chosen one. *It's evident that the girl's grandmother has a lot to do with this one's brains*, he thought to himself bowing. "What can I do for you your highness?"

"I'm not Her Highness just yet Lord Tarly." she said smiling. "Pray do not tempt the Seven by assuming that before it is fact."

Randyll nodded at the correction, and waited silently for her to speak. "I noticed in there that you were not very happy about the fact that the North would be sending down their forces, may I ask why not?"

"Two reasons milady, for one I could wish that the entire northern forces would concentrate on the Wall, the wildlings and the King Beyond the Wall seem real. If Lord Stark believed it that is good enough for me. That man does not have a lying bone in his body, for good or ill."

While Randyll had never met Ranma, and was not about to believe all the rumors about him, he had met Eddard, both across the battlefield during the war of the Usurper and on the same battleground fighting the Ironborn. He couldn't comment on whether or not Ranma would return from his mission, but it was certain that the Starks had been telling the truth about the King Beyond the Wall. "The wildlings can put a force in the field much larger than even the Reach at full muster, no one knows how much land there is beyond the Wall, but the massive hordes the wildlings could put in the field occurred in every tale of the King Beyond the Wall. Worse, if they break through the Wall there's no way they would stop in the north, especially when there is much easier living further south."

He paused a moment, thinking of his firstborn son Samwell. The pulling weak whelp had no hand for a sword and no mind for combat despite all Randyll could do to instill such, and thus no worth in Randyll's eyes. Randyll had sent him off to the Wall a year gone with the last recruiter to come through the Marches. As far as Randyll was concerned, that was good riddance. His second son was already showing much more promise at eight than Samwell had shown at twenty. "The second issue I have with the North sending forces down is that every time they do, they impact the flow of history."

Not certain what he was speaking of, Margaery cocked her head, one eyebrow raised in query.



Randyll sighed. "The last King of the North mustered his forces and came south to face the dragons, he then bowed creating Westeros in its first iteration, then in the wars after the Blackfyre Rebellion the Starks came down and made the difference in many a battle there and in the Ninepenny Kings war, just as in Robert's Rebellion. They also provided the bulk of the forces fielded on the Iron Islands, which means that most of their forces are veterans, unlike our own. Despite their army not being nearly as large as the Reach, they can have an impact well beyond their size. I'm also leery of the connection between Tully and Stark, if they can rally the Riverlands they could field an army nearly as large as the Reach."

Margaery nodded, and would have asked further questions but a maid came up to them then. "Milady," she said. "Lady Olenna has sent me to fetch you."

Sighing irritably Margaery curtsied formally to Randyll. "Thank you for satisfying my curiosity Lord. I'll let you go on your way."

Randyll nodded cordially, watching her leave thoughtfully before turning away to head towards his rooms. *I'm beginning to think it was good that most of my forces remained home, if Renly is unwilling to listen to that woman in counsel, he is a greater idiot than I expected.*

OOOOOOO

Entering the room in the highest tower of Highgarden that served her grandmother as for informal throne room, Margaery found her grandmother as usual sitting in torchlight in her room high up one of the towers of Highgarden. She was accompanied by one man who looked like a smallfolk of some sort, perhaps a drover given his dress, and her oldest brother. That surprised her, as Willas had been with his dogs for the past few days. Two of them were due to give birth soon, and Willas was always on hand for that. "Willas, how are your dogs? Did the births go all right?"

Willas smiled at her, taking her hand in his and pulling her down to join him in the chair, perching her on his lap as if she was a little girl again causing her to giggle. "Indeed, both bitches are doing well, ten puppies between them all of them healthy and the size of their paws indicate my strain for breeding for size has succeeded again! It's too early to tell if their instincts will follow their mothers or fathers, but that at least give me hope."

"If you two are finished acting like stupid children, I did not call you here to simply talk about Willas' latest successful breeding." Their grandmother barked. "Though, if he had done some breeding of his own I would be much happier!"

Willas rolled his eyes at that, and Margaery chuckled. Willas' hand in marriage was a weapon of diplomacy that the family hadn't yet found a high enough price for, but he was by no means a virgin, simply very careful. They had been holding out for Princess Arianne of Dorne but they had been rebuffed in that every time they had brought it up. With Arianne out of the way there wasn't another highborn lady of enough standing to interest House Tyrell for their firstborn son. Not at the moment at any rate.

"Enough!" their grandmother snapped, and both of them finally realized she was actually unhappy. Looking closely Margaery could see that her grandmother's lips were ruler straight, so thin and white that it indicated extreme anger. Or at least discomfiture she wasn't sure which.

"I apologize grandmother." she said, sitting up and bowing her head before pushing Willas to bunch up enough to let her share his seat, refusing to sit on the small footstool that was normally her place in this room. The choice was an easy one for her.

For his part, Willas wasn't going to complain. He had disliked how their grandmother and father treated Margaery at times like a child at times before this and at others like a tool in their machinations. The continued use of the stool was part of Olenna's way of putting Margaery off her stride in conversations between them, and it had worked often in the past.

"This," Olenna said, gesturing at the man standing beside her chair. "Is one of our agents in King's Landing, a grain drover that works the loop between Highgarden and that cesspool of a city. You were right." she barked looking away.

"Excuse me?" Margaery said raising an eyebrow. "Right in what?" Inside however Margaery was beginning to smile, knowing it must've been something up about which she and her mother had disagreed, and if it was about King's Landing, there are very few things it could've been about.

"Don't be snarky." Her grandmother said, a thin smile on her face despite her words. "You don't have the age for it. As you have no doubt already deduced, Ranma has returned. More than that, he apparently entered the city and

abscinded with Sansa Stark. He killed yet another Kingsguard, along with several more knights and armsmen, before getting away with an ease that is... disturbing. What's more, it appears as if Lord Eddard Stark was able to escape by sea. He apparently did have more forces on hand as you predicted girl." Olenna glared at her granddaughter, not enjoying the fact that she had been wrong. "He was badly injured apparently, but the Starks are as tough as those wolves on their banner, I have no doubt he survived."

She scowled further. "If we had heard of this before, even a single House's worth of knights might've been able to win the city for us." At Willas' interrogative look Olenna sighed and gestured at the man.

The man began to speak. At first he tried to erase his bucolic accent, but as he went on it seeped through more and more. "Well milord, it's like this, there was a lot of fighting in the city, and I mean a **lot**. Lord Stark, his troops, both his own and from the Riverlands, were just on a whole different level than the Lannister supporters, in bein' able ta work together and use the small back alleys and sich that make up most o' King's Landin'. Several Houses've lost their lords and heir's. Da bastard Gold Cloaks had their own bloody civil war they did, wiped each other out but good. And the servants from the Red Keep, they say that da men in da tower put up an even **'ardor** fight, gutted the Lannister forces but good!"

"It was days afore they and the golders had enough numbers ta come out of the hoity areas of da city and try an' put some order 'n place. They had this knight from down in da Stormlands, a right grim faced youngster he is, big too, a warrior born, that was in charge o' most of that effort at first, and the Kingslayer, 'e took it over after that. He might not be the most trustworthy sort, but 'e knows how ta pick fightin' men. By the time I was given da okay ta leave most o' the city was back in their control, if not 'appy 'bout it."

"So if Renly and Loras had stayed with their forces Lord Stark might've won the day." Margaery said, her eyes narrowed. "Can I be the one to tell Loras that?"

"Be nice." Willas said tickling her side for a moment. She smacked his hand away, in no mood to be mollified but subsided slightly, which had been his objective in the first place. Most of his attention however was elsewhere, going over what this news meant for his family.

"I wonder how Ranma got Sansa out." she murmured, cocking her head to one side.

"Don't know 'bout 'at." said the man shrugging his shoulders. "The Northern lordling came in one night and left that same night sneaky like a thief on'y better. Didn't get on no ship in port neither, 'e 'scaped o'erland from the city, prob'ly fetched up along the shoreline somewheres."

For all his small folk accident the men's points was good, and her grandmother nodded, thanked him and sent for a maid to give him his reward for the information before escorting him wouldn't be returning to King's Landing of course, the grain supplies that normally came from the Reach for King's Landing had already been stopped by this point. It would take a few months, but eventually King's Landing would begin to feel the pinch from that.

"So I was wrong," she reiterated. "With both Ranma and Lord Stark back, the North will not only march they will be well led, and organized."

"We'll need to think of a way to appease them." Willas said calmly, nothing about him hinting at the giant 'I told you so' that was hovering in the room at the moment. Olenna was touchy at the best of times, rubbing her nose in her error was not a good idea.

"That's a tall order." Margaery shook her head. "Neither man will be influenced by threats but by honor and friendship which you have possibly ruined by recalling me grandmother, you and father. Loras certainly did his part to crush their opinion about us by retreating from the city. That cowardice will not be forgotten. Maybe helping house Tully will appease them somewhat, but I can't think of anything else."

Willas could, and it was sitting next to him at the moment, but he was also worried. Ranma struck him as someone who either succeeded or died, and going from what Margaery had said he was no assassin, whatever Robert's orders might have been. Which meant he had returned with the Targaryen siblings. What that could mean to the coming war he didn't know, but he was very worried about it, and the word 'legitimacy' was going through his head. *Would the Targaryen siblings look favorably on us, my family was loyal to them during the rebellion, if largely ineffectual. Would that be enough to offset the disdain the Starks will no doubt feel for us and Renly?*

His grandmother however believed in facts rather than wild supposition, which Willas would admit that line of thought was. Eventually the news from the ship Ranma and Daenerys had taken from Pentos to Westeros, which had by this point put in at Duskendale, would spread but the Tyrells didn't have any agents in that port. It was an important

enough mercantile place for the rest of the Crownlands, but it wasn't important in the great scheme of things to House Tyrell. Until then, no one but Stannis and his closest advisors would learn of the return of the dragons.

Frowning, Olenna thought hard. "Lord Renly is still the safe bet, he is here and easy to influence, and our army will still be the largest, not just of his forces but anywhere. And we can keep putting off the actual marriage, the arrangement is enough for now to connect us to his cause."

Inside Olenna was now very worried they had jumped the line very badly here. She had thought that the Starks were out of the way, making it a case of Renly versus Lannister, an easy decision to make, considering how little influence they could wield with the Lannisters. Putting a crown on her granddaughter's head would have been somewhat simple, and connect them to what would no doubt be the new ruling family. But now, with no news about Stannis, Renly's own idiocy, and the Starks not only alive but with the apparently frightening Ranna back to lead them to war, it looked like they were going to become more and more embroiled in open conflict.

All because she and Mace had been too quick to act. *Damn me, I was too quick to act, Mace is a buffoon, but I should've known better.* "We need to think about appeasing the North at the very least you're right about that Willas, we don't want to fight the North, the Riverlands and the Westerlands as well as the Crownlands if we can help it. And I'll open up dialogue on the side to House Lannister as well. Tywin is pragmatic, I have no doubt somewhere down the line we might be able to make a deal there, for a time anyway. We can play all sides that way, and come out on top whoever actually begins to look like the winning side."

Beside him, Margaery laughed quietly, already liking how this conversation had shaped up. Olenna on the other hand simply stared at both her and Willas thoughtfully. *Hmm... Cersei will need a new husband eventually, say a few months down the line? Perhaps, perhaps. And of course Margaery could well marry Joffrey, so long as we put off the actual marriage to Renly for now. No worry there, Hah, his preferences will work for us for now, allowing us to back out with ease later on, even hand him up on a silver platter if he proves as incompetent as I fear. But where by the Seven in all this is Stannis?*

Willas nodded, but then prevaricated. "I can see the point about Tywin, he is indeed practical enough to wish to at least look at the idea of having us fighting on his side with favor. But I have no idea how you're going to go about doing that same thing with the North grandmother, it will have to be a very big bone we throw to the wolves."

Then he went on, deliberately changing the subject, something his grandmother of course noticed but allowed, having already considered that same things. "Right now the North is a problem for the future, Grandmother. At present I am worried about what Stannis is up to, he is not known for giving up what is his easily. Regardless of Renly's charisma or his good, well thought out reasons given Stannis' lack of flexibility to anything outside warfare that he would be a disaster as king, Stannis is still the oldest, and therefore Robert's lawful heir. This silence is not like him."

Her grandmother frowned nodding her head. "I was just thinking the same thing."

OOOOOO

Indeed, while his younger brother was simply talking and planning for the future Stannis had been on the move though not in a direction anyone else would have suspected. The voyage and subsequent marching overland into the Stormlands was difficult to say the least, it had also proven as profitable as he had hoped. His army was on the small size, but it was his presence that truly did the trick. *Renly was a fool to retreat to the Reach rather than the Stormlands,* he thought looking across the table at Lord Sebastian Errol, Lord of Haystack Hall and owner of much of the best farmlands the Stormlands contained.

The man sipped thoughtfully at his wine then nodded. "If the queen has truly descended that far, then it is no doubt right and proper that we rebel, but I will be honest with you my Lord. If Renly was here, if he had retreated to the Stormlands, I would have raised my armsmen for him since King Robert placed him as our Lord Paramount. He is not here however, which shows a remarkable disdain for his rightful position, and his duty to lead us in person rather than afar. I will not jump at his command sent by raven wings, unlike my late aunt, who was more than willing to do so."

Stannis very carefully did not smile. That aunt had a mishap several evenings before his army came into sight of Haystack Hall. No suspicion could fall on him for the event. The red witch had once more proven her worth.

"And what will my place be in this new court you are putting together?" The younger man asked casually, those his eyes were locked on Stannis.

"I have thought long and hard about the small counsel as it is, and how Westeros is ruled." Stannis said grimly. "I have decided to keep the positions of master of purse and master of ships, but all of the other positions are going to

be up for review after we win this war. The position of Hand will be split in two. We will have a Hand, a Fist who the king will turn to on matters of war, and the Open Palm, which will be his aid in matters of law, and the wellbeing of Westeros. This is a time of war Lord Sebastion, and even though I respect the number of men you can bring to battle, you yourself do not have battle experience." As the man bristled Stannis went on smoothly, the diplomatic words sticking in his craw somewhat, but true none the less. "I would make you my master of coin instead, and in this time of war that will make you the one in charge of supplies."

The phrase 'until you have earned your spurs' did not need to be said, and Sebastion nodded thoughtfully, subsiding somewhat under Stannis' cool, unruffled gaze. "With the output of my lands that makes sense, and I agree. I will ally my forces with yours, your grace." he replied at last, nodding his head.

"Excellent." Stannis said nodding his head firmly.

That made two houses that he had added to his forces peacefully. House Bolling, the next-door neighbor to the southeast of House Errol had also agreed to join him. Bolling was started by a cadet branch of House Baratheon, a bastard house to put it bluntly, set up where it was to give House Baratheon more land through it, land which was much better for farming than House Baratheon's own. Barely a noble house, its lord had joined Stannis on agreement of his house's independence of its parent House. Together they would add five thousand men to his cause, nearly two-thirds the size of the forces he had brought into the Stormlands. This was minus the men needed to remain and secure their keeps from attack, which he knew would come.

He had no illusions that he could turn all of the Stormlands against his brother, he was too popular with most of the young lords before this, those that had risen to power after Robert's Rebellion, and the oldsters didn't have the stomach for more war, whichever side they'd fought for in that conflict. It was only because the former Lady Errol had been enamored of Renly for years that he hadn't made any similar arrangement with the heir to this house. An oversight, among others, that would haunt Renly now.

"My men will be ready to march within the next two days." Sebastion said, nodding. Nodding in turn, Stannis stood up and made his way out of the room without another word. Smalltalk would never be something he was comfortable with.

Two weeks later found him once more staring at another lord that should have followed him because he was the eldest and therefore the heir to his brother's crown. He **hated** this, hated the fact that he had to try to convince people of the rightness of his cause, when it was so readily apparent that he was his brother's heir by law and common convention. Still, this had been the easiest sell of the three he had done so far.

Lord Penrose was an old man, frail and so thin his bones could be made out under his thin skin. Stannis's presence had easily browbeaten him. In return for the certainty of his son's safety if a battle broke out at Storm's End, Penrose had agreed to bend the knee to Stannis rather than his younger brother. Cortnay was castellan at Storm's End, but Stannis had no issue with assuring the young man's safety, indeed he had no plans to assault Storm's End just yet, that would take too much time and effort best used elsewhere. If Renly were to retreat there eventually perhaps, but not yet.

The old man nodded his head, looking at Stannis through nearly blind eyes. "My son Cortnay is all I have in my old age, the price is easy to bear. I will send my men out within a fortnight."

Stannis nodded then shook the man's hand. Both swore their pact on the Seven, which was no longer Stannis's god, but he wasn't about to mention that. In all honesty his opinion on his new so-called religion was much like his opinion on the old one; he saw it as a tool to be used, not fact.

He marched out of the keep, which was one of the smallest ones in the Stormlands, but one of the best placed. With the sea behind it, and residing on a cliff as it was, Parchment could only truly be attacked from one direction easily. In modern times with heavier catapults something that any army could build in time, it could be taken of course, but slowly.

Twenty minutes ride found him once more in amongst the tents of his now fifteen thousand man army. He nodded to lord Bolling, who had come to command his scouts. "Leave ten men with two horses each to watch Parchments. That old man agreed too easily, he's one who will agree to follow whoever is standing in front of him at that moment, then do nothing the moment their back is turned. He's mustered about half his strength, and I want to know if they march out when he said they will."

"And if they do march out but don't make to catch up to us?" Lord Bolling asked.

"Then I want to know about that the moment they march." Stannis replied grimly.

Another week's march had the army back on Bolling land, moving toward the last house Stannis wished to see if he could influence, House Buckler. That evening as all evenings Melisandre retreated to her tent. Often she simply did so because she was unused to being on horseback for so long, but other times she would retreat there to use her powers. This evening however, she was only in her tent for about an hour before she came back out, moving to find Stannis quickly.

"I have seen something in my flames." Melisandre stated as soon as she was in Stannis' command tent. He was alone, which the priestess of R'hllor had known before stepping inside else she would have waited to share this. "Men below a banner like that of the House we just left moving to a shoreline within a few days march of their keep. I see a fleet coming from the straits to meet them. The ships fly a quartered banner of blue and purple, a yellow sun set on the purple, a moon sliver on the blue."

"House Tarth." Stannis said grimly, pulling on his jerkin quickly from where he had just taken it off for bed. "Are you certain? Which direction from Parchments did they march? What about our scouts?"

"The scouts are dead for the most part, the few survivors have escaped, but are horseless." Melisandre replied calmly. "And I believe they marched south along the shoreline for three days."

Stannis nodded, thinking hard. *House Tarth would not join my cause, its lord is too arrogant, and his heir, the so-called 'Maid', is known to be besotted with Renly. Penrose has betrayed me far more quickly and thoughtfully than I expected. Pity, for him that is.* "I will turn the Army around, I will smash Penrose. I will burn it to the ground and stick that old man's head on a pike to deliver to his son. We made an agreement in faith, and he goes behind my back to aid the allies of my brother? No mercy."

He frowned looking pulling out a very vague map, the best he or anyone really had of the shoreline of the Stormlands. "You said three days march down the coast from Penrose correct?"

"That is what my vision saw yes."

"Good, we'll be able to deal with them first then turn on Parchments. Besieging that castle will take too long. We will have to think of other ways to break them."

"We have only used a Shadow Assassin once my Lord, we could use one of them again." she said coquettishly, staring at Stannis as she stood directly in front of him. From here Stannis could see down her dress to her bare breasts, they were larger and more perfectly formed than Selyse's, and he felt a trembling of desire stir within him.

The Shadow Assassin was a different breed from the Shadow Warriors. The Warriors were able to operate independently for longer, but Melisandre now understood she couldn't control them well from a distance. They were sustained by the life force of those that had been given to the fire in R'hllor's name, called forth as Melisandre pulled their souls from the fire and carved them into their new shadow shapes.

Whatever she might say, they were not easy to make each one took a toll on her, most particularly in the form of burn marks on her throat from her choker, which glowed hotter with every warrior she called forth. She couldn't create more than ten before resting, and the gem that was part of her choker took days to cool down, getting worse every time without a longer break. She had been bedridden and wounded sore after the last batch of the ones she had created back on Dragonstone. But they survived for days so long as they were not touched by sunlight.

The Shadow Assassin was created in an entirely different matter. Instead of coming from the fire, it came from Melisandre herself. After she explained that a Shadow Warrior would be subtle enough for the task they needed, the death of Lady Errol, the two of them had slept together. The very next evening she looked as if she had been pregnant for months. Unseen by any Melisandre had slipped away from the army and gone into the woods to birth their unholy child.

Stannis was not a superstitious or queasy man, but he was thankful she had not asked him to come with her for that, it would have been horrifying. He did not have any idea what the thing looked like, only that it could kill at a touch and that its creation also took a lot out of Melisandre. It could be called upon to kill a single individual and was able to cover ground like a shadow in the night, moving faster than anything natural could even come close to. But it would only last a single night, if it could not find its target within that time it would dissipate.

"I will think on that further after the battle." He said stepping away from Melisandre. Whatever her physical form, he knew the woman before him was the most dangerous creature he had ever met. Once was enough. Yet even as he

thought that, Stannis' eyes stole over to her, and she looked into his eyes smiling seductively and he knew that eventually, sooner rather than later, he would lay with her again. But now was not that time.

At his orders, his army turned around despite his commanders protests. Stannis gave orders for rumors to abound that Penrose had decided not to keep to the agreement, and that one of Bolling's scouts had returned, but died after giving the word. Errol and Bolling agreed that an example should be met for someone who went back on his word.

At Stannis's command, the cavalry gave up their horses for a portion of the infantry, something that would have been impossible to contemplate for most armies in Westeros, leaving him with seven thousand men. Speed was the essence, not striking power. With every man taking a few hours on horseback the entire force was able go faster, and they arrived back near Parchment in two days rather than the five days it'd taken them to get that far away, arriving back on the third night of their forced march. On the way they had run into two of the scouts that had escaped House Penrose's men, and their words helped bolster the army's outrage.

Scouts sent out on foot once they were within sight of the shore came back with a report that there was a force of seven hundred men waiting on a shore nearby, with the banner of house Penrose flying above them. The shore they were using was small, barely enough for two galleys to put to shore at once, which they would have to do to offload horses, and at the end of a small, but very craggy inlet. The Stormlands were not named that because of the gentleness of their weather, nor did Shipbreaker Bay only start at Storm's End and head down towards Griffin's Roost. While there were a few places where landing was easy, like the one they were now observing, these were in the minority.

The shoreline was also set somewhat below the rest of the cliffs that made up the shoreline here. And, the scouts were gleeful to report, Penrose hadn't stationed any men on either side of the shore. Penrose must have thought he was very clever to use this little secret, but for all his cunning, Lord Penrose knew nothing about war.

Stannis nodded at Sebastian, who he had given command of his archers, and ordered him to take up position overlooking the small shoreline on both edges, but not to join the battle at first. "Your task will be to stop the ships from leaving. Our own ships can't get here in time to do the task, but I want those ships added to our numbers." At present Stannis had more men than he could actually lift with the fleet he had, so adding more ships to his armada would help him tremendously.

The archers left camp quickly making their way unseen through the night to their new position while Stannis positioned his lines. They would be hiding nearby, waiting for his signal to attack. While he was willing to attempt to convince Lord Tarth to join him, if the man didn't he wanted to wipe out their entire force utterly. After setting everything to order, Stannis allowed his men to bed down where they were but no fires were lit, and no tents put up while he waited for word from the archers up on the hill that the Tarth fleet was in sight.

About two hours later a runner came, slinking his way down from the vantage point then making his way in a roundabout manner to where Stannis and the rest of his forces were waiting. "Lord," he gasped, coming to a rest in the small rocky hedge where Stannis was hiding from sight with Melisandre and Lord Bolling nearby. The ships are within sight, fifteen of them all galleons."

"Excellent." Stannis said nodding his head. "That will add tremendously to our ability to transport my troops. Remind Sebastian of those orders, I have need of those ships." The man nodded, turning around to race back the way he had come while Stannis turned to lord Bolling and ordered him to get the men up and ready for battle. "But be quiet about it, I do not mean to give away the element of surprise. We'll hit them on the shoreline once they have started to disembark."

Lord Robert Bolling nodded, intelligent enough not to comment on the fact that this was an ambush, not exactly an honorable undertaking. This was war, and if he played his cards right, his family would be enriched even more than his previous agreement with Stannis would have made them.

Another hour passed until another messenger arrived, saying that the unloading had begun. Stannis wondered how many men could be on those galleons. Unable to see them Stannis could only guess a number that they could reasonably carry for the time it would take them to get from Evenfall Hall to here. He knew that trip would only take two days unless the weather was against you, so it would have been quick.

He shook off that idle thought, and summoned up another runner. "You, head down there under a flag of peace, tell them to surrender." Robert looked at him and Stannis shrugged. "They get one chance, I doubt they will take it, but I must offer it in any event."

"And if they run, what will you do then?" Melisandre asked..

"If those men try to board their ships again, Sebastian has permission to take the ships under fire with fire arrows." Stannis said coldly. "They will either surrender and join me, or they will die, it's their choice."

Two minutes was all the time he was willing to give his scout and the men down there to decide. When that time passed and his scout had not returned Stannis nodded coolly. "Very well, they have made their decision. Our forces will advance."

He pulled out his sword, and immediately after it left the scabbard, which was specially made by Melisandre from a piece of hollowed out dragon bone that she had found on Dragonstone, it ignited yet again. "Forward!" he shouted, "kill the traitors!"

His force of five thousand infantry trooped out of their hiding places among the rocks and trees, joining up into a wedge with Stannis and his guard at the front. These men were the fire guard, knights and skilled swordsmen taken from Dragonstone and the fleet that had pledged to him and to R'hllor, fanatical in their devotion in a way that made Stannis' skin crawl at times. In battle however, was when they truly fulfilled their purpose.

The army marched down toward the shoreline, where their enemies saw them coming in time to prepare their lines.

Stannis took in the scene in a glance. His men were racing down from a slight hill, which had hidden their position from the Penrose man and the men of Tarth who had landed. There were two galleys pushed up against the shoreline, with more lying behind them in the waters of the small watery crag. They were all so close to protect them from the winds and waves that would otherwise have smashed them against the side of the rocky shores, but they were so close together it made the entire area a fire trap, something the crews of those vessels should've known.

In front of those ships were the men of Tarth and the men of Penrose. He estimated there were possibly half of the men he commanded down there. But there was no way they could use that force, not on the front they had, they would be getting in their own way, and they didn't seem to have any archers. Worse, many of the men were cavalry, and their horses too were trapped by the press of bodies. Even in open battle they would be crushed, under these conditions they had no chance. *Selwyn is a fool.* He thought coldly. *He should have surrendered or at worst tried to retreat, now he will die, and his men with him.*

At the front of the troops down there was a force of twenty cavalry already horsed somehow with the banner of Evenfall flowing at their front. Stannis made a beeline for them, pointing with his Lightbringer. "There!" he shouted, looking to either side at the fire guards around him. "Cut them down, and this battle is over!"

The cavalry units, all knights from House Tarth, couched their lances and raced towards the incoming army of infantry. Stannis and his fire guard faded back into the ranks for a moment letting the front rank take the charge. There were too many men for the charging horses to break through, and they soon became bogged down unable to make any headway.

And as any experienced knight would tell you, a knight who has lost his forward momentum is a dead one. Stannis' infantry began to cut horses down, getting close and ripping open their bellies with their blades, while other blades sought the knights from every side. The rest of the infantry flowed around them to slam into the barely prepared infantry line behind them, much of the men in it encumbered by armor too heavy to let them move easily on foot.

Stannis slammed his sword up, shearing through a hastily raised shield to cut off the arm behind it then was forced to duck away as the horse whinnied in terror from his Lightbringer, trying to kick his head off with its front hoofs. One of the fire guards wielding a spear came up behind him slamming the point of the spear into the horse's unarmored belly.

The banner bearer had fallen out of his saddle, his horse maddened as well by Lightbringer. The banner bearer however stood his ground, cutting down three armsmen as they came against him, then cutting a fourth, a fire guard down before turning his corpse and using him as a shield against four more wielding spears.

Stannis frowned he hadn't thought that Selwyn was that good, indicating this was someone else leading his force, a pity. Nonetheless he forged forward, cutting down another knight before clashing blades with the man beside the banner. He frowned as the other man's eyes widened behind his full face helmet. "You're not Selwyn, who are you?"

"You'll get nothing from me!" The person shouted, seemingly unfazed after that initial start of surprise by the Lightbringer. Yet the voice was that of a woman, a deep voice for all that, but still a woman.

Realizing who this was, Stannis scowled. He ducked a blow from her sword, sweeping his shield against it to knock it further out of position bringing up his own blade to slam the flat of it against her head. It dented the helmet enough so

that she had been forced back away, ripping it off quickly to retain her vision on that side. Besides which, in an infantry battle like this a full face helmet like that was just as deadly to the wearer as it was blinding. Peripheral vision in a battle like this was a necessity, not just a good idea.

The woman's face thus revealed was not pretty. The kindest word you could use to describe it was punkish. It was freckled, with a nose which looked as if it had been smashed in, the chin was manly, the cheeks thick. Yet for all of that the lips were that of a woman, and the eyelashes too. "Brienne of Tarth," Stannis said. "So, your father sent you to war while he remained behind?"

Letting the woman recover, he took a moment to look over the battle. Thanks to the small incline of the hill he was able to look down to see the battle ahead of him, where the forces of Tarth had been pinned against the shoreline in the ships. The men there were well and truly pinned, unable to form a line to let most of their men enter battle, his men crowding them into the sea and against the ships' sides. Their heavier armor availed the cavalry naught now, and they were being slaughtered, his own men taking one dead for every three.

Several of them were trying to board those ships again, but Lord Bolling had ordered a few of his archers to take them under fire, while the others shot fire arrows at the farthest ship from the shore. The message there was clear, and those ships weren't going anywhere. Indeed two of them had already struck colors, the two that had been hit by fire arrows already. The fact that several of the crewmen lay dead from regular arrows showed why, and the normal seaman's fear of fire.

The woman snarled and came on again. "For my Lord Baratheon!" she shouted, showing no fear of Lightbringer still. Her blade clashed with his, and Stannis was amused at how good she was, certainly better than the average armsmen or knight, but not up to his level yet. *Give her a few real battles though and maybe that would've been different*, he thought, moving into smashed her sword aside again before kicking her in the crotch. That works just as well for women as men, and there was no such thing as fair play in battle, something youngsters always had to learn the hard way.

"I am Lord Baratheon, my brother has no right to that lordship or to the throne, I am eldest it is my right." Stannis said, unknowingly echoing words Joffrey had said to Myrcella more than two months before in meaning if not in tone.

The woman glared up at him, trying to scabble for her sword which she had lost when her hands went to her battered crotch, but Stannis brought his knee up into her face, then kicked her face in as she lay there until she stopped moving. Unconscious or dead, he didn't care which at this point. It wasn't the daughter he was interested in, it was the Lord, though he was afraid that his taunt had been correct, Selwyn had sent his daughter to war while staying home himself.

Stannis turned raising his burning blade into the air casting his face into a mass of shadows and light. "Your leader is gone! Surrender!"

At that, and seeing Brienne's dead or comatose body at his feet, the surviving men of Tarth and Penrose threw down their blades surrendering. A few dozen more died in the heat of battle, but generally speaking that was the end of it. Stannis' men stormed around them, several hundred racing onto the ships to capture the ships in turn. Their crews did not put up any further fight, having known the battle was over the moment fire arrows began to rain on the furthest ship from the drop-off point.

When the next day dawned Stannis found that they had taken about two-thousand two-hundred prisoners a hundred and twenty of which were sorely wounded and would not survive the day, as well as nearly two thousand horses to add to their army's train. Whether or not any of the uninjured prisoners would survive however was still in question.

Stannis let his army rest throughout the day after they had stripped the prisoners of their weapons and armor. Then at sunset Stannis had the prisoners trotted out in front of him.

Stannis sat on a makeshift throne with his fire guard arrayed on a diagonal from his throne out to either side, Melisandre standing nearby in the councilor position, while Lord Bolling and Lord Errol stood on his other side. The first group of prisoners, all knights sworn to the House of Tarth, were paraded out before them, then forced down to their knees before the throne.

At their front Brienne tried to fight, her face a mask of bruises from her beating at his hands, but two of his fire guards moved forward, smashing her down to the ground with the flats of their swords against her back. She still glared up at them defiantly, then spat at their feet before staring hard at Stannis.

Looking down at them all coldly Stannis spoke a moment after letting the silence linger. "All of you are guilty of raising



arms against your true King." Brienne made to speak but Stannis held up a hand glaring at her. "The lines of succession are clear, regardless of anything else: if the older brother dies without trueborn heirs, the next oldest is his heir. Robert did not have a true heir, he has left many a by-blow, but his three children, the ones that were supposed to be true heirs, are instead the seeds of incest, spawn of the queen and her king slaying, oath breaking brother!"

There were some exclamations of shock from the prisoners at that, who unlike his own men, hadn't heard it just yet, that information not being part of Renly's propaganda, and Stannis' own not moving as quickly. He ignored that however, going on. "Therefore by law, by tradition and by destiny I am King!" With that exclamation he brought out Lightbringer again, hoping to overawe them all and get the prisoners to swear fealty to him.

"All praise the Light That Was Promised!" Melisandre said her eyes alight with religious fervor as they glared down at the prisoners. "Chosen of R'hllor!"

"You surrendered, and thus you are alive to be given a choice, swear your fealty to me and you will join my army as valued members." Stannis said now.

That was as far as he got before Brienne surged to her feet, rage giving her strength to ignore her bruises. "Never! I will never denounce the Faith! You aren't even a Baratheon anymore, your brother and your ancestors are rolling in their graves, giving yourself to some foreign tart and her God! Your soul is as black as aAGGGHH!"

Brienne screamed as fire suddenly surged from Melisandre's hand to impact her chest. One moment she was standing there shouting her defiance, then the next she was on fire, dying as it ate into her chest. Yet she did not call out in pain, no. "Seven Aid your faithful!" She screamed then barreled forward a few steps before finally collapsing several feet from her starting point while the flames consumed her.

Contrary to what Melisandre might've hoped, the death of Brienne did not dishearten the other prisoners. When Brienne fell they all shouted as one, surging to their feet and towards Stannis and the fire guard despite being unarmed, despite being tied up. They looked like madmen, fully intent on trying to take armored and armed men on with just their teeth and legs.

Stannis sighed, then slashed his hands down. Archers from all around the makeshift court fired, and his fire guard surged forward their blades rising and falling.

In the end every one of that first batch of prisoners had to be killed along with half the remainder. Somehow word had gotten out about Brienne's death, and most of them refused point blank to swear allegiance to Stannis. Instead they tried to revolt, to escape, and had to be killed by their guards.

The bloody business went on for hours, costing them the remainder of the light that day. Luckily it didn't seem to have affected Bolling and Errol's opinion about Stannis. They like him put the blame for this directly at Melisandre's feet. When informed he would be having words with her during the debacle, they both nodded, understanding. A weapon like her was useful, but she had to know her limits.

Forty minutes after the butchery ended Stannis and Melisandre entered his command tent alone. The moment they entered Stannis turned grasping her around the throat and lifting her off her feet shaking her like a dog with a rat. "You stupid bitch!" He roared.

Shaking her he went on, his voice only slightly lower but no less ferocious, letting it carry to the men, so that they knew he was laying down the law to the madwoman. "Brienne's defiance was less than empty, it would have amounted to nothing if you hadn't overreacted! We could have won a thousand more men to my cause, instead I have a thousand useless corpses, and an army that now is divided on how it sees you. The R'hllor worshippers believe you speak for their god, but the rest would see you dead if they could! You are supposed to be a hidden dagger, a threat I can use without anyone knowing how dangerous you truly are, not an overt threat, a mad bitch who burns anyone who speaks out of turn! From now on you do not burn anyone without my say so, do you understand?"

Despite having her feet a foot off the ground, Melisandre stared back at him defiantly, and under his hand Stannis could feel the jewel in her choker began to heat. But he had wielded Lightbringer for hours on end in practice, getting used to the heat of it through the pommel and he closed his grip slightly, cutting off her circulation.

The two of them stared at one another until Melisandre finally looked away bowing her head. "As you will, Azor Ahai." She croaked.

Stannis let go of her throat letting the woman massage it for a moment turning away slightly. Her breasts were heaving from the lack of air, but she let none of that show on her face. Stannis was taken with a sudden desire to

throw her down and prove his dominance further on her body right there. He threw that thought off however, instead turning to more important matters. "We will leave within the hour for Penrose, I trust you will be able to create another assassin?"

Melisandre looked at him, and a sultry smirk appeared on her face as she let her hands fall from her throat down her body to rest on her hips. "I am certain that together we can do this my Lord" she said seductively.

A week later found Stannis once more marching overland towards where he had placed his fleet, thinking hard about the future. Parchments had fallen, the lord having died apparently from a heart attack in the night, with only Stannis and Melisandre knowing the truth. With that and with the men he had captured from that house having sent word at his request ahead, Parchment had opened its gates. Bolling now had a new castle, and a fair chunk of new territory to expand into after the war.

Now Stannis was debating between staying here to smash a few of the other northeastern Stormlands Lords one by one, emulating his brother's work in the Rebellion, or move to take King's Landing.

He was within sight of Haystack Hall, and he smiled seeing that Sebastion's castellan had been as good as his word, several dozen cartloads of foodstuffs were already outside, and his men gave a cheer seeing it, having marched for nearly two weeks on half rations. He would rest his men for two days here, allowing them to eat their fill and rest before deciding on a course of action. Yet even as that thought struck him, he knew what he would do.

Later that evening he announced it to his captains and lords. "We will march on Bronzegate." he said decisively. "House Buckler is strong, and their town a good resource. It and their keep are set as a choke point for any force further south in the Stormlands using the Kingsroad. I will try to persuade them to join us, but if not we will lay siege to Bronzegate until it gives over."

He did not allow his eyes to stray to Melisandre, who smiled a small secretive smile and said. "Only the foolish or the suicidal will stand against the Azor Ahai, especially with the examples of House Tarth and Penrose to call upon." She had taken the time the evening after the battle to pickle Brienne's head, and that and the banners of the two houses would do to show what happened to the last people who tried to fight Stannis.

"I agree house Buckler will make a good addition to our cause sire, but besieging Bronzegate will take months. Luck has been on our side so far, if we try that..." Lord Bolling shrugged.

Stannis nodded. "True, but Lord Buckler is practical, much like you are Lord Errol. And house Fell on its other side is certain to have sided with my brother Renly. I understand that Buckler has always coveted that land..."

Lord Bolling and Sebastion both frowned at that thought, knowing how strong adding that land to its own would make Buckler. At the moment they were one of the richest houses in the Stormlands, sitting on the Kingsroad which was the best trading road into or out of the Stormlands. The town Bronzegate also gave them access to artificers, metal workers, and cloth makers.

Not a trained force, though they could raise a decent sized defensive levee, but what armsmen they had, possibly three thousand or so, were well armed, equipped and trained. Much better than Bolling's men in the main, or the majority of the men Stannis had taken from the navy if not Dragonstone itself. Errol could more than match their numbers and training even from the men they had fielded already, but not the equipment.

After a moment Sebastion nodded. "A promise of some position, and if House Fell does raise arms for Lord Renly your protection against them and the promise of their land after the war might be enough to tempt Ralph Buckler, true."

"Then what my Lord?" asked Lord Bolling. "And what about House Tarth?"

"Hmm... I will send Davos down after we meet up in Dragonstone to burn out Tarth's port. No port, no way for them to rejoin the war, and we can deal with them at our leisure. For now, if Bronzegate comes over peacefully we will reinforce it as much as possible. Bronzegate is not only a town, it is one of the more powerful castles in the Stormlands. We can use it as a bottleneck to block further troops being sent the easiest way around the mountains into the Crownlands and Reach via the Kingsroad. That will force them to go overland through the kingswood, which will slow my brother's muster from the Stormlands.

"But not from the Reach my Lord." said Sebastion frowning, looking worried.

"True, but the Reach's army will be large and slow, we will retain our small size for now, it will allow us to

outmaneuver them." Indeed they only had about sixteen thousand men at this point. "We will soon join with several other houses, I have sent the Onion Knight to Sharp Point and Stonedance, and we will meet them at Dragonstone."

"We are to take to the ocean then," said Lord Bolling, looking a little ill at the thought, while Sebastian merely nodded.

"Yes, we will march to meet my fleet where I left the ships along the shoreline at the nearest point to Haystack Hall. With it and the ships taken from House Tarth who we'll meet there, we can transport our forces to Duskendale. House Rykker will not wish to fight us; Duskendale isn't a defensible position, the port is far too open for that. It will allow us to land our forces quickly and we will march into the Riverlands. I have already sent a message to House Tully demanding their aid."

Stannis hadn't stayed in Dragonstone long enough for word to reach him of all that had happened in King's Landing, so he only had Melisandre's information about the Wolves and the Dragon Queen. He had no idea that the king had Edmure, and so fully expected to meet forces from the Riverlands as soon as possible.

"We will meet them on the Kingsroad near the Trident, and from there march down to King's Landing to put it under siege, smashing any Lannister force that Tywin has put into the field by this point on our way." He had other thoughts along those lines, using a few connections that Seaworth had with a few pirate lords might give them another avenue of attack. Or even make overtures to the Ironborn to see if he could convince them to attack Lannisport for him, force Tywin to turn back. The main point was that right now he didn't want to be bogged down in taking castle after castle or convincing lord after lord to join him.

No, he who held King's Landing held the throne. Once he had the throne, his brother would be certain to surrender, and he could make overtures to House Tyrell. He knew that they would have already demanded Renly take Margaery to wife, but offering his daughter to Willas for marriage would offset that. With their neutrality secured Renly would only have the Stormlands and not even all of them to call upon. With those two facts and King's Landing under his older brother's thumb he would surrender Renly was not want to risk his life if he had no chance of winning.

The plan took a few more hours to hammer out, mostly about how much food would be sent by Errol with the army, but as an outline it would do. In the end house Buckler would indeed join them. In return for House Fell's land if they rose against Lord Stannis, and the heir's position on King Stannis' fire guard they agreed and bowed to Stannis allowing him to turn around quickly after investing the Castle with another two thousand men pulled from all his loyal houses with a thousand coming from Dragonstone itself.

With that, the Stormlands were broken into two pieces, and Stannis was on his way back to the shoreline to meet his navy, with his younger brother as yet none the wiser.

OOOOOOO

Dacey woke up in pain and with the feeling in her mouth as if a skunk had taken up residence in it. She groaned, moving the shoulder above where the ice sword had pierced her side finding she couldn't at the same time she began to open her eyes, trying to sit up.

"Stay put girl." Olis' gruff voice interrupted her efforts, and a firm, but gentle hand pressed her upper body back down. "None of that. What's the last thing you remember?"

"I..." Dacey croaked, then paused as Olis held a cup of water to her lips. She drank greedily, then began again. "I remember feeling feverish, and it getting worse every day on the way back to Norrey territory. That, that's about all I can remember."

"That would be because you apparently collapsed halfway back my friend." A deep voice she knew very well spoke up from nearby, and Dacey turned her eyes in that direction to see Hathan, leaning against the doorway of the room she was resting in. "Something in the wound was fighting the healing process, much like Ranma's arm when he was struck by the Ice giant's club during the ambush. If not for Olis you would have succumbed to whatever it was Dacey."

"Bah, her pushing herself on as she did almost did as much to kill her as whatever it was in the wound." Olis shook his head. "Still don't know what it was, but the poultices I made were able to keep it at bay, and we forced you to sweat it out, whatever it was."

"Thank you Olis, I, I didn't... thank you." For all her courage in battle, Dacey was deathly afraid of dying from illness. "I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"How about by not undoing my good work by moving around too quickly." Olis grumped, but she could see he wore a

slight smile under his beard.

Moments later he left, and she turned to Hathan. "How did I get here, and where is here?"

"You're in my holdfast, Dacey. The mountain clans have a system where they use a series of runners to pass on important messages, the Norrey got a message down to me, and I and men of my household road out to meet their party with as many extra horses as we could and a gurney for you. You've been here for a few days now."

Dacey nodded. "Good, that will mean passing on my news will be that much easier."

"True, though perhaps not for just the reason you think." At Dacey's inquisitive look, Hathan smiled grimly through his well-trimmed handlebar mustache. "Lord Stark, Ranma and his sister are back from down south." He went on from there to explain what was going on, and Dacey's eyes narrowed grimly. "So we have some time for you to get better, we're waiting for the barges carrying Lord Umber and Lord Karstark's men down from Long Lake. After that, well, we'll have to see what Ranma plans."

OOOOOOO

The trip upriver to the nearest point where the course of the White Knife took them to Winterfell was an extremely nice, sleepy, six days. During the morning, Ranma spent time with his sister, Myrcella and the others, exchanging stories and listening to what Myrcella wanted to do with her life going forward if she could. She had decided she wanted to be a healer, and had raided the rooms of Lord Manderly's former maester for his tomes on healing. She spent most of the afternoon reading, taking small, neat notes on sheets of parchment Wyman had given her. The idea of talking to the former master, her distant family member, had never even occurred to her.

Needless to say of course she would need to remain near Ranma, since he had promised to look after her but Ranma and Eddard were very supportive of her interest. Alayaya on the other hand wasn't certain what she wanted to do. Yes, she could play at the handmaiden for Daenerys and a fine needlewoman for Merry, but she missed the excitement of being a spy, of stretching her mind and concentration like that. Yet it would be a long time if ever before she could utilize those skills. Alayaya was a city girl, utterly at sea out in the country and her odds of fitting in outside a town or city were nil.

During the afternoon Ranma and Fenris left the boat to hunt, with the two draklings sometimes sent into the air to practice flying and hunting by Daenerys, who remained in firm control of them when they were in the air. Like Ranma and his more experienced siblings, she had to deal with some of the backslash from that connection during moments of high emotion, and when the two draklings made their first kill under Fenris' direction was one such moment.

Fenris had scared a medium-sized elk out of the deep woods, a young buck that had probably been part of a herd before going off on its own. After stalking it for some time, he started herding it back towards the river at a diagonal, into a small opening in the forest which normally crowded the edge of the river. The elk broke out into cover, it's breathing ragged and its eyes widen and terrified.

The draklings had been circling above. Somehow understanding Fenris' instructions, they had remained in that area, sending thoughts back to Daenerys of waiting and anticipation. For a moment they froze as the prey animal burst out of the woods below them, its size and sudden presence startling them. After a second however instinct kicked in and Rhaegon and Sunfyre plummeted down, fangs and claws bared.

Back on the boat Daenerys gasped, her hands almost unconsciously gripping like the draklings' claws as they used slammed down onto the back of the elk, which was larger than they by more than a bit, their claws gouging into its back, teeth seeking its neck. She gasped again and again, then shook her head as the feeling of still warm red blood hit her senses, but a soft touch on Daenerys' shoulder broke her out of it.

"Easy," Ranma said his voice understanding, knowing what she was feeling. He had lost himself in the hunt a few times with Fenris, particularly after the hunt became a fight with another predator. Overall he felt it made their bond stronger, but it was incredibly disconcerting the first few times.

Daenerys shook her head, coming back into herself much faster than Ranma had. Of course unlike Ranma she had experience with overwhelming emotions coming from the draklings along with sensations that she had no experience with. Flying with them had prepared her for this quite a bit more than running did with Fenris for Ranma. After all, even now he could still outpace his direwolf if he really tried. Whereas no human could fly under their own power.

"Is it always like that?" Daenerys asked gasping a little.

"You'll get better at sensing when you need to start pulling out of the connection." Ranma said nodding his head. "I tend to ride Fenris right up until the moment he spooks whatever prey he's after or goes in for the kill. That's actually tougher if I'm honest. Fenris likes to go after bears, something about showing them who's boss I think, and after riding his brain in a fight, even helping him a time or two, it was much harder to pull away when it came time for the fight to end.

"I can understand that, flying with my draklings is...." she shivered a little but it was not from the cold. "It's utterly magnificent, I don't have any words to describe it."

"I suppose for a normal person running with Fenris would be the same thing, but I have a bit of an advantage there." Ranma laughed, putting his arms around Daenerys's stomach and holding her tight. "Keep a light touch on them, I have no idea how they'll respond after their first kill, young ones are unpredictable."

Daenerys nodded, leaning against his shoulder as she closed her eyes once more concentrating on the link between herself, Sunfyre and Rhaegon. Luckily it seemed as if the hunt itself was more important to the draklings than the kill. Ranma and Daenerys were uncertain why that was, maybe the draklings just didn't have as well developed taste buds as a direwolf did, but it was much easier to get control of the two draklings after they had eaten their fill than Ranma had feared.

That became the routine, with the two draklings exercising from after the humans had lunch to when the sun began to go down, flying, hunting and occasionally, very occasionally practicing with their flames. It was only occasionally because Ranma and Daenerys were very firm that they did not want to cause any sudden forest fires, and along the river the forest was often almost straight up against the bank.

The nights were given over to further discussions between all of those on the boat on various topics, most notably the power of river travel. Ranma and Daenerys had a lot of thoughts about that, most importantly the idea of channels, which were heavily in use in Dorne and in Essos, but never so much elsewhere on Westeros. Brynden too was enthusiastic about the idea, seeing what they could mean for the Riverlands. Eddard also saw the point of them and work like that done on the White Knife, in particular in the North.

They had a bit of an argument about where however such a project should be started. Eddard felt that with the infrastructure already in place that creating a channel to lead toward Winterfell from the white knife at its nearest point to the castle was an obvious solution, which would make transportation to and from White Harbor even faster.

Daenerys on the other hand felt that was unnecessary. The nearest point was only four days travel by horse drawn cart since the tributary by castle Cerwyn was too narrow for large barge traffic (small traffic and logs were a different story), and barely a day on any regular horse. What was more, the trip according to what everyone else was easy-going. Even Sansa had been there before, visiting House Wells.

On the other hand, the Last River passed through house Umber's land, and could be used to get goods down to the ocean and from there elsewhere in the North. Since house Umber was one of the two houses that produced the most coal in the North, and with winter coming up that would become very important, it was not only an economically sound maneuver, but a necessity. The other house that produced a lot of coal, House Flint of Flint's Finger had no rivers, few places and no money to pay for ports on the Saltspear. They also had very little in the way of manpower, and therefore no easy way to get their coal, much like their other resources of tin and copper, to anyone else.

With Eddard and the others as arbitrator the discussion continued. This was a task he took to with a small smile on his face, always amused by the way these two seemed to be perfect foils for one another. Eventually the rest of them were swayed by Daenerys' arguments but Eddard added a caveat. "It's an interesting idea, but Greatjon might not go for it. He'd probably prefer to be on hand to oversee it, and trying to keep him away from the campaign in the south is going to be an exercise in futility."

Ranma laughed in agreement with Smalljon who nodded. "We Umber men all love a good fight." He said smirking.

That conversation ended the evening, and it ended up as all evenings on the river did, with Daenerys and Ranma going off alone on the boat to find a quiet place where they could have some time together. They were careful never to do anything untoward, but it was certainly taxing their self-restraint to keep to that. It was fueled and helped along by Daenerys' unwillingness to rub their relationship into Merry's face, knowing how the young girl felt about Ranma. She had come to understand over the time on the Fish's Scales that Myrcella truly did love Ranma, and was of two minds about it.

On the one hand, she got along well with Myrcella herself, seeing the younger girl almost as a surrogate sister not just a handmaiden or even a friend, someone she could laugh and joke about in ways she would never consider

joking about with Ranma (a very short list admittedly but still there). But on the other, she was concerned about what would happen there. It was almost a certainty that they would receive word from the tower that Myrcella was illegitimate, after which she would lose much of her rights, and all of her standing in the eyes of society this side of the Dornish mountains. But that would mean her wellbeing would depend even more on Ranma than was the case now, which meant Merry would be around the two for years, maybe her entire life.

Still, that was a problem for the future. Right now the girl seemed happy for her, able to move past her own jealousy, and Daenerys would do the same. She was not a scared little girl, uncertain of her position or power. She was the Dragon Queen, the woman who had brought dragons to life, and with Ranma by her side, the two of them would change Westeros.

Three days into the journey they reached the fork where the White Knife split, a portion of it going via a tributary towards House Cerwyn, while the main river continued heading up towards Long Lake. As they passed the fork they could see several small river boats being kept there, and an odd sort of doorway set over the water, keeping them from entering with several guardsmen posted there. One man, who was most probably the one in charge wore the colors of House Poole on his tabard. He waved his hand at the boat coming up the river.

In response Sansa, who was at the front of the barge, waved back somewhat sadly, remembering Jeyne's death. The sight of her caused murmurs from the men on the other barges as they recognized her and beside her Ranma and their father. The news of their arrival evidently hadn't gotten this far, Lord Manderly not sharing who was traveling up the river that was worth halting down river traffic, just giving the order.

The man grinned "Welcome home Lord Stark, there's been a few changes as you can see!"

Eddard actually laughed, raising his good arm in reply. He still couldn't move his other arm without pain, something that would no doubt be with him for the rest of his life, and his leg was still dead to any commands he tried to give it, though for now it could still hold his weight with aid. He recognized the man, so when he replied it was with his name. "So I see Helden!"

But by that point they were almost out of shouting distance. Behind them the doorway so swung open on either side allowed in the barges that had been piled up there to start their way down river herding timber down to White Harbor.

Three days after that they arrived at the stopping point for Winterfell, which had been heavily built-up. House Wells had poured in its resources and the resources of their lords, and the result was a small dock area, with space enough for four barges to load and unload, a large cart area, and equally large barn for trained reindeer, which did the same job as horses would for cart pulling here in the North. Their holdfast too, which was near the new construction, was in the process of being reinforced.

Lord Wells came out to clasp forearms with Eddard and Ranma, bowing grandly to Sansa. "It's good to see you all safe and home. I have transportation available for all of you, a cart and horses." he said, though his eyes kept tracking to Daenerys awe in his face at the two draklings, who were leaning against her sides as they stared around at the many four-legged animals around them.

This was only the second time they had seen even horses after all, the first being in White Harbor, and up to this point they had killed two wild elk, which looked and smelled similar to these new four-legged things. But Daenerys had been very firm with them that any four-legged one who had humans around was not for eating. It was the best she could do, but thankfully they weren't actually hungry at present, merely curious.

An hour later, the party moved on with the two drakling in a cart whose nervous reindeer was being led by Ranma on foot with Fenris beside him, growling lightly whenever the beast tried to bolt. Eddard had insisted on riding a horse, but he had to be tied into the saddle, unable to grip the saddle with one of his legs.

With only one cart with them, they made excellent time to Winterfell, only taking two days to cover the distance larger carts would take four to do. Of course word had been sent ahead that they were coming. They met a force of 20 men riding out from Winterfell, with Jon at their head, his face broken by an uncharacteristic grin. He swung down from his horse, laughing as he pounced on Ranma. The two brothers embraced, slapping one another on the back while the aerial and Smalljon looked on with Daryn, both of them grinning. "By the old gods it's good to see you brother!" Jon said.

Ranma nodded "You too, Jon, damn, you too!"

Jon turned, exchanging a much more restrained hug with his father as well, reaching up to do so, Eddard not having left the saddle. "Father, it is good to see you too!" Eddard nodded his heart in his throat at the warm welcome from his

foster son. He only hoped Jon would take the news of his parentage as well as Eddard hoped. A moment later Jon released Eddard only to find his hands full of Sansa a moment later, the girl trying desperately not to cry, while Jon blinked, not having expected this warm a welcome from her.

Looking at the two young men together Daenerys could see both their similarities and their differences, and smiled faintly. Ranma in her opinion was much more handsome. Jon was a little too Stark in his features for her, those blue eyes of Ranma and the smile lines on his face offset those features in him, and she disliked facial hair. The well-trimmed goatee Jon had was most definitely not to her liking.

Jon broke the hug moments later, looking over at Fenris and Ghost, growling and yapping at one another quietly sitting side-by-side. Fenris was a good head taller than ghost, and somewhat more muscled at the shoulders, but other than that and their coloring they were very much alike, and slightly larger than normal war horses. He leaned in close, nodding his head at the direwolves. "Ghost knew you had arrived and nearby before any of us knew, even for the messenger from House Wells reached us. I think they sort of took over the local wolf packs and forced them to pass on messages at some point."

"Wouldn't surprise me." Ranma murmured back smiling faintly.

"And this is the Stormborn?" Jon asked looking over at Daenerys. He bowed his head slightly to her. "Milady." He looked at the draklings and shook his head. "Wonders both good and ill walk this world it seems."

"Your brother has told me a lot about you Jon Snow." She said taking his forearm like a warrior would rather than holding out her hand to be kissed. "I hope to get to know you further, he holds you in high regard. I hope you're capable of helping me keep Ranma out of trouble as he seems to think. It is most definitely a full-time job."

Jon turned with to Ranma with a smirk on his face. Ranma laughed and Jon grinned, putting his arm around his brother once more in a fierce one-armed hug. After that he turned back to his father, his eyes still shining with joy at seeing all three back and relatively whole. His eyes had not missed the fact that Eddard couldn't put much pressure on his one leg, which hung limply in the saddle.

Moving back to his horse, Jon laughed. "We should get on or else several people will wish to box my ears for me. Lady Stark and the rest of the family are anxiously waiting your arrival."

Eddard's smile at hearing about his wife and family shattered his normal stone face, and his eyes gleamed with eagerness.

Not two hours later they arrived at Winterfell. The bugles of horns announcing their presence, and the shouts of the smallfolk of the small town rang in their ears as they made their way through it to the castle. The town was nearly full, not because of the impending winter, though every Northmen knew it was only a bare few years or so away at best, but because the workers were needed here for various projects. Even during their arrival the clamor of blacksmith hammers could be heard, and other work continued. Inside Winterfell however work had stopped, and all of the servants and castle denizens had come out to greet the returning Lord.

But not the lords who had already arrived at Catelyn's call. Hearing of their impending arrival, Medger Cerwyn and the others who had arrived already, Glover, Hornwood, Mormont, and Ryswell, had all decided to give the Starks the rest of the day to themselves, heading to castle Cerwyn for the day. Many of their men had already been moved to Cerwyn, allowing the army being mustered to be spread between the two castles and not burdening Winterfell or Cerwyn with their full numbers.

At the head of the family was Lady Catelyn, her eyes shining with tears as she saw her husband and oldest children returned to her alive. In her arms she carried the baby that was yet to be named, though not for much longer while on either side stood Arya, Bran and Rickon, with maester Luwin behind them one hand on either boys shoulder, holding them still as both of them vibrated in place with happiness at seeing their older siblings and father returned.

Luwin's placement near Bran was not by chance; Bran's mind had been a treasure to the maester ever since he woke up. Every good teacher desires to have a student who is capable of surpassing them, capable of taking what is taught to a whole new level, and in Bran maester Luwin had that student. His ideas had been the Maesters delight to cultivate, and he had enjoyed immensely the little group of thinkers that the young man had brought together, who stood behind Luwin now as Winterfell welcomed its lord home.

The entire family was grinning widely as Jon and Ranma led the troop in, with Fenris and Ghost speeding along ahead of them. The rest of the pack met them and Fenris led them to one side to allow the human to have their own reunion while he and his family had their own.

Eddard rode ahead of his two sons, his eyes locked on Catelyn while his hands were busy untying his body from the saddle, before looking to either side at his children's joy at seeing Brand awake and moving around with his own eyes clear on his face. Working the reins he brought his horse to a halt before his family and then with difficulty got himself out of the saddle. A stern look at Ranna stopped him from moving to help, and Ranna shrugged his shoulders but stood nearby just in case.

Catelyn strode forward, curtsying gracefully to her husband. "My husband, I'm happy to see you home, your family and castle has..." At that point Eddard had had enough of the formal greeting, and pulled Catelyn into his arms kissing her thoroughly to the cheers of the jubilant crowd around them.

She should've been shocked at this breach of propriety, not just the public showing of affection, which Catelyn always saw as rather uncouth. She should've been, but she was not. It had been many long months since Catelyn had last seen her husband, since she had last been able to touch him, and most of those days had been spent worrying for his safety as well as that of her eldest children. Propriety, she felt, could go hang this once.

This seemed to be a signal, and the rest of the family raced forward, gathering around Ranna and Sansa hugging them both ecstatically. Even Arya hugged Sansa and jabbered into her ear about how happy she was to see her, something that Sansa would never have thought of her younger sibling. They weren't exactly close after all before she left, simply being too different. Yet that didn't matter at all right now and she returned the hugs all around fiercely, crying happily.

Daenerys watched with Smalljon and Daryn beside her as the family was reunited. She smiled, her own eyes misting slightly while next to her Myrcella was looking on in sadness, knowing her own family, while never that happy with one another, would never be the same now. Then Rickon and Sansa reached out for her pulling Merry in as well. Whatever else, Sansa valued Myrcella as her dearest friend, and she was making certain that all of her family and their retainers knew it in no uncertain terms.

Myrcella smiled happily as she exchanged hugs with the younger boys, though Arya avoided her slightly, simply patting her on the shoulder before moving on to Brynden. "Great Uncle Brynden?" She asked, staring up at the gray haired man.

The older man smiled down at her. "Aye lass that'd be me. Your father and siblings described you well, though you are much taller than I thought. Come here child." Arya laughed and hugged the older man tightly. The strength in the girl startled Brynden. She was wiry and limber of arm and leg, and he could actually feel the muscles under her skin, something he had never felt hugging any other woman or girl.

With Sansa leading the young siblings over Brynden was soon surrounded by his niece's family. With that Arya left them to it moving on to the most interesting newcomer, Daenerys. She took in the long knife at the older girl's waist, her silver hair bound up in a braid at the moment, the sparkling violet eyes and the way she stood with Jon and the other wolfsworn around her, before moving forward, holding out her hand to shake.

Daenerys clasped it in a warrior's grip. "You must be Arya, your siblings told me a lot about you. Which one of those is yours can I ask?" she said tilting her head towards where the direwolves were getting reacquainted, roughhousing with one another exchanging senses and yips, communicating at a level neither human nor normal wolf would be able to follow though derived from both.

There seemed to be a bit of a moment over there just then. The shaggiest looking one growled and went for Fenris' throat in something a little too serious for play but just as he did, Fenris smacked him aside easily, then grabbed him by the back scruff, shaking him lightly but pointedly. Nymeria, Ghost and Summer looked on in something that looked remarkably like vexed amusement at their fellow's ill fortune.

"The third biggest one, the one with a bit of her right ear missing, her name's Nymeria." That had happened a few weeks ago, when the two of them were on their last hunting trip with Meera before the Reed girl had to leave with her brother. Nymeria had accidentally gone after a mother fox who was protecting her cubs. The bit of ear was a small price to pay considering that if she had been a normal wolf she might have well been completely overmatched by the enraged mother.

"What about the two dragons?" Arya asked, looking at the two animals, her main interest in coming over this way and leaving the mushy welcoming stuff behind her. Normally she would not have been so welcoming of a strange girl, but the little beasts were really amazing looking.

"This is Sunfyre and Rhaegon." Daenerys said nodding to the two draklings who were curled up on the ground behind her, following her stern injunctions to be on their best behavior, their eyes watching all the odd humans around them.



"Can they fly already?" Arya excitedly asked, kneeling down in front of them.

Sunfyre was the friendlier of the two, and he leaned his neck upright to stare into her eyes. This one smelled much like queen-mother's mate, though female. Not like the other female whose head fur was the color of flame and who was good with the scratching, but similar enough that Sunfyre realized that this was a new family member. That was all right, so long as she didn't try to give him orders like the queen-mother, he would let her close.

Rhaegon was not as friendly, and remained where he lay staring up at her but did not strike out.

"Yes they can fly!" Daenerys said laughing. "That was an experience let me tell you. In fact, I believe your brother will have many a tale to tell you of our adventures getting up here. Trust me, It has been quite an experience." She knelt down to scratch Rhaegon behind his skull right at the base of his neck, causing the little draklings eyes to close in pleasure. "Though I understand that you've had a few adventures here as well? Ranma mentioned something about some battle that occurred here a few weeks after he left? And you're training with Jon?"

Nearby the married couple broke apart and Eddard laid his forehead against Catelyn's. "By the old gods and by the Seven it is good to be home my lady. If I have my way I am never leaving again."

He turned in her arms, and Catelyn's eyes narrowed a little as she noticed his wince at even that slight movement. "If I have my way you're not leaving either." she replied in a low, tart tone. She smiled as the little bundle in her arms began to make itself known again having woken up from his nap with all the noise and shouting. It cried out, and she held the babe up removing a bit of blanket so that Eddard could look down into it. "My Lord, may I present our son."

Her eyes lit up as they always did when she watched her husband with her children. Say what you would about the agony of going through the whole birthing process but Catelyn was one of nature's mother's and Eddard, for all of his sternness was just as good a father. He brushed a finger along the baby's silk smooth cheek and the baby quieted, reaching up with his two little hands to grasp Eddard's finger staring up at him.

The babe's hair seemed a dark red, a mix of Stark brown and Tully red, and his eyes seemed to be a mix of Tully blue and Stark brown, deeper and darker than Ranma's or Catelyn's, but not quite the shade of Rickon. There was no blemish on his face, no blemish on any part of his body Eddard could see and his eyes, which had been wrinkled in tears, were now wide and inquisitive looking up at this strange man.

"What shall we call him my Lord?" Catelyn asked, leaned her head against his good shoulder.

Eddard raised his newest son in his arm smiling faintly as the baby tried to nibble on his finger. "I believe we should name him after your father my lady, I think that is the best idea. He will be Hoster Stark."

Catelyn's eyes widened. She had thought that Eddard would pick a name from his family or from Northern tradition. But then her eyes misted over at this show of compassion. "I like that just fine my Lord." she murmured, looking down at the babe with him. "My little Hoster."

After a moment she turned to stare at where Myrcella was being still hugged by Rickon, while Bran was laughing at something the princess had said, his own arms around a Laughing Ranma, frowning slightly at the site. The Lannister golden hair of the girl made her want to growl like one of her family's pets, but she refrained looking at the girl and the expression on her face as she was welcomed as if she was part of the family.

She looked over to where Daenerys and Arya were talking, exchanging excited talk about something, with Arya demonstrating a sword thrust of some sort while Daenerys nodded, pointing to where ice was resting on Ranma's back. The sight of the two draklings behind the Stormborn girl startled and terrified Catelyn for what they could represent. Catelyn was happy that they were on her side, but unhappy that they were alive at all, she could all too easily remember the stories of what happened to the people burned alive by the Mad King, and she had never been as good about not allowing her hate to splash on the rest of the family as her husband was. And the sight of the little draklings was adding to that worry all the more despite the fact that they seemed docile enough.

At that point Ranma finished hugging his siblings. He moved over to pick up Catelyn in his arms hugging her tightly. "Mother it's good to be home! And who's this?" he said looking down at the little baby.

Catelyn smiled up at her oldest son, reaching down and hugging his head to her chest, while at the same time admonishing him to set her down. When he did, she leaned in whispering into his ear. "Thank you for bringing your sister and your father home." She knew somehow that it had been Ranma's presence that enabled them to get home at all, though she was still in the dark as to what they had actually faced, or that Ranma had gone into King's Landing and rescued Sansa. That tale she would hear later that evening and it would nearly cause her to break down and

gives thanks to the Seven that her son was so skilled, though she still had no idea where those skills had originally come from.

"They're my family to you know." Ranma said with a chuckle in his voice, kissing her cheek before pulling back, one hand under her arm as he gestured to Daenerys to come forward. She did so breaking off her conversation with Arya to come forward curtsying to the lady of the house despite the leggings she wore. "Mother, may I present Daenerys Targaryen, my fiancée."

And just like that nearly all of Catelyn's good feelings began to fade.

OOOOOOO

Later that evening at dinner, Eddard told the entire castle that he was stepping down as Lord Stark. Ranma then swiftly installed him as steward of Winterfell, where Ned would have control over the day-to-day running of the keep while Ranma left for war. After tales were exchanged among the family, eliciting much exclamations of shock at the Shadow Warriors and the perfidy of the Queen, Catelyn organized where Myrcella and Daenerys were to stay.

Daenerys got her own apartment with Alayaya embedded there as her handmaiden while Myrcella was put in Sansa's bedroom next-door. It was much the same as she had left it, which pleased Sansa no end. After the events at King's Landing what Sansa wished was to return to the life she had led here previously, though she knew that the memories would never allow that.

After the dinner broke up, Catelyn showed Daenerys and Alayaya to their room, then made a beeline to Ned's study, where she knew her husband and sons would opened up the conversation between them with an opening volley the moment the door shut behind her. "My son, I realize you are quite taken with the Targaryen girl but surely you must understand that your hand in marriage is a massive diplomatic tool! I realize that having her on our side is a good thing, but it will also paint you as one of their loyalists, it will affect how other families see you, how they see us and our cause, and close many doors that would otherwise be open! Besides, what can she really bring to you? The draklings are too young to be of any use at the moment."

"You'd be surprised." Ranma said laughing quietly, moving forward to hug her again before moving back, taking up a chair at the desk beside Jon, a map spread out between the two of them and Eddard. "We only gave you the bare bones of our battles earlier mother. The draklings can already breathe fire, and proved their worth against the Shadow Warriors and against the boats of the pirates. So while they might be of limited ability now, eventually they will be a force no one else can match save her brother, and I sure as hell will not be allying with him."

That forced Catelyn to nod. If the draklings were already able to breathe fire, then they were indeed a military force already, one that would grow as they did.

"Besides," Ranma went on. "Just as Daenerys might close some doors, she will open others. There are loyalist lords everywhere, and not all of them fought in the war. She will give us legitimacy in the eyes of many down south. And if the choice is between taking the throne myself with Daenerys at my side, or backing Renly the coward or Stannis our enemy, then I'll do it."

*If Tommy were still alive I would be happy to simply be Lord Paramount once we removed Joffrey from his throne and from his life because with Tommy alive neither Renly or Stannis could ever be king. But I still would have married Daenerys. I've always wanted to marry for love, and the draklings are just a very large bonus.*

The thought of Tommy and his death brought a familiar pang of grief and rage to Ranma, and he once again vowed that Joffrey's death would be the stuff of legends if Ranma could get his hands on him. While they might not have been related, much like Myrcella Tommy had become family to Ranma, and anyone who fucked with his family was going to die. *Or perhaps not quite like Myrcella*, the insidious part of his mind said, remembering how she had made his body react during that hug they shared after he rescued Sansa.

He drove that thought out of his mind quickly, the image of Daenerys flirting with him helping him quite a lot there. He was brought back to the here and now by his mother speaking up again, changing the subject for now. She was not happy, and Catelyn doubted inside that she would ever be happy with the idea of the girl being her daughter-in-law, not after what the Mad King did to Brandon. But Ranma was right, the draklings were a force that no one else could match.

She was not so sanguine about Ranma declaring himself King, and was glad to hear that he was not going to pronounce it himself, but let it simply come up in the conclave naturally. She felt they should back Renly, who while not having the strongest legal claim was certainly the best candidate of the three.

But her husband, uncle and son had been adamant about that at dinner: the cowardice of Renly needed to be answered, and he was the one that needed to open overtures in that direction. He had to come to them to apologize for his cowardice and for the fact that if he hadn't run this war might not have started at all, or at the least not be as bad as it was going to become, before the Starks even considered backing him.

"I have something to show you both," Catelyn said changing the subject for now. She pulled out a Raven message, with the signal of Riverrun on it. "My father sent this to me. My brother is captive in King's Landing, so you will hear no argument from me that you need to march. That kind of dishonor needs to be repaid, but worse my father's health is fading badly."

Catelyn paused, her lips trembling. He had been very blunt about it, saying that he had barely months to live at best, and most of the message had been a last goodbye from father to daughter. Another message had come with it with her uncle's name on it but she had not opened that one. She hoped, prayed that it was a sign of reconciliation between the two, but it was doubtful that even at an army's best speed that her uncle could reach Riverrun before her father died. And even if they did, what they might find there was questionable.

"He names you as his voice my son, acting in his name until my brother is freed. And if anything should happened to Edmure while in Lannister captivity, my father names you his heir."

Ranma's eyes widened at that, then narrowed in thought and he nodded. "I was going to aid them anyway if it was needed, you know that but that will be a help once we get down into the Riverlands."

His mother nodded, visibly pushing her grief to one side. She had one last question she wanted to ask tonight, then she wanted to retire. It had been any incredibly emotional day, and she needed some time alone with her husband. "Before I take my husband away for the evening..." Catelyn paused smiling as her uncle chuckled at that, though her sons looked rather pained.

Like all children Jon and Ranma didn't like the idea of their parents doing anything physical like that with each other. She found a little bit of vindictive pleasure in that, after he had so easily shot down her objections to his fiancée.

After a moment she went on. "The Lords Mormont, Cerwyn, Ryswell, Glover and Hornwood have already arrived, they are spending the evening at Cerwyn to give us this time. Lords Karstark and Umber were going to take the new river passage down from the Long Lake, but should be here within a week. Hathan Shieldarm will be arriving with them I think, he contacted us yesterday with a message that said the Flints had passed on a message from the Norrey clan asking him to wait for them, I don't know why. And with that gentlemen, I bid you goodnight."

With that she turned, and after helping Eddard to his feet the two of them left heading towards their room, the lords bedroom, since Ranma had refused to change the sleeping arrangements.

Behind them Ranma shuddered a little then went downstairs with Jon. Jon pulled out one of his short swords, passing it over to Ranma. "That's an example of the blades we're turning out here thanks to Bran and his special furnace and the iron that Hathan found. I'm not surprised Hathan was willing to wait for the Norrey clan for more than one reason."

He briefly explained the mission he had sent Dacey on, and Ranma nodded, understanding that the message from the mountain clan might mean Dacey was back. He was a little worried about that, since this would put his past lover and current fiancé/future lover in the same place, something no man was really prepared for. Still, he was happy to hear that Dacey had returned from the dangerous mission.

Jon knew what his brother was thinking, but instead of commenting on it went on. "Besides that, I know Hathan wanted to put someone in place to command his new holdfast, but frankly he's not happy with his decision. The man he's chosen is inexperienced in the extreme, even if he is personable and intelligent enough to do it."

Ranma nodded, staring back down at the blade Jon had handed him then going into a few katas in the middle of the hall. After a moment he nodded "this is an excellent weapon, by the old gods Bran's helped us more with his mind than any ten thousand swords could." He turned his eyes back to Jon. "So, Arya, she looks good, I take it she took to her continued training as well as she has before this? I bet you have some plan there, and I bet it's the same as mine."

His brother smiled, nodding, his head, and then sighed theatrically. "Lady Catelyn won't be happy." Ranma shrugged philosophically, and then they both laughed.

OOOOOO

The lords returned late the next day and were welcomed by Ranma in his new persona as Lord Stark. After greeting them all he took Lord Glover over to one side, and informed the man of Daenerys' presence, as well as her two draklings. At first the man looked fit to attack him, he had lost his uncle to the Mad King and any mention of the Targaryen family would set him off. But Ranma calmly explained what had happened, and told the man some of the rest of what had went on down south.

Galbart was a late-middle-aged man, with prematurely grey hair and a mind more at home with law and managing disputes than war, he could easily see the upside to having dragons on their own side, especially if there was a chance her brother might return to Westeros with one of his own.

Later, after getting all the lords sequestered in their rooms, giving them a bit of information but putting off most of their questions with multiple refrains of 'I don't want to say it over and over again, wait until the conclave', Ranma was finally able to say hello to one of his other friends. "Roger." Ranma said, gripping the other man's arm tightly, thumping him on his shoulder. "How are you? I'm surprised that you didn't bring what's her face, the wildling woman with you."

"She wanted to come, most particularly when we found out there might be war in the offing, but she's a little too far into her pregnancy for that." Roger said rather complacently with a smug smile on his face. It remained to be seen if his wife, (she still had a problem with the removal of the word spear before that), wouldn't be coming after him eventually, but for now she was safe in his house's castle.

Jon and the others crowded around, thumping his back and shaking his hands in congratulations. "I'm not the only one!" Roger protested, pointing at Daryn and then at Ranma. "Word travels quickly, you're marrying Alys Karstark, and you apparently brought back the Stormborn as your bride? Or at least that's the rumor I've heard. That's a tale and a half I'd wager."

"Wait for it." Ranma said with a chuckle. "I have no doubt that Domicer is putting it in verse, I'm surprised he hasn't already finished it frankly, but until then, I would rather tell the tale just once more if I can get away with it. And, as Lord Stark, I can, so there."

"So the former Bolton is back," Roger said, his eyes glittering coldly for a moment at the remembrance of what happened there. He didn't have a problem with Domicer per se, but any mention of the house that he had once been a part of was enough to get Roger's goat up. Given what had happened to his older sister Bethany, the wife of Roose that Ramsay Snow might have poisoned, that was understandable.

Ranma led them off towards the exercise area, whispering. "Now that you're here, Jon and I have an idea..."

They stopped and watched as Arya put several men through their paces. All of them were former armsmen wearing Hornwood colors, and were now part of the light infantry, swordsmen in the main, despite all of them wearing decent light chain mail. They also had been trained for weeks now, and it showed but not one of them or even all of them combined matched Arya. She was devilishly quick, her strikes coming from every direction, and she was always moving, never still, constantly turning the tables on them when they thought she was cornered.

To one side the wolfsworn after hearing the two Stark's idea, nodded to one another, then left the area for time.

Later that evening after having spent the rest of the day with his younger siblings, Ranma asked Arya to join him late that night in the godswood. Arya wondered what that was about, but decided to go with it. It wasn't the first time she had slipped out of an evening after all, and the godswood was always comforting. You could truly feel the age of the place, and some kind of power as well. Her mother and the other followers of the Seven didn't seem to like it, but it was very comforting to Arya. Something she equated to the fact that her family had held land here for as long as the woods had been there.

Stalking through the woods toward the heart tree Arya and Nymeria both stopped suddenly, staring as they noticed a small circle of figures waiting for her illuminated by the moonlight above them. One voice boomed out, the comforting voice of Ranma, though the tone was more formal than he normally sounded. "Who comes before us?"

Arya's eyes narrowed, but she strode forward confidently. "I'm Arya Stark." "I've been called here for some reason I don't know." She said staring around at them all. Arya wasn't one to stand on ceremony, and this looked like some weird ceremony that her brothers had thought up.

There were chuckles, and the people stepped forward out of the trees and further into the light of the moon above. Arya nodded, she had guessed right, it looked like all of the wolfsworn in Winterfell were here, along with Ghost and Fenris standing next to their masters. Daenerys too was there, though she was standing to one side, with only one of

her draklings, Rhaegon Arya thought, he was a little bulkier than the other one, at her side. She was obviously there as a witness rather than a part of what was going on.

Ranma grinned raising a thumbs up in Arya's direction before going on, his voice now somewhere between formal and jovial. "Arya Stark, you are known as a warrior, are you loyal?"

"I am loyal to my family and to my friends." Arya said looking around again but answering readily enough. If this was what she was thinking it was, she wasn't about to make waves just yet.

Ranma nodded. The wolfsworn hadn't been a name he and his friends had given themselves, but once it had been thought up by the smallfolk they ran with it, and had created this whole ceremony to induct new members as they had done with Hathan, Edd and Roger before this. Arya was responding pretty much the same way they had, she seemed to both see the humor of the situation and the seriousness which was good. "Are you blooded in battle?"

"I am." Arya replied, her head coming up proudly.

"Then Arya Stark, we find you worthy of becoming wolfsworn, will you take the oath?" Ranma pulled out Fang, letting it rest for a moment by his side.

Arya's eyes narrowed again one eyebrow going up but after a moment she nodded hesitantly. She knew Ranma took oaths seriously, and so did she for the most part, but this was coming at her out of the woods. Still, she trusted Ranma not to have come up with anything she would find disagreeable.

At Ranma's gesture Arya sank to her knees, but her eyes remained on him, which Ranma again nodded to. The flat of Fang touched each of her shoulders and he began. The oaths were pretty much like those knights were supposed to do, hitting upon integrity and loyalty, both to the other wolfsworn to her house and to the common man. They also demanded she hold herself to a way of acting, like the code of chivalry knights were supposed to keep to, but much more realistic, and with a greater emphasis on how she was to treat the smallfolk than most knightly oaths.

Despite this they were quick, with Arya answering each with a simple "I will."

After the oaths were over Ranma nodded. "Then rise Arya Stark, wolfsworn."

She grinned, taking her Fang back from him, and moved to stand beside Nymeria where it crouched in the circle of wolfsworn near Daenerys. She looked around at them all, then took the jug that Smalljon passed down to her, sipping and gasping as the strength of the ale inside of it. The big man laughed, but thumped her on the back with a surprisingly gentle hand, before indicating she should pass it on. Arya growled then took another defiant sip before passing it on.

"Now." said Ranma, sitting down and gesturing everyone else to sit, while Daenerys sat next to him, leaning against his side lightly as he in turn leaned against the front of the heart tree. "Before you get too drunk, tell me what you've been up to little sister, and we'll tell you about our adventures down south."

The next several hours passed thus, with the jug of what another world would call scumble being passed from one wolfsworn to another, though after the first round Smalljon gave Arya some from a specially watered down jog, something that she didn't notice by that point.

While Daenerys was still an outsider here, she was most certainly a welcome one, and after the others had told her own tales of what had been going on since the last time they had gotten together like this she regaled them all with the tale of her escape from her brother. All in all, it was the most fun Arya had had since Ranma had left Winterfell.

By the end of that time, most of them were extremely tipsy, and Arya was quite a bit closer to drunk than sober. At that point they all broke up, heading back to the keep and their rooms with Arya being helped along by Ranma, with Daenerys behind him leaning on Jon. Still, Arya had enough presence of mind to stop Ranma from leaving her when she flopped onto her bed. "When you go south, I'm going with you." She said, her voice sounding almost sober.

"I know." Ranma said sighing. "I knew that ever since Jon agreed with me you should be inducted into the wolfsworn. Just don't tell mother about all this okay? We'll think of something, but that's one fight I really don't want to have to battle okay?"

"M'kay." Arya nodded, then flopped onto her side in her bed not even bothering to pull up the covers, asleep the moment her head hit the pillow.

OOOOOO

Elsewhere things were not as peaceful. Not even the ocean itself was proof against the chaos that was gripping Westeros. On the Sunset Sea, ships of black hull and varicolored sails, long sleek shapes like sharks on top of the water, sailed on in groups, some as small as five, others as large as two hundred. On many of them the flag of the Kraken could be seen flapping in the breeze.

Much like many lords suspected, the Ironborn had taken the weakening of the Iron Throne as a sign. They had long chafed under the rule of the Iron Throne even before their rebellion during Robert's reign, and the North having a hostage to compel their good conduct could not keep the Greyjoys from trying desperately to turn back time to when they were true masters of the ocean. Be it pride, be it hubris, be it a desire for blood and mayhem or the needs of their God to be sated by the blood of others, the Ironborn were going to war.

OOOOOOO

The next morning, Jon was asked to join his father in his study. Wincing occasionally as he passed a arrow slit letting in the sun, he made his way there after downing some of maester Luwin's special hangover remedy. There he found not only his father but Ranma, Catelyn, and Daenerys.

He exchanged weak nods with the other two young people, amused that Daenerys was showing more pain than Ranma, despite having taken only from the jug specially prepared for Arya after the first round rather than the real rotgut that the rest of them had drunk last night. Still, being awake this early after what was obviously her first time getting drunk was impressive.

Daenerys nodded in turn, trying to keep her head from falling off with the movement while internally vowing that last night was the last time she was going to be getting drunk. Through her pain however she still smiled at Jon. He was a remarkable young man much like his brother, both intelligent and loyal. He also had a surprisingly good way with her draklings.

Actually both Jon and his younger brother Bran had a way with her youngster seemed to get along with any animal, something which Ranma said spoke of Bran's more powerful warging potential. He had however taken Bran aside the day after they arrived and warned him not to try to connect to the draklings without Daenerys's permission. That was just rude after all. Bran had seemed saddened by that, but had agreed to it. Bran seemed in awe of her and so too bashful to approach Daenerys to ask permission, but she knew that if they spent overlong here in Winterfell he would. What she would say to that however, she didn't know just yet.

Jon on the other hand showed no sign of being able to connect mind to mind with the draklings, but the draklings treated him much more kindly than they had treated Sansa or Myrcella in the beginning, showing none of the aggression that they showed anyone else. Save Ranma the un-biteable or course.

Still Daenerys wondered why she was here. She had been told it was a family matter, but surely that meant she shouldn't be here shouldn't it?

Sitting at his desk with his leg up on a cushion, Eddard looked at Jon's gravely, none of his amusement at the looks of pain that all three young people had on their faces showing on his, while Catelyn was mildly disapproving, or greatly disapproving he wasn't certain right now nor did he care at present. "Jon, I have something to tell you. Something about your parentage, something I have had to keep secret before this for the safety of us all."

Jon's eyes widened. *Am I finally going to learn who my mother was?* That had been the one thing that always bothered him; that he didn't know who his mother had been, had it really been just a sudden love affair between her and Lord Stark, was there something deeper there? Or was he from smallfolk stock, something that happened after a battle like Theon had once said, before being soundly thrashed by Jon for it. That was the fight that had destroyed several dozen bottles of wine in the wine cellar, and caused Eddard to raise his hand to the boys for the first and only time.

Now Jon looked at them all, then back to Eddard. He gulped, his throat having suddenly gone dry, then nodded convulsively. "I-I've always wondered about my parentage, but, but can I ask, why now?"

Eddard's eyes flicked to Daenerys then back to Jon. "Because the reason it had to be kept secret no longer matters. Robert is dead, he can no longer take vengeance upon you or my family for hiding you. And because you deserve to know, you both do."

Daenerys cocked her head, wondering what that meant, unable quite yet to see where this was going while Jon and Catelyn both simply waited and Ranma smirked internally. This would answer the one, final question he had about his brother's birth, and he was looking forward to it.

"The tale begins near the end of the rebellion, when myself and my companions finally found my sister where Lyanna had been placed in the Tower of Joy down in Dorne by Prince Rhaegar. Everyone in the West knows how he absconded with her, despite already being married, but, and I swear this to be the truth on my name, we were all wrong. Lyanna did not, she was not taken against her will, she had fallen in love with Rhaegar, and he with her despite already being married."

While Jon and Ranma's eyes widened at that sudden shock, Eddard shook his head, once more thinking of the folly of love and its power to change the world. *If Lyanna had been open about their infatuation, could that have changed anything? No, the Prince was still married, and Dorne would never have forgiven any attempt at annulment, especially one without reason.*

Daenerys now was looking between him and Jon in wild surmise, while Jon still wasn't there. Eddard smiled then went on with his tale. "There were seven of us, seven of the best warriors of the North, against three Kingsguard, and only myself and Lord Reed made it back alive. Only Lord Reed and I know what was really going on, that Lyanna had not only had run away with the Prince, but had already slept with him. By the time we found her, she had gone into labor."

His eyes turned distant remembering that moment, when they stormed up the steps of the Tower of Joy to find three healers with his sister all of them trying desperately to save her life while a babe was cradled in a wet nurse's arm, crying out lustily. At the time, all Eddard took in was the blood on the sheets, the paleness of his sister's normally lively face, her eyes opening and closing rapidly, the sounds of the panicking healers. Those healers had all died by his blade unwilling to swear to keep the secret as the wet nurse had.

"That babe was you." Ned said, coming back to the here and now to stare at Jon. "My sister made me promise, on the blood that we shared and on my love for her that I would watch over you, that I would treat you as family. Yet I could not declare you such. Robert was gripped in a blood madness, shown by what happened in King's Landing to Elia Martell's children, and his standing orders for Viserys and Daenerys. He wanted to wipe out every bit of Targaryen blood from the world, and my friendship with him would not have saved us."

Jon trembled. "I-I have Targaryen blood in me." He stuttered looking at Daenerys. "I, that's unbelievable, I have nothing I mean nothing in my features say I am..."

Daenerys nodded looking at him thoughtfully but she shook her head. "That's true, but there is the way you have with the draklings to consider. They didn't let Myrcella or Sansa near them for a time unless I was close by controlling them, it was only after the two girls helped me with their first molting that they accepted the two of them. And they still don't let Alayaya or any of the others near them, and it certainly isn't because of sensing that you are like Ranma, since they attacked him at first too." she said, obliquely referencing the warging ability, not looking at Catelyn.

Catelyn was a devout believer in the Seven, and the Seven held that magics like mind to mind linking were signs of witchcraft and therefore evil. Ranma and his siblings had long since decided to hide their ability to warg from her, and in fact Ranma had made Bran and the others promise to not mention it even to Sansa, who was the only one among the kids who have decided to follow the Seven, though Rickon hadn't yet made that choice.

"But they let you touch them, they even seemed to like it when you did so, which is incredible, since even Bran wasn't allowed to do that the first time he approached them, and you know how good he is with animals. It could be a sign of what Lord Stark is saying." She smiled suddenly, reaching forward to grasp his shoulders with both of her hands looking into his eyes. "For my part I'm happy to have found a family member who I can honestly say I am honored to know. I'm happy to meet you, nephew."

Jon stared at her, then began to smile as well reaching out and pulling her into a brief but heartfelt hug before turning to the others. "What does this mean for me?"

"It means that you can be known as a Stark, brother." Ranma said smiling at him. "I mean to legitimize you as one of the first orders of business in the conclave. I doubt that many of the Lord's will object." he added dryly. That actually won a round of chuckles, since Jon Twinblade was almost as well respected in the North as his father or Ranma.

"Alternatively," Ranma went on. "We could name you Targaryen. At the moment that really can't make our position any worse in the eyes of the Baratheon siblings or the Lannisters, they apparently are already sending out messages saying we are closet Targaryen supporters anyway." The official line of what happened in King's Landing had spread to the Riverlands, sent on by messenger to Moat Cailin and then by raven up to Winterfell.

Daenerys looked hopeful at that, not because she would indeed like another Targaryen named member around her, but also because she knew how her brother would react when news reached him. *Hah, if only I were there to see it!*

But after a moment Jon shook his head. "I'm a Stark, I've been that for years regardless of the name, regardless of who my father really was." he said looking apologetically at Daenerys before turning to face Catelyn and Eddard. "you are my father sir, and you lady, despite never quite treating me as well as one of your sons, you were the closest thing I had to mother. I will be a Stark, whatever my real heritage."

Ranma clapped him hard on the shoulder, a wide grin on his face. Daenerys shrugged philosophically, while Catelyn and Eddard looked on proudly.

Jon-now-Stark joined his brother later that morning with the rest of the Wolfsworn including Arya and Daenerys as they raced out of the woods. Ostensibly they were heading out to watch Daenerys train her draklings, while the rest of the wolfsworn got to know one another again after so long, but that had mostly been accomplished last night. Still, none of the lords cared, their egos having been sufficiently stroked the day before, and they were eagerly awaiting the last of their fellows. Besides, Eddard remained, and there were old tales to speak of and drinking to do.

Soon they came upon an open clearing, ironically the same one Arya had been training with Dacey in when Nymeria heard the incoming raiders.

Ranma held up Ice, the greatsword easily wielded one-handed as he moved through a series of katas. The others were all watching him, then gasped in sudden shock as the blade began to glow light blue tinged with gold, not sickly blue like the eyes of the undead, but bright flickering blue gold fire.

"This was why my weapons were deadly to the Shadow Warriors" he said, coming to a halt and bringing up the blade holding it in front of him. "A Valyrian blade like Ice is apparently deadly to them on its own, but this, was just as deadly. I mean for all of you to learn how to do this."

"What is it?" Roger said looking at the blade in awe. Daryn and the others were staring in awe as well. "And how did you learn to do whatever it is?"

"You've all been training with me since we were young, and I know some of you have wondered where my own skill comes from. I'll tell you all when Edd, Hathan and Dacey arrived, it's not so interesting I want to tell the same tale twice. But for now, let's concentrate on this."

While Daenerys moved her draklings through their flying paces, getting better and better at controlling them and sending them further away from her, though they still couldn't go very far in a single flight, Ranma trained the others in the rudiments of ki manipulation. This began with meditations, something that had them all grumbling. But he had introduced them to it before, telling them about how they could sink into a combat mentality, which would help them their reaction times and awareness during combat. After that he walked them through the feeling of pushing their life energy into the blade.

Leaving the rest to practice, Ranma took Arya off to a side of the clearing into the woods to where he had set up a series of ropes tied between trees. They were at various heights, ranging from one a foot off the ground, to another well into the branches of the largest oaks that made up the course.

"What is all this?" Arya asked, looking around.

"Jon and I have talked about it, and we think given the fact you need to base your style off speed and movement, you should learn something of the same style I do. We call it Anything Goes, and it was originally an aerial style, meaning the user tries to stay and fight in midair. It's tough, but it gives you a lot of advantages in a fight, not just mobility, but shock value, and the fact it's very hard for other people to adapt to."

Arya nodded, having occasionally seen Ranma in what she had called 'jumping practice' jumping from one limb of a tree to another, while kicking or striking out. He often practiced that in the godswood. Then she frowned. "Wait, Jon doesn't use this style, does he? I mean, I never see him jumping like you do or anything like that."

"Hah!" Ranma laughed. "Well, heh, Jon started to learn a weapons style that used both hands before we could really get into midair practice. And once we did, we found that he's afraid of heights."

He was forced to dodge as a large cob of wood passed through the place his head had previously inhabited. "I am not!" Jon's voice shouted from the other side of the clearing, to the background of several people laughing. "I simply have a preference for keeping both my feet on the ground if I can help it, and a respect for gravity that you, you crazy shit, don't."

"Whatever!" Ranma yelled back, before turning to Arya. "Anyway, let's see if you have any aptitude for it."



Arya nodded eagerly, then followed his instructions getting up onto the first rope. Thanks to her previous training she had excellent body control and balance, so she was able to stay up on the rope, and even flip herself up to the second one. Nor did she have any fear of heights. Arya had often gone with Bran on his climbing expeditions, until her mother had threatened to cancel the agreement between her and Ranma.

When he began to throw things at her while shouting "DODGE!" however, Arya began to have a much harder time of it. She fell several times, but other than cursing Ranma out every time the small leather wrapped sticks hit her she didn't complain.

After a few hours to Ranma's surprise Jon was able to show a flicker of energy before that first day ended. But by the end of the week, Roger had begun to exhibit similar flickers. The Daryn and Smalljon were slower, only showing flickers on the last day, before Greatjon and Lord Karstark arrived with Dacey and Hathan in tow.

Both men arrived with a force of one thousand five hundred, coming down the river from Long Lake. Umber brought a thousand mixed weapons infantry, who Ranma thought of as light infantry, two hundred cavalry and three hundred archers. Karstark brought seven hundred archers, five hundred infantry, and three hundred cavalry. Combined it was a powerful addition to the army already in place here and in Cerwyn, but right now Ranma was happier to see his friends than the men.

Dacey looked weak where she sat in her saddle, and Hathan and Edd were hovering around her protectively, as if they were worried she might fall off her horse. The fact she wore no armor but a shift over which she had a sling keeping her arm still and what looked like heavy bandages under her armpit, also worried Ranma. But her eyes were clear, and she was watching everything around her alertly. A single glare his way also made it clear she was nearly fed up with the cozening she had already gotten, and would thump him if he tried to add to it. So instead Ranma turned back to welcome his fellow lords.

Lord Karstark was at the head of his family, his heir beside him on one side and his daughter on his other, though not his wife, she traveled poorly. She became sick even when in a cart moving slowly over flat ground let alone by horseback or by riverboat.

"Cousin." Ranma said reaching up to clasp forearms with Rickard, then, as she gracefully descended from her horse pulled Alys into a one armed brotherly hug. "Good to see both of you, looking forward to getting married Alys?"

"I am well cousin." Alys said reaching up to kiss Ranma lightly on the cheek. "And yes, I am. Daryn is a good man, and I have been dreaming of this day for some time now."

Her father looked at the two of them as he slipped off his own horse, sighing sadly at hopes he'd had in the past well and truly gone now. Still, the marriage between Alys and Daryn Hornwood was good, and had been long in the making. He smiled as the rest of the Starks came toward him led by Jon, always happy at how the Starks treated him and his like family rather than simple lords or vassals. "You've been busy I believe, Jon." he said then smirked as he caught Daryn staring at his daughter a blush on his face quickly matched by one on hers.

"I think we should get these two married off quickly yes, to make sure something untoward doesn't happen?" He said aloud in a whispering sort of voice yet one which carried, causing both youngsters to blush even redder.

Ranma laughed and the Karstarks moved off, with Catelyn showing them into the keep while Ranma and Jon turned to welcome their friends and Greatjon. As soon as he was within the castle's main square, Greatjon's voice boomed out. "Smalljon! What are you doing down here, you're supposed to be on the wall with your uncle, I'll tan your hide for disobeying me!"

"Peace Greatjon" said Ranma, leaning up to clasp forearms with the man before backing away to let him slide out of the saddle. "I'd decided I wanted all of my friends around me, and he came down with the Imp to make sure he didn't try to run away before we arrived in White Harbor."

"And is he here?" Greatjon growled, looking around. "The Imp I mean. What's all this I hear about the bloody lions showing their true colors again? And you bringing back the Stormborn girl?"

"No, Tyrion and I came to an agreement, he's back on the Wall, and happy with it I think. As for the rest, you and everyone else are waiting for that, but I wanted to tell all of you all at once, save my throat some work that way." Ranma said laughing and slapping the older man on the shoulder. "The war counsel is tomorrow afternoon, and we'll have quite a tale to tell you. Before that though, I think we've got a wedding to go to tonight."

Greatjon looked over to where Daryn was still staring after Alys who had just gone inside the keep, then began to

laugh.

After that, Ranma was finally able to greet his friends. "Dacey, Hathan, Edd, damn good to see you three, the gangs all here now!" Ranma grinned, exchanging a hug with Edd and a handclasp with Dacey and Hathan. "So, what exactly happened to you Dacey?" He went on, his voice lower as he began to direct them toward the keep, Greatjon behind him talking to Jon about a schedule for his men' rearmament. "Or should I ask, what did you find?"

Dacey nodded her head slightly down at her wound, keeping her voice low. "That was done by a sword that was made of ice and we found a small foot bridge leading across the Gorge made of the same thing. Burned it, and if that was all they could do after a year from the time we were ambushed, we might have cut off the White Walkers from being able to send troops around the Wall for now."

Something about that statement bothered Ranma, but he nodded. There they were interrupted by Maeve Mormont coming out of the keep, roaring for her heir to show herself, and tell her how she got herself hurt.

After Dacey escaped her mother, she met up with the others in Ranma's room where she relayed the entire story to them, Arya, Domeric and Daenerys. After she finished, he was so busy talking about the implications with Jon and the others he didn't notice Dacey and Daenerys sizing one another up.

After a moment, the older Dacey, shrugged philosophically, and nodded her head over to Arya, who was listening to the truth of the northern threat avidly. "So runt, how did you bribe your brother into letting you join this troop?"

Later that day while Ranma was once more spending time with Rickon and Bran, Dacey and Daenerys talked, and Dacey realized quickly why Ranma was so besotted with the girl, while also setting her straight on their own relationship and how it had ended. Daenerys in turn told Dacey how she felt about Ranma, how they had met and how she had come to care for him. By the end of that discussion the two had made their peace with one another, with Ranma none the wiser.

A much more important meeting occurred while the godswood was being prepared for the wedding. There Ranma told his friends (minus Theon, who wasn't there), his sister and Daenerys about his past life. Not everything, just the bare amount, that he was a warrior from another place, who had developed his skills in combat against others with similar skills, and how he had been forced to run away to retain his personal honor, then found himself as a baby once more here. He also included the fact the old gods had sent him visions.

This was the clincher for his friends. All of them had been prepared to believe him before that, but it was well known that sometimes the old gods spoke in such manners to their believers in times of great upheaval. Daenerys was more skeptical about that, but did believe that Ranma had been resurrected in some manner, and was here now to face the White Walkers by something.

After the others had confirmed that this new information changed nothing between them (after all, they had suspected Ranma was gods-touched before this) and promised to keep this information a secret, Daenerys spoke up. "I agree this needs to be kept a secret Ranma, but I wonder if you've thought this through."

When everyone looked at her she shrugged. "I do not believe in the old gods, and my faith in the Seven isn't particularly strong either, but if the old gods do exist as indicated by them giving you visions and bringing you here, then it stands to reason other gods might as well."

Ranma nodded somberly. "I've thought of that, and I think we've already seen an example of something like it, those Shadow Warriors. Though what god they're connected to I don't know. I hope that the Seven remains aloof at least, I can't see it, er them, er... whatever..." Hathan, the only real follower of the Seven among them, snorted in amusement while Ranma went on. "Have any real problems with us, unless they don't like the whole warging thing, which is another thing we'll all need to keep secret. But other than that, well I'm just hoping the White Walkers don't have a real deity to call on."

"I don't think they do, if anything from the old tales they seem to simply worship, well, themselves in a way. Not their ancestors, but their own abilities, as well as simply winter in all its horrible power." Jon shrugged. "At least that's my impression after researching them here in the library."

Hathan was frowning thoughtfully. "So really this whole war in the south is more of a side show for you and for us, if the old gods brought you here to face the White Walkers." He would have preferred that Ranma had been sent by the Seven, but given his abilities it actually made more sense for him to have been sent by the old gods.

"Pretty much." Ranma shrugged. "We march south to see justice done, to avenge our dead, but also, and this is even

more important in a way, to unite enough of Westeros under us so we can bring even more aid to the Wall if needed. And I'm very afraid it will be. I could wish we didn't have to but wishes in one hand, shit in the other, see which one fills up first."

At that they all laughed and the moment passed. None of them really cared one way or another what might be out there, whatever it was they would face it together.

OOOOOO

Daryn and Alys were married that evening in the old style as practiced in the North. Daenerys and Ranma were both there as witnesses, and Daenerys afterwards pulled him to the side. "If you think for one moment I'm going to have a marriage like that you have another think coming Ranma Stark!" she said sternly poking him in the sternum with every word.

"Never dreamed of it." Ranma said shaking his head. "I think it's barbaric myself, and I live here remember. Don't worry though, I've got a plan." Ranma began to whisper the plan for the real marriage, and she nodded. It seemed like it would work, especially given the power of the scumble she had tired the night Arya was inducted into the wolfsworn.

The next afternoon however, both of them had other, more serious things to concentrate on. While the two newlyweds recovered, the Lords and all their heirs gathered in the keep's main hall. Daenerys, Myrcella, Brynden, Sansa, Ranma, his father and Jon were waiting for them, with Fenris and Ghost laying on the floor nearby. Myrcella acted like a maid, going around and giving them each steins, while Ranma went around filling them from his own hand.

After they all had quaffed a single gulp, symbolic for this meeting, they sat down at the long table. Ranma nodded to his father who sat beside him in the advisers position rather than Lords, something Greatjon noticed, and sighed at. But he had already heard about his Lords crippling injury, and understood. More, he knew Ranma and like all the others who did knew he would be a magnificent Lord Paramount for the North.

"So!" he bellowed, getting the ball rolling quickly as was his normal bombastic nature. "Since I've arrived here I've heard rumors gossip and suppositions. I'd like to hear some facts. You called us and our men up, told us to gather here, so what's going on down south and what do you plan to do about it?"

Ranma nodded at his father who began the tale from the beginning. First was their worry that something was going on, though they couldn't at first pin anything on the Lannisters, then Ned's concern about what had happened to Jon Aryn and looking into the bastards of the King and the lineage of previous marriages between House Lannister and House Baratheon. Many a Lord turned to look at Myrcella where she stood behind Daenerys, who was sitting on Ranma's other side at the head of the table. She met their eyes levelly, while Ranma stated their current position, that she and they would remain acting as if she was a princess of the house of Baratheon until they received word from the Citadel that the female offspring of those marriages also favored the Baratheons.

There was some murmuring about that, but that ended when Daenerys spoke up saying that Myrcella would act as her handmaiden, and after Ranma said that she was under her personal protection. In the south there would have been a lot of mutters about that, seeing the young girl as a potential tool against her mother and the rest of her family, but here in the North they didn't think like that for the most part. Not after Ranma said that she was under his protection.

From there on Ranma's father Brynden and Myrcella continued, filling them in on the war of influence that occurred in King's Landing, then the death of Tommen, where Myrcella stated unequivocally that it had been Joffrey who engineered it, admitting it to her later.

After the roars of disbelief and fury that the idea of a kinslayer sitting on the Iron Throne evoked faded, the conversation continued with Brynden and Eddard describing the battle that had occurred in the city. Eddard surprised many there with how passionate he was in praising his guards. He went into detail about how they had sold their lives more dearly than anyone could have ever expected, how they had come so close to victory and if not for Renly and Loras' cowardice they might've won.

This caused some more murmuring, which ended when Sansa spoke up from where she stood behind her father, describing the perfidy of Joffrey. Her lips trembling as she remembered, describing how he had her whipped, how he put men to death simply to grind into her face her position as his prisoner.

That was the final straw for Rickard, who had come to care for Sansa and the Starks as his family as they had his,

and the others. They all rose to their feet, slamming their hands down on the table and shouting out about treachery, cowardice, and 'this must be answered' and 'to war!'. After a few moments, Ranma's voice overrode them "There is more my lords that you need to hear!"

Daenerys spoke into the quiet then, her voice passionate, yet controlled. "You have heard of the Lannisters, and you have heard of Renly, who, we have since learned has declared himself King. You have not yet heard of Stannis, and the villainess that he seems to have welcomed into Westeros. Hear this tale now, then think hard about what fighting it may mean. This is not a war like any other my Lords, this might be a war against pure evil."

She went on from there, describing both the first attempt to take her alive, then the second with the Shadow Warriors. There were exclamations of shock and horror at them, but no disbelief. While magic was not very well known here in the North, they found it easier to believe since it had a place in the Old God religion, and none would doubt her words, with Sansa, Ranma and Eddard all there to back it up. The only one who is skeptical was Lord Ryswell, but that was simply his nature.

"You say we have a choice whether to face this my lady," said Lord Hornwood shaking his head, his normal control in abeyance now. "The choice is simple, face it now down south, or face it in the North when they come for us. None of the three claimants to the Iron Throne are of the type to let us alone up here, we'd have to bend the knee to one or the other if we don't march. These Shadow Warriors sound like the foulest magic wherever they come from, so I'll have no truck with Stannis. I have no patience for cowards, and thus have no respect for Renly. And I would sooner die than bend my neck to a Lannister bastard!"

There were shouts and thumps on the table of approval at that, and it came as no surprise to Ranma that Greatjon spoke up next, his voice allowing him to quiet the hubbub easily. "Aye, even before this Renly Baratheon was nothing to me, a pulling whelp who's never known battle, nor Stannis neither, a cold fish and not the man he was if he has truck with such as these shadow things. Why should they rule over me and mine from some soft seat in Highgarden or the Stormlands? What do they know of the Wall or the Wolfswood or the barrows of the First Men?"

He stood up, looking around at them all, his great, bearded face fierce and challenging as the northern wind. "What has the south done for us since the dragons passed? It was the dragons we married, the Targaryens who helped create the Night's Watch, who gave them the Gift, who allowed us to keep to our ways. And look we have dragons!" Greatjon bellowed pointing at Daenerys. "I've seen them, we've all seen her little ones, have seen them in flight, and we know what they can do. I say that it is time for new blood on that throne coupled with the old, let us raise our own king and queen of the North!"

The other Lords took it up bellowing agreement, but it still shocked Ranma when he saw Lord Ryswell stand up, banging his stein on the table for silence. "You speak for me as well Halys, Greatjon, and I'll say it again. What did Baratheon or Lannister or even the Reach do for us here in the North, nothing! At least the Targaryens helped us on the Wall, at least they gave us subsidies for food when times were harsh! I agree let us raise our own king and queen, king in the North!"

There was a roar of approval, which sent Fenris down to his haunches putting his paws over his eyes whining slightly along with Ghost. Despite their irritation at the noise, they both understood this was some sort of pre-battle howl and were happy with that. They had their own bit of vengeance to look into. Lady's death had left a hole in the pack, and it would be answered in blood.

"No matter what else happens, we will not just be king and queen of the North." Ranma said. That silenced them, and Ranma read out the message from his grandfather. There was some mumblings about that, though every Lord there understood that Hoster was doing all he could to keep his lands from falling to Lannister control. Ranma went on. "Even without this I would not be willing to simply stand back and let my grandfather and my family down there fall without a fight. We will march to their defense, as much as possible, and we will deal with this these Shadow Warriors of Stannis's, and with the Lannister treachery! But we cannot leave the North undefended."

There were some looks exchanged at that wondering what other threat there could be. The wall was held so securely now that there was no doubt that the wildlings couldn't break through. Not unless they found a way around it, and there was no sign they could do that not with the forces enough to matter.

Daenerys spoke up, shaking her head sternly. "The Ironborn my Lords. Surely you do not think that they will remain peaceable in this time of chaos? They will no doubt go back to their old ways, and the North cannot seem an easy target."

"That is why my lady mother specified that you should leave your men behind Lord Glover, your town will be a primary target for them, a forward base they could use to invade further inland. In fact, I hereby order you to build up

your defenses as much as possible in that eventuality. If you cannot, if your town in your opinion is not defensible, then I give you leave to retreat further into our territories. Let the Wolfswood be our defense on that side. And you my Lord," he turned to have Lord Ryswell. "I would like you to only give me a fourth of your forces. You will need to be available to defend the Stony Shore if need be, and Lord Tallhart, you as well."

Tallhart smiled, enjoying being called lord rather than 'master', as his house's rank would allow. "I've gathered about five hundred men here my lord, three hundred archers, two hundred infantry. I have about another five hundred light cavalry, which I'll put at lord Ryswell's disposal for defense of the shore under my brother."

Normally such a task would be given to his son, but Benfred Tallhart was known as an arrogant, standoffish and rather idiotic young man. Ranma and he had met once, and it had been all Ranma could do to not smash his teeth in. He was an utter idiot when it came to anything combat related, or much of anything really. It was why Tallhart's brother was his heir rather than his firstborn son.

After a moment Ryswell nodded. "I've already gathered two thousand men here, heavy and light cavalry, that leaves me another thousand light cavalry and five hundred heavy for defense of the shore. But are you certain you won't need more men down south? The armies of the Westerlands and the Reach are massive."

Ranma and Dacey exchanged a look, and after a moment, Dacey nodded her head and Ranma stood up. "There is more you all need to know, more than you have been told up to this point about another threat. For that I and my friends apologize, but we didn't think you would believe us, not until we had more proof. But we have some more proof now, and more witnesses, thanks to Dacey Mormont and her mission to the Gorge."

From there, Ranma went into the ambush he and his friends had walked into on their way to the Wall. Hearing the full story many a parent harrumphed, having figured out there was something more going on there than they had been told, though none of them had supposed the full horror. While one or two were angry they hadn't been told earlier, Maeve and Lord Glover being the most angry of these, the others understood why it had been kept a secret. Certainly the former king or his court would never have believed such a tale.

After Dacey filled them in on her own mission and what it had revealed, Greatjon in particular was much more positive about it all, pointing at the fact that all of their Houses had already sent forces to the Wall. Indeed it was still being reinforced, a force from Locke, about six hundred armymen, had been sent up there less than a week before Ranma and the others arrived in White Harbor. "Hah, if those undead bastards think they can get through the Wall so easily with just the Night's Watch to contend with, let them face the might of the North united and ready for them!"

There were some bellows of approval at that, though a few of the lords were suddenly looking a little more leery about going south.

Sensing an opportunity Medger hummed thoughtfully, looking from one lord to another. "I probably don't need to say this, but I'm getting a little old for this warfare game." There was some laughter at that, though there was a bit of truth to it. Cerwyn could still fight and well, but he was an older man, slightly older than Eddard.

The more important fact though was that his daughter Jonelle and son-in-law were both not warriors, not really. Oh his son-in-law, Jerolt Flint of Flint's Finger, the second son of that family, was a good warrior but had no head for leading. And Medger had already sent his second, Kyle Conton, to the Wall and had no one else he trusted to look after his land and lead his people in battle.

"Still, it needs to be said." Medger went on, waving his hand at the others laughter. "But I trust Ranma Stark to lead my men, even without me looking over his shoulder to make sure, so I'll hereby relinquish formal command of my men going south to him. Now, let's put some numbers on the table here. I don't think any of us should call up more men for the southern excursion, let's look at what we've already brought together. By my count, and it's accurate since my house is putting up food and board for half of it, we have four thousand pike, some five thousand light infantry, around two thousand light cavalry, and a little over a thousand heavy, a little over two thousand archers, and seven hundred scouts and skirmishers from the Mountain clans."

"House Manderly has already begun to send a force down to Moat Cailin of six hundred heavy cavalry and infantry, and they will be preparing a supply point for us on the other side of the Neck." Ranma smiled. "I told you I wasn't going to let my grandfather and his house fight alone. Even if you had not all joined with me so vehemently, I was not going to let that happen. I would've gone alone if I had to."

There was some mutterings of approval and disapproval for that, but they were quieted as Medger spoke up. "So even with the forces on the Wall that leaves all of us with enough forces, particularly cavalry, to guard our own lands and field a decent defensive force or reinforce the Wall further. Excellent."

Daryn frowned, knowing the 'us' had been sent his way in particular. "... son, despite having to tear him away from his wife, will be sent in my stead. Even if they will wait for full winter to come against us, I can't in good conscience go off to war and let my wife hold my land alone with a threat like the White Walkers looming." Like Medger, he didn't really have anyone who he could trust with leading his men in war other than his son, and despite having to leave Alys, Hornwood doubted he could keep Daryn away from this.

Lord Ryswell snorted, seeing no need to save face, since he was the oldest man here, and well past his warrior years. "My son Roger will lead my troops of course."

"As will Dacey mine, after we've a talk about keeping secrets girl." Maeve growled. Dacey had the good grace to look mildly abashed, but unrepentant. "I'll not let any Ironborn attack my island without me there to personally put my sword up their ass!"

"Hah, well Rickard and I have a son and an uncle respectively we can leave to look after things. There's no way I'm missing out on this!" Greatjon laughed. "Though if the war drags until winter starts, I'll have to rethink things."

"In that line Lord Umber, we have a proposal to talk to you about." Daenerys said. "Specifically your control of the Last River and coal supplies."

Greatjon looked at her, then nodded as she went on, agreeing to house the workers that would start that task, taken from Stark and White Harbor for now. Later prisoners might be used for that sort of transportation construction, but not right now.

"What of House Locke?" asked Rickard. "Or the Flints and Dustins? And besides your pikes, won't you be sending any cavalry? Cavalry is the measure of a lord's worth."

Ranma laughed, and at a mental command Fenris stood up, leaning his massive head over his master's head where he sat. His lips rippled backwards, allowing all his teeth to show, while beside him Ghost did the same, leaning between Merry and Jon to nearly reach across the entire table to stare at Rickard. "Oh, I think we've got an equivalent force here, don't you?"

Rickard withdrew his objection while the other lords laughed, then Ranma addressed his other questions. "The Flints of Flint's Finger have the same problem that you do Lord Glover, they're very vulnerable to attacks from sea. I refuse to take people from their defense if the Ironborn return to their Old Way." Ranma nearly spat the words shaking his head.

"House Locke and the Flint's of Widows Watch have already promised their services elsewhere." Daenerys took up the tale. "They and the Manderly navy will be taking and investing the Three Sisters, then building us a supply point at the lowest point of the Bite to the Neck."

That brought a round of approval from all the lords. Memories were long in the North, and the sistermen hadn't made any friends here even after the war between the Vale and the North over them had ended.

"Is that what that Greyjoy brat is doing? I noticed Theon's not here. If he were, we could still use him as a hostage against the Ironborn." Lord Glover said, though there was no acrimony in his voice. He hadn't lost any family to the Ironborn's last uprising, but he hadn't particularly warmed to Theon either.

"He's in command of the fleet taking the Sisters." Ranma confirmed, grinding his teeth a little at the older man's tone, but letting it slide for now. "Wylis Manderly will take over the conquest once the landings are secure. Besides, the idea of hostages only work when the other family is honorable or cares for their members. Can anyone here say with a straight face that you believe that the Greyjoys are honorable? Or will care about a son who has been raised here in the North most of his life?"

Eddard, who had been silent since finishing the tale of the south, looked away, not happy about that, but unable to gainsay it. The men around the table however laughed, and the question turns to logistics and other things, including pay for the man on the march. Two silver Stags a day, to be started forty days from now for most because of the subtraction of payment for their weapons and armor. More than fifty silver stags could then be exchanged at the end of the war for land up in the Gift, or possibly in the Riverlands. House Stark would pay for the foodstuffs for the army as well up until they left the neck behind, whereupon Locke and Manderly would take up the task until one of the Riverlands lords took up the task.

As the meeting finally reached its conclusion, and the various northern lords got up from the table talking excitedly about the coming campaign, Ranma, raised his voice for a moment. "Lord Cerwyn, Lord Ryswell, please stay for a

moment."

Looking at one another wondering what this was about, the two men obeyed, moving over to where Ranma, his father and Daenerys were still sitting. Ranma turned to Lord Cerwyn first. "Your grandson, Cley, he is of an age to be sent to ward correct?"

"Yes." Medger nodded. "I had hoped to have him do so with Kyle. He could squire with him and then Jonelle wouldn't chew my ear off for sending her little boy away. Now though, I will need to look for other solutions. Why?"

Ranma smiled. "On the campaign, we're not going to have servants or anything of that nature, but a squire or ward can help immensely, he could fill in the same position for me and the rest of the wolfsworn as Merry is going to be filling in for Daenerys."

Actually that wasn't true, Myrcella and Alayaya were both going to be housed as Daenerys' maids but Merry was also going to be acting as part of the medical teams at need. That had been an innovation Ranma had put together that Merry had distinctly approved of. They would be adding any healers, both septons and maesters who they came across that proved trustworthy to their army.

This would later include the maester of house Locke, who Lord Manderly had convinced the elderly Lord Locke to send down to meet the army at the way point his people and House Reed were going to set up past the Neck. He was a youngish man, and Ranma hadn't met him before but he was already renowned as a healer more than any of his other duties, hence Manderly's suggestion of sending him.

Medger smiled. He also knew why Ranma was offering this, since Daenerys was standing there with a smug little smile on her face. Due to his wife dying in childbirth along with their second born, who would've been a son, he hadn't had a son of the proper age to join the wolfsworn. But with his family's position and power, he should have had a representative among Ranma's friends. He hadn't felt slighted by it, Ranma had often been to his house on this errand or other and the ties between their families were strong, but this would be a good way to continue the tradition. "Excellent, I presume you'll also be training him?"

"Of course." Ranma said nodding. In fact if Medger had brought him to Winterfell that training would already have begun.

"Good, in that case I except, I'll tell him when I get home this evening. But you get to tell to his mother about it." Medger said dryly. "I'm old, my ears are too frail to put up with that kind of punishment."

Ranma winced while the others in the room laughed. "Are you sure you don't have a castle you want me to take single handed instead?"

"Not at all, if you're going to be taking her darling boy away to war, you get to be the one to smooth talk Jonelle. Besides, she likes you, and you don't have a beard for her to pluck out. Mine would most distinctly be in danger if I was the one sacri-I mean the one to inform her of this."

Ranma winced again then nodded acquiescence. Realizing that was his cue to leave Medger stood up, stopping only when Eddard asked him to help him out of his chair, and walk with him out of the hall. Eddard knew this was on a topic he should have taken care of years ago but hadn't for friendship's sake and sadness, and had no desire now to be the one to solve it.

The others left too, knowing that what Ranma had to speak to Lord Ryswell about wasn't nearly as pleasant. Daenerys alone stayed, one hand resting lightly on Ranma's arm. When the room was cleared Ranma began. "Lord Ryswell your daughter, Lady Dustin..."

"I know what you're going to say, milord." the older man said shaking his head. "She holds a grudge like no one's business, it was always that way with her even as a child. Not being here or even sending a representative for this meeting was unconscionable, and there needs to be repercussions forward. But remember that house Dustin is in a bad way and has been for years, they lost nearly all their forces in Robert's Rebellion along with their lord, dead near the end. Barbrey took that hard, and has loathed your father for getting him killed ever since, that and her own memories keep her from moving on."

"I know, and I'm not going to raid her scant force for the army or anything of that nature. No, what House Dustin and Barrowton **will** be doing is equipping the army with provisions, and adding to our supply train."

Daenerys pulled out a list of their requirements, which had taken the two of them hours of working with Jon and

maester Luwin to write out. Much of it had already been filled by Winterfell and House Cerwyn, and some more of it would be filled by House Locke when the army left the Neck. Blankets, arrows and food for example were taken care of for now, but they still needed more, in particular medical supplies and tents. Ingredients they would get from house Reed directly, but actual supplies, carts for the supplies, and other things they needed more of. Ranma intended to move the army quickly, but he wasn't about to let them rough it more than was necessary.

"She'll be filling these out gratis from her own resources. We won't be paying for them at all. Let that stand as payment for not obeying her Lord Paramount's commands." Ranma said sternly, taking the list from Daenerys and passing it over to the older man.

Lord Ryswell looked over the list wincing a little. It wasn't that any one item on it was expensive, but there was so much there. "She could say that since it was only your mother speaking for your father rather than him speaking for himself she didn't have any obligation to listen," he prevaricated.

"Which is so much marsh gas." Daenerys said sternly. She had been the one to come up with this idea when it became clear Barbrey Dustin would not appear, and was certain to drive the lesson home. "Many a time a castellan or lady has stood in for a Lord away at war, and they are not questioned in their authority. Let me be blunt my lord, lady Dustin has allowed her house to slide into a recession of power that is leaving a power vacuum in the Barrowlands, one that we cannot allow to remain. I urge you to speak to her about this, she is yet middle-aged is she not? She can change her ways, come to some form of agreement and move past the past. If she cannot, then we need to think of a more... permanent solution."

Ranma nodded. "Ser Jory Cassel gave his life to defend my father, and the Cassel House has been loyal to mine for generations. Nor are they the only ones. The Poole for example, or House Stout or Goldgrass may be elevated to fill in the void she has allowed to fester." While the Poole and Cassels were minor houses beholden to Winterfell, with House Poole actually looking to become richer with their position along the White Knife and the small taxes that would allow them to garner.

Goldgrass and Stout however were two of the few minor houses that still were nominally supposed to answer to House Dustin. In contrast to that house however, they had grown slightly since Robert's Rebellion. Ranma and Eddard really didn't care for either house much, Eddard had met their leaders and they seemed too like southern 'yes men' than real northern lords, so that was more of a threat than something they would actually go through with. House Cassel however, despite the fact Dustin's minor houses wouldn't like it, was a definite idea.

Lord Ryswell winced again. "I'll talk to her." he promised. "I don't know how far I'll get, but I'll talk to her. Hook of by crook though, you'll have your supplies my liege."

Ranma nodded. "That's about all we can ask of you, just make certain she understands her position."

OOOOOO

The next day, the rearmament for the Karstark, Norrey and Umber forces went on. The light infantry, the trained armsmen, were given decent, but still light chainmail to replace their studded leather armor they wore for the most part, something even Karstark and Umber men needed. The cavalry too received some better equipment, though not the heavy cavalry, which had been given the 'lion's' share of such before. The light cavalry however received breastplates of the same type the heavy infantry were given to wear over their leather armor, and more than one man also was given a helmet as heavy infantry of Stark and Cerwyn, all of them having been trained by Jon, wore plate cuirass and thigh guards over chainmail plus helmets.

They all needed this to a greater or lesser degree. The Norrey men's armor was all leather or ancient ring mail, and more than one minor house couldn't give its men steel weapons, using bronze instead. They were all ecstatic about their new weapons, but the Norrey and the other Mountain clans were even more so, since Ranma and his father had pledged that the rearmament was for all their fighting men. Each clan lord had already sent a runner home with news to that effect, and they would see more mountain warriors arriving in clumps over the next few months after the army left.

Ranma wasn't in charge of that. He left that in maester Luwin and Bran's capable hands, along with his father to manage the lords. Instead, while all of the men were getting over the fact they would have excellent weapons and armor, Ranma was having his first battle of the southern war and seemingly losing badly.

"For the final time **NO!**" Catelyn growled looking as if she wanted to shake him by the throat. She had lost the argument about Daenerys, she was not going to lose this one. "I nearly lost Bran once, I am **not** letting you take him off to war! I would rather you stay here too, but I know you cannot, but Bran is too young, **and** he is no warrior.



Whatever projects you think you may need him on, I need him here, I will not allow it! If you take him, you'll have to take me too!"

That ended that conversation. Ranma wanted his mother as far away from the war as he could get her, and he sighed in defeat. "Alright, I would've wanted him to be the lead on some of the projects I can see needing down the road, but um, y-your right, his, his place his here with the rest of his family." Catelyn's eyes remained narrowed as they stared at him and he asked timidly. "Er, I-I don't suppose I could ask him to suggest someone else?"

"Fine, I'll go with you." Catelyn said smiling thinly. "That way I'll know that you've not tried to pressure him into going."

Ranma nodded meekly, but internally he was actually rather pleased with how this went on. Their fight had gone on long enough for Catelyn to truly believe that Ranma had desperately wanted Bran along, and not once had he mentioned the idea of Arya coming with him. No, he wasn't even going to try to fight that battle, he was just going to take her with him.

Arya was flat-chested enough to dress up as a man, and could slip in easily with the rest of the army until they were well away from Winterfell, whereupon she would join the wolfsworn along with Nymeria. That was a much better idea than having her chase after them alone, which was almost certain to happen if he didn't bring her along himself. That way, hopefully they would be out of earshot when his mother realized Arya was gone.

Of course, his argument with his mother wasn't the only thing that was going on that day...

OOOOOO

That evening, the Lords, their heirs and a few of their ladies along with some chosen retainers met up in the godswood before the heart tree. The area was now crowded with several long tables, piled high with food on their white linen. Garlands were hanging from several of the trees, though not the heart tree, which stood resplendent, powerful and forbidding in its austerity, the face of the old man on its bark seeming to both stare and smile at the same time for some reason.

Ranma stood beside the pool at the heart tree's bade wearing formal clothing, Ice resting in the ground next to him. Jon and his father, using a large staff, stood to either side of him, the rest of the Lords gathered to either side.

As the sun set Daenerys moved towards them through the woods Myrcella, Alayaya and Dacey with her, performing an honor guard. Sunfyre also moved alongside her, the most well behaved of her two draklings. While Rhaegon was willing to not bite everything he saw, he did not like crowds, or noise. Fenris stood by her side as well, and there was some murmuring from the few retainers who had yet to see him or Ghost, who was also trailing on her other side. They acted like bodyguards, growling at the crowd of people to keep their distance. Ranma however barely noticed, his eyes locked on Daenerys.

Daenerys wore a simple dress of purest white, with some silver stitching done in the shape of her house's banner on her shoulders. It fell loosely down her legs, hugging her chest and upper body, showing her figure while allowing her legs full movement. Her head was bare, the silver hair of her house falling in a cascade down her back. Her violet eyes were locked on Ranma's blue ones, and neither could look away.

To one side Dacey laughed silently at the two of them. Seeing the two of them together had been amusing to say the least to the older woman. While she had enjoyed being with Ranma greatly, a wedding like this had never been something she wanted or wished for between them. Indeed Dacey would have balked at the idea of being tied down, even if at the time she had been happy sharing Ranma's bed. Daenerys on the other hand, could have nothing but and seemed to be looking forward to it. *Young people. Eesh. Was I ever that young?*

"Who comes before the old gods?" Ned asked in a loud voice standing forward.

Daenerys answered here. "I am Daenerys of the house of Targaryen, I come before you never touched by man, a willing wife I be, looking to be wed to Ranma Stark."

"Ranma will you take this woman?" said Lord Stark looking at his son.

"I will take this woman." said Ranma formally, holding out his hand to Daenerys who grasped it. At this point Ranma would normally have placed a cloak over Daenerys shoulders, but considering this was more a marriage of equals, and that their names were going to be Stark Targaryen signifying this, they had decided not to include that. Plus, they were both still wondering about what their banner should look like, let alone their family's colors, and had indeed decided to let Sansa loose on the problem for now.

They both knelt to the heart tree, and Lord Stark stood before them, trying to keep the pain from standing on his unresponsive leg from showing. "Then by the grace of the old gods I proclaim the man and wife."

The two of them looked at one another, and Ranma leaned over kissing her on the lips. There was a roar of approval, and Daenerys's arms went around him, hugging him tightly for a moment before they turned and viewed the cheering lords of the North.

"Now to feast!" said Smalljon pointing at the tables. "I bet I can finally drink you under the table father!"

"That will be the day!" his father bellowed back, smacking him on the shoulder. "I'll take that bet, and see you eat crow!"

With that their party started, with Daenerys sitting at the main table next to Ranma. He whispered into her ear as he sat down. "We'll act as if this was a normal feast for now, then as soon as the drinking begins we can slip away. Don't worry, all of the ale has been spiked already."

It wasn't exactly by the rules, the feast was supposed to end after the two new married couple had eaten then the bride was supposed to have her clothing torn off by the crowd so that everyone could see her body and make certain that she was clean and unblemished. Then they were supposed to watch while her maidenhead was broken, like Alys had been forced to endure. But both Daenerys and Ranma found that ceremony repugnant, and knew it wasn't needed in any event. Still, as long as the lords had enough fun and drank enough spirits, they would be allowed to slip off to Ranma's bed in his room without being bothered.

About an hour later Ranma nodded over at Jon who nodded back. The others were all drunk as Lords, and the only ones that remained awake were Smalljon and Greatjon. Every retainer was down, though maester Luwin was still awake staring around at the others in amusement. He however like Catelyn was a follower of the Seven, and did not really have much truck with the marriage customs here in the North.

Daenerys smiled, looking around them. She was feeling slight hesitation, but more and more eagerness as Ranma's hand was on her thigh, kneading the skin through her dress as her hand was on his. "Do you think they'll be irritated tomorrow?"

"Hung over yes, irritated no. It's not the first time this has happened after all, trust me on that. We will however need to remember to strip the sheet off the bed afterward." He shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, but some things apparently need to be proven to a wide audience."

"We might wish to think of new marriage ceremony in the future. I liked exchanging our simple words out in the woods, underneath the sky and stars, but the whole bedding ceremony...' she shook her head.

"I'm just glad that you decided to go along with being married in the old tradition at all, that would have been a disaster." Ranma said standing up and helping her to her feet. "so, um, t, to bed, my wife?"

Daenerys nodded, anticipation boiling within her. With that they made their way out of the godswood, back into the keep and up to Ranma's room, never noticing how Greatjon had noticed them sneaking off, and smiled, shaking his head, understanding easily what had happened, but not having a problem with it. As much as he espoused the traditions of the old gods, he knew the bedding ceremony wasn't the most romantic of events, and that kind of thing mattered to girls.

#### **Lemon start:**

The moment the door shut Ranma turned to Daenerys, only to find her leaning up to him already. Their lips met, and her arms went around his neck, drawing him down to her. His own hands went around Daenerys' waist at first before grabbing her svelte rear, lifting her up with one hand on either cheek. Her legs went around Ranma's waist as he plunged his tongue into her mouth, dueling with her own there. Daenerys did not let Ranma dictate the kiss easily, pushing back as hard as Ranma did, unwilling to allow him control just yet.

Both of their eyes were closed, but Ranma knew his room well enough to move forward, still carrying Daenerys until her rear slid up along the bedding, forcing him to remove his hands, sliding them up her sides. Daenerys pulled back grinning wickedly up at him, as Ranma quickly divested himself of his shirt tossing it aside. Running her hands up his chiseled chest for a moment, Daenerys reveled in the feel of his muscles, so hard under her hands.

She began to fumble at her own dress for a moment, but Ranma reached around her, pulling the dress apart from where it tied at her neck easily. Daenerys pulled out of her sleeves, letting it pillow around her waist where she sat

upright on the edge of the bed.

Her body was then bared to his gaze, and she flushed at the look of desire in Ranma's eyes. Though petite, Daenerys was quite stacked up top, with high C-sized breasts in the scale of his former life, a bare size smaller than Ranma's female form in that past life. Her nipples were a pale pink color, already hard and sticking out from the rest of her breasts.

"You're so beautiful Daenerys..." with those words Ranma knelt down, his knees on the floor. He then leaned forward taking one of her nipples in his mouth sucking gently, then harder as Daenerys encouraged him, pulling his head against her chest. "Harder. I'm not glass, harder."

Ranma complied sucking harder at her nipple as his tongue went to work on it, his other hand kneading her other breast while her hands fisted in his hair for a moment her head thrown back at the new sensations rocking through her body. This was amazing, this was astonishing, it was almost frightening how good it felt. Then it got better as Ranma began to use his teeth on her nipple, grinding the hard nub between his teeth, a sensation they caused her to gasp aloud. "Yes! Ranma!"

He grinned up at her, then switched to her other nipple giving it the same attention. After several minutes of this Daenerys pulled him back to his feet, then down into a heated kiss, their tongues once more dueling, almost beginning in midair for a moment she was so eager.

Then she pushed him away slightly, reaching down to grasp his breeches pulling them down hard. Both his breeches and his underwear came with. His cock sprang free, eight and a half inches and thick, standing up as hard and as straight as a granite column. The sight sent a pulse of desire through Daenerys. After a moment staring, she hesitantly leaned forward, licking the tip of it experimentally. Alayaya had told her about this and its equivalent the lord's kiss which she hoped Ranma would do to her but she had to be the one to start things apparently.

Or she would have, if Ranma was a normal part man. Instead he stopped her with a gentle hand on her hair. "You don't have to do that you know." He said his voice deeper than normal with lust and love. "I won't force you to do that if you think it's beneath you or anything."

Daenerys smiled at his concern, but shook her head pressing forward and licking the underside of his cock for a moment. Ranma had bathed of course before the ceremony so it didn't smell or anything like that. She licked at it experimentally, her hands going around him to knead his buttocks as Ranma's hands sank below her head, once again playing with her breasts, catching her nipples in his fingers.

She murmured in appreciation at that, then backed away from his shaft and opened her lips widely to take the tip in her mouth. Ranma moaned above her, signaling that she was doing something right. Licking the tip for a few moments Daenerys got used to having it in her mouth, then slowly pulled him forward, letting more of his shaft enter her mouth slowly, still licking at it as it entered.

Ranma growled his hands twitching against her breasts one of them leaving her breasts for a moment to fist in her hair, then falling away as if he was forcing himself not to simply grab her head and his cock down her throat. His self-control made Daenerys smile even more and she continued slowly forcing his cock down her throat.

After two more inches however Daenerys realized she couldn't go further, and her jaw was beginning to hurt. She slowly pulled back, licking at the shaft then the tip as she did so before it exited her mouth with a 'popping' sound. She works her jaw for a moment shaking your head. "Alayaya was right." she muttered, "that kind of thing takes practice."

Ranma laughed, lifting her up easily by he get his hands on her waist tossing her onto his bed to causing her to squeal. "Plenty of time for us to practice together my wife. I'm never letting you go!"

Daenerys laughed then gasped as suddenly her skirt was ripped from her and tossed to the side followed quickly by her underwear, with her lifting up her rear eagerly to allow Ranma to pull it off more easily. Her glistening flower was thus revealed, dripping with arousal already. The scent quickly hit Ranma, and he growled like Fenris, diving down before Daenerys could even gasp. She gasped then however, as he nuzzled her flower, his lips licking and biting at her outer folds. Indeed, she cried. "By the gods old and new!" Her hands fisted in his hair as she groaned aloud, bucking her waist up into his mouth. "Don't stop, don't stop. It feels so **good!**"

In response Ranma grabbed her thighs forcing her waist back down onto the bed from where she had bucked up. Now Daenerys couldn't get away from him, and was utterly at his mercy. Not that she was complaining, Ranma was working over her nether regions like a master pianist on the piano.

About five minutes later, Daenerys' cries became more and more ragged, and her upper body thrashed, her hair wildly flown this way and that as her eyes began to slide shut. 'Something, something's coming, I.....AHHHHHH!' At that moment Ranma had added a finger, gently pushing it inside her hole as his lips found her clit. She screamed like a banshee, her fingers almost ripping out his hair as she bucked up against his grip, spasming as she came for the first time. She actually squirted a little, something Ranma hadn't ever seen before or even heard about.

He grinned moments later pulling back and wiping his face licking at her juices. "You taste amazing Daenerys, like honey and cinnamon and some kind of fiery fruit, if that makes sense."

Daenerys laughed shaking your head. "I have no idea why, but I'm glad you enjoyed yourself my dear husband."

She practically purred the word husband, reaching up to grasp Ranma by his ponytail pulling him down to her while her fingers undid the string holding it in a ponytail, letting his hair fall against the back of his neck freely like her hair did. They kissed again, and Daenerys could taste herself on his lips. Ranma had described it accurately, and Daenerys was not repulsed by the taste. Indeed, it tasted rather good on his tongue against hers.

The two of them kissed softly then more ardently as Daenerys recovered, and Ranma moved himself up lightly to be between her legs. He pulled back, looking down at her, blue eyes meeting violet. "Are you ready?"

Daenerys nodded, staring up at him bravely, speaking formally. "Go slow my Lord. This has been magnificent so far, let's not ruin it with untoward haste."

Ranma laughed, and she slapped his chest, still some of the tension of the moment left them at that, which had been her objective speaking so formally. Moments later however she watched as Ranma brought his cock up to her flower, gently sliding it along the outer edge for a moment, lubricating it if such a thing was truly needed given how wet Daenerys was. Indeed the bedding underneath her waist had been drenched by her orgasm earlier.

At her nod Ranma slowly eased his cock into her, going in a bare inch before stopping letting her get used to his girth. Her hands fisted in the bedding on either side of her, then moved to his shoulders as he added another inch. It was excruciating torture for him having to control himself, but he persevered despite wanting to simply ram it in and get the painful bit over with. She had asked him to go slow, and he would do so.

Still, his control was fraying badly as he went on, and finally he hit her barrier inside her. Daenerys grimaced, pulling him down to kiss her again. After a few moments she pulled back and nodded and Ranma pulled back slightly then rammed forward, breaking her barrier.

She wanted to scream but instead Daenerys bit down on his shoulder, biting so hard she actually drew blood. Her nails also dug in to his back slightly. Ranma grunted, the pain of that helping to combat the feeling of his cock being inside of her.

The two of them stayed like that for several moments as Daenerys's pain began to recede, and she loosened her clamped jaw on his shoulder. Her nails also slowly loosening their death grip on his back. She pulled back, her eyes closed as Daenerys fought the pain for a moment, before looking up into Ranma's concerned blue eyes. She nodded, and he leaned down and kissed her again, while his hips began to slowly piston in and out, not going deeper just yet, just in and out slowly.

That lasted about ten minutes before both of them began to be top anxious for more for him to continue. She raised up to meet one of his downward thrusts breaking the kiss to growl. "I'm not made of glass, please, **faster!**"

Ranma complied, thrusting into her harder and harder, until she was bouncing off the bed in rhythm with his thrusts, squealing, moaning "YES, jarasea (my love), yes!"

In response Ranma simply began to say her name over and over again "Daenerys, Daenerys, Daenerys!"

Soon enough Daenerys peaked again. Shouting "Ranma!" her nails on his back once again punctured his skin, raking his back slightly leaving welts and almost drawing blood as she thrust her core up into his thrusts.

Daenerys's pussy clamped down as she came and it was all Ranma could do to pull out before he too came, like a geyser going off. Streams of cum splattered Daenerys's stomach, her breasts and even reached her neck, before sliding slowly down to one side of her neck as Daenerys turned her head, lolling completely out of it for a few moments.

Daenerys slowly came back to herself as Ranma leaned away, remaining on his hands and knees at the foot of the bed but obviously wobbling a little. She looked down at the mess he had made on her chest and stomach, then

reached down slightly with one finger and scooped up a gobbet of his semen. Tentatively she raised it to her mouth, sticking out her tongue to lick at it for a moment. Her eyes widened slightly surprised. It wasn't nearly as nasty tasting as Alayaya had told her it would be. It tasted almost good, and she wondered why before licking the rest of the gob away from her fingers. She looked down at Ranma, who was watching this with wide eyes. "You taste good." she purred then laughed as Ranma's eyes widened further. "Thank you though for following our plan there."

"Of course." Ranma said as if not following it hadn't even occurred to them. "A child right now might make my nobles happy, solidifying the line of succession, but it would also damn irritating on the march."

Daenerys nodded, reaching down to scoop up more of his comments sucking at it off her fingers staring at him. The two of them had discussed children on the boat coming up from White Harbor, and had decided together that it was not something they needed or could really deal with now. There was simply too much going on, they would both need to head south, Daenerys because of her draklings and the influence she might have with a few houses down south, and him because of the army. A child would force her to remain behind, and while that was fine for a normal noble wife, Daenerys wasn't just his wife but his chief counselor, and the symbol of their union. None of the families that had supported her house would believe him if she was not actually with him physically.

"Very good indeed." she said, pushing herself up the bed to lean against that bedpost behind her. Her eyes strayed down to the mass they had made of the bedding, a few large spots of blood marking the place where she had lost her virginity, centered on the rather large wet spot that she had caused earlier, then added to when she came a second time.

Ranma moved up to her side, kissing her lovingly on the lips then down the side of her face to her neck sucking there gently, leaving a mark as Daenerys had on his shoulder while his hands began to work at her breasts once more. She looked down, gasping when she saw that his cock was once more erect, if it had indeed flagged before. "Oh my" Daenerys murmured, causing Ranma to break off kissing her neck with a chuckle. She looked at him quizzically, but he shook his head leaning up to kiss her on the lips before pulling her to him, switching around so that he was on the bottom of the two of them.

He pulled back from the kiss nuzzling into her neck as he looked up at her with one eyebrow cocked. "Round two?"

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Daenerys laughed, pushing her rear back against run his cock, lifting herself up slightly to allow them to line up once more before lowering her herself with a moaning gurgle as his cock once more filled her. Neither noticed during this that the door to Ranma's room was open a crack.

On the other side of the door crouched Myrcella, hidden in the shadows of the hallway outside while the action on the inside of Ranma's room was very visible thanks to a few torches set into the walls of the room earlier that evening. She continued to watch for several more moments, the sight burning its way into her brain and causing a fire in her belly and further down.

It was a feeling that Myrcella had only felt once before, when Ranma kissed her that time during the tourney when he was under the aphrodisiac's power. Her hands, unconscious of her mind which was still trying to burn everything she was seeing into its memory, trailed down to her privates, covered as they were in her skirt.

Alayaya had been with her originally during the festivities outside, but had retired with Smalljon for the evening. The Summer island woman was rather fascinated by how there was a mind hidden under that wild northern bumpkin exterior. That relationship would probably not become permanent, but for now Alayaya was more much more freer with her affections than Myrcella could be.

Catelyn too had been with her for a few moments, but she had retired with her husband several moments after Ranma and Daenerys had escaped. Sansa was with the other youngsters having a sleepover, her and Arya taking turns telling Rickon stories while they all bunkered down in his room at the end of the hallway. Myrcella was supposed to be with them, but she had been able to convince lady Catelyn and the others to allow her to watch the ceremony at least, and after the drinking had begun and the children escorted away, she had begun to follow the newlyweds when they broke off.

Fenris who was guarding the hallway from busybodies had let her go, not seeing any harm in it and with Ranma not having told Fenris to stop her, just any of the people whose sense Fenris did not know intimately. Nay of the wolfsworn, Sansa and Alayaya could've done the same thing, but they weren't interested thankfully.

Myrcella stopped touching herself after the first shock at doing so, which had sent a bolt of pleasure through her, then

reluctantly pulled away from the doorway, closing it as quietly as she could. She looked around, then to the room next to Ranma's, which had originally been Bran's, but he was with the others down in Rickon's in the next hall.

For a moment she waited there, her mind dueling with her subconscious desires. Myrcella knew she should return to the other children before she was missed, but. A loud moan from Ranma's room, and the shout of "Yes!" caused her to decide, and she moved into Bran's room. There she leaned against the wall separating the two rooms, which thankfully put her directly behind the bed where the action had begun once more. Sliding down to the ground, she began to gently place her hands underneath her bunched skirt...

## Lemon End

OOOOOOO

The next morning dawned bright, though Daenerys didn't really realize this at the time. She was in pain. A lot of pain. She felt as if someone had driven a red hot poker up inside her. She cursed Ranma volubly and he winced as he rolled out of bed. "Okay, so maybe the fifth and sixth rounds were a bad idea. But ya weren't complainin' at the time."

"A moment of insanity that I am now paying for!" Daenerys said reaching out to smack him on the shoulder. He winced, moving his shoulder theatrically but that hadn't left a mark, she had given him others. His back was a crisscross now of welts from her nails, her teeth had left a mark on his shoulder, and on his thigh from later that evening. Other than that however, he was feeling quite spry this morning, whereas Daenerys wasn't.

She was feeling wrung out and hung out to dry, and that was without the pain centered on her privates. She was also feeling rather sticky, covered with both of their juices. Ranma had been as good as his word and had pulled out every time, but that and the sweat and her own juices made for a very sticky combination. "Get Alayaya or one of your maids in here to clean the up, then get me something for the pain." she ordered imperiously pointing at the door. "And until this pain has gone away my Lord, you can think again about any sort of reprise of last night."

Ranma laughed and kissed her on the lips and Daenerys' traitorous body began to respond again. She pushed him away quickly. "None of that! Besides, aren't we supposed to leave later today?" Ranma nodded, more grimly but still stole one more kiss for leaving, one of his bed pillows following him to the door.

Daenerys fell back onto the bed, her smile going from a tiny almost invisible one to a wide beaming grin as she leaned back. Despite the pains shooting through her body and her general level of exhaustion, she had never felt more alive, never more like a woman that she did now.

Moments later the door opened, and Ranma pushed his way back in, carrying a warm damp towel, with Sunfyre and Rhaegon behind him Alayaya followed them at a safe distance, a smirk on her face. Surprisingly Merry followed her, face flushed so much that it looked almost rose like in color as she stared between the two of them. The feelings she had given herself last night had been astonishing in their potency, and looking at the two of them simply brought back that memory. Luckily she had gotten back to the children with no one the wiser, simply saying that something she had eaten had disagreed with her.

Alayaya moved forward with Ranma, both of them taking a cloth and working them down Daenerys's body cleaning her off. While they were doing that, Myrcella looked at the utterly ruined sheet. "You know you'll need to show that to the lords outside?"

Daenerys and Ranma both growled, but Ranma nodded. "Take it with you Myrcella, show the crowd what they have to see I suppose."

Moments after Myrcella left they could both hear the shout of joy from outside, and Daenerys shook her head. "And that my Lord," she said looking up at Ranma. "Is the first and only time anything we do will be on display!"

"I'm certainly not gonna object." Ranma said leaning down the kitchen kissing her on the lips again. "I'll send some more maids in to help you get dressed, then I get to have the fun of getting some drunk and very hung over lords ready to march."

"Good luck!" Daenerys laughed, reaching down to help her no-longer-so little ones up onto the bed where they nuzzled into her sides. They had felt her exultation last night as well as her slight pain, but Ghost and the other direwolves had sat on them hard when they tried to go to her. The draklings didn't get along as well with the rest of the pack as they did with Fenris, but they were friendly enough, and they feared Nymeria. For some reason she just gave them the creeps, even more than Ghost, who their senses could barely follow if he moved around. There was just something about the powerful female direwolf that screamed **submit** to both of the young draklings.

As soon as they were alone, Alyayaya smirked at the princess. "So, how was it?"

Outside Ranma gleefully went about the business of waking the lords from a massive drinking binge to equally massive hangovers. Regrettably Myrcella had done a good enough job, getting most of them to at least be awake when she came out and informed them of the nights activities parading the sheet around. Seeing it lying on the main table Ranma shook his head in disgust. Some things in this world just pissed him off, but at least they'd found a way around that bit of politically motivated vileness.

Hours later however, his irritation was gone, and he was once more saying goodbye to his family. Catelyn was crying softly, leaning against Ned who was exchanging hand clasps with his son. Rickon was also crying, clutching at Ranma's leg begging him not to leave again. Ranma looked down at him then gently pried his youngest brother's arms off him, shaking his head. "I have to go Rickon, I have to save our grandfather. Maybe if I do you can come down and see him sometime, wouldn't you like that?"

Actually the odds of Ranma arriving in time to save or even see Hoster alive was low, but Rickon didn't know that. After a moment he nodded sniffling still but backing away. Bran came forward for a hug, as did Sansa, who was in no hurry to leave Winterfell again. Arya was in her room after having a loud and very public row with Ranma about coming with him. That had assuaged Catelyn's fears that the girl might run after him, and she hadn't even noticed a much shorter than normal guardsmen joining the column as it marched out of Winterfell behind Ranma.

Daenerys waited on a horse nearby by Jon, with Ghost and Fenris to either side of them with the two draklings on their backs for now. Fenris could've carried them both weight wise, but not size wise. They were now both nearly up to Daenerys waist if they stretched, small in comparison to the direwolves, but laid out still large enough so that they didn't have enough space for both of them.

Catelyn looked up at her, nodding formally at her. "Take care of one another."

"We will." Daenerys said nodding her head. Luckily, no one had argued with the fact that she had to go with the army, personally talking to the houses that she hoped to bring to their side, though the first several of those houses would at best be able to give the army a local source of food and housing rather than actually add to its strength overmuch. The loyalist houses in the Riverlands had been smashed by Lord Tully after the war, and not a one of them had been able to regain its former strength. The Reach however would be a different story, and possibly the Vale, where the Loyalist houses hadn't been smashed as badly by Jon Aryn after the war.

Ranma finished hugging his parents and siblings, then turned away taking position next to Daenerys. The two of them waved one final time then left. "Let's get out of here before mother decides to check Arya's room and finds her gone." Ranma whispered.

Jon laughed quietly, and the two of them with their wolves beside them raced through the winter town to join the forces already making its way down the Kingsroad from Winterfell. They would meet up with the forces already sent to Castle Cerwyn, and then would march down as fast as they could go moving as quickly as they could down to Moat Cailin and from there into the Riverlands. Ranma, Daenerys and the North were going to war.

## Chapter End

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I hope everyone noticed that I didn't even try to do many travel scenes. While travel times and communication times matter, I used those times originally to build characters and interactions, that is no longer necessary. I won't even mention the march down to Moat Cailin, except for three scenes, neither of which will have anything to do with the actual travelling. The war however is going to pick up down south, and what the Northerners run into won't be to their liking at all. Nor will the Reach or Renly be happy. Renly will have to face the charge of cowardice head on, and The Reach learns that Tywin has ways to hurt them even with his army elsewhere.

So, now the North knows about the White Walker threat, and the threat of Stannis, and are ready to defend their lands from all comers while also wishing to unite some of the southern forces so they too can be added to the defense of the Wall. Thanks to the larger levees from Cerwyn, Karstark, Ryswell and Stark the force sent is actually larger than in canon but don't take too much from the houses that will allow them to defend themselves.

I realize it seems a lot of secrets came out in this chapter without much hullabaloo, but I think in the main it made sense for the lords to take the news of the White Walkers as they did, especially given the Shadow Warriors. And as for the wolfsworn, sorry, I don't do angst. There was no chance of any of them turning against Ranma because of his resurrection, but given the new training they were taking on, it made sense for it to come out now.

I also know that Daenerys keeping her last name might irritate some purists, but I wanted to make the marriage very obviously a marriage between equals, in mind and position towards one another if not in military strength. Think the marriage between Cayleb and Sharleyan and how they kept their last names.

For those wondering, I'm about a week and a half away from putting out my next ATP chapter. Sorry Harry fans, but this story has really grabbed my attention and thus my free time.

As always please review, and I hope you all enjoyed it.

I've also added a new idea on my profile, if you want to talk about it, PM me, but be aware I won't be taking them up any time soon.



## **\*Chapter 11\*: Chapter 11**

I don't own Martin or Takahashi's work, one was written by a lazy dork that read one book ([Prince](#)) and assumed that was enough to understand Medieval warfare, while the other has only the vaguest understanding of how actual love/attraction works.

*RJP*: As you're not a member I am responding to you here. No, I will not be giving Ranma access to cannons or any kind of gunpowder. Sorry, but there are so many steps between finding saltpeter (which would likely only be found in Dorne in any event in Essos and creating even the first version of recorded gunpowder would take a lot of knowledge that Ranma has no way of knowing from his past life.

Note three things. One, I give one or two scenes in this much shorter screen time than I had initially thought and might have indicated in PMs to past reviewers, this is again because the war has begun. Two, I made a name mistake in the last chapter. Damon Was the Lannister left to lead the force at Wayfarer's rest, not Daven. A Dragon Naturally Speaking screw up that I missed, sorry. And three, while my beta reader, *Anthony444* – give him a round of thanks people – and I tried to be thorough, we ran into a formatting problem when I sent the chapter to him so there might be missing spaces and especially misplaced ". If any of you see one, or my normal DNS mistakes, please tell me via PM, and I will correct it as soon as possible.

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### **Wild Wolf 11 In the face of the northern wings, castles too can crumble**

Ander Clegane was an old weasel sort of man, a branch member of that family and had served as the Mountain's castellan and seneschal for years. Gregor was not a man who understood how to truly take care of a castle or manage land, so Ander survived in the Mountain's service because he was small, unassuming, un-threatening, and completely sycophantic. He was utterly loyal to the Lannisters, since part of his survival was based off Tywin's protection.

The castle of the former hound masters of the Lannisters was set on the southeastern edge of the Westerlands, not quite on the border with the Reach but close enough. It made an excellent staging area, close enough to rapidly deploy to the defense of the Westerlands along that border or as an offensive force.

Lord Lannister knew the value of having specific tools to do specific jobs, and had slowly invested over the years in a large band of men who had come to be called The Mountain's Men, who were of similar disposition to him. Like the Brave Companions they could handle the more atrocious jobs and could also give Lord Lannister plausible deniability later on. After all Gregor had been a monster and monsters often slipped their leashes. Only a few of those men had ridden with the Mountain to the Tourney of the hand. Those few of course died in King's Landing to the mobs after Ranma slaughtered Gregor, but this left the majority still around to cause carnage.

Indeed those were the orders Ander was following now, that had set these men on the march into the Reach and to lands held by House Rowan several weeks ago. 'Burn, pillage, rape, make a nuisance of yourselves. Avoid any set battle with larger forces, instead harry, harass, burn, keep on the move. Bring the horror of war to the Reach as much as possible before you are forced to retreat'. That, these men, these two thousand barely human monsters would do gleefully, as the line of smoke in the sky behind them attested to.

Nor was this the only group sent out from the Westerlands to raid the Reach. While Tywin did not employ many mercenary companies save those who could perform deeds he would like to have plausible deniability for, he retained one company from Tyrosh, a band of free riders that were more organized and better led than most.

This company, consisting of nearly another two thousand men, moved down the Ocean Road from Crakehall into the Reach from that direction. They were backed by men of House Turnberry and Greenfield, another eight hundred archers and a little over a hundred scouts. Their job was to either sack any keep or holdfast which they felt was too weak to hold them out, or wait in ambush for any force sent out against the former Mountain's men. The decision of which order to follow was left up to the commander, Ser Prester.

**OOOOOO**

The camp sitting on the outskirts of the city of the Whispering Woods wasn't large, about eighty armstrongs, three knights and two hundred archer. Over the main tent flew the banner of House Grell, a blue shield split by a diagonal white line with three red birds. A knightly house, they had long been loyal followers of House Tully, just as House Paeg was known to be, hence why the camp's guards merely waved Ser Harmon, head of that house, and his party

of ten men through when they rode up.

House Paege too had mustered their forces. They were waiting in Fairmarket but Halmon had ridden out to meet with House Grell, wanting to confer on what they should do before marching out.

*It was interesting* Ser Hartwick Grell thought to himself as he studied the ten men dismounting from their horses, *that not one of those men is one of his son-in-laws, or even his grandsons*. That said something about the house's interior disposition, and it wasn't good. "Halmon," he said aloud, grasping the other man's forearm warmly. "Are you ready to receive us in Fairmarket?"

Fairmarket was a town on the Blue Fork, the waypoint of trade between Seagard and the rest of the Riverlands. It was small, but growing slowly and its defenses were also growing. Paege had originally been a knightly house, but thanks to Fairmarket continuing to slowly grow, they might achieve lordly status in a generation or two more.

"Aye, I am," The other man said. He was a knight and retained both the body and the training of said, much like his counterpart. Both were hard, tough men, who had fought against the traitors that followed House Targaryen rather than their Lord Paramount in the War of the Usurper despite their own misgivings, and again against the Ironborn when they tried to invade the Ironman's Bay, serving under Lord Mallister. "But I have other matters to speak of."

Ser Grell groaned. "What's gone wrong now?" There'd been so many things going wrong that it was an easy assumption to make.

"I know not what maggot has infested his brain, but Bruce Nayland has declared his house for Lord Renly!"

For a moment Hartwick simply looked at him blankly. Nayland was a knightly house much like his own, but even weaker considering that they held the lands of the Hags Mire, a large everglade that was the end of the Blue Fork, with many of its source tributaries feeding out of the glades. It was a small weak area in terms of men and food it could produce or support and the power of the knightly house in control of it reflected that. They could barely put a hundred men, at best two hundred men into the field, and most of those would be untried levies.

What bothered Hartwick however was the fact that they were declaring for Renly Baratheon rather than simply stating they wouldn't take any side. **That** he could understand, indeed for most of the minor houses that stance would be sensible, especially in a situation like this when no one really knew which side was in the right, whatever they may say publicly. But to declare for a Lord Paramount not of the Riverlands and one without a good legal claim to the throne, **that** was bizarre. "By the Stanger what is Bruce thinking!"

"I don't know if he **is** thinking." Halmon growled. "The Naylands have never been known for their ability to plan ahead, but the young firebrand that is their head of house now is even worse. I think he met Renly once at a tournament or something, and that seems to be enough for him."

"Enough for what, to raise his house in arms against their Lord Paramount, to ignore all oaths of loyalty and fealty?" Hartwick said incredulously. "Fool."

"True." Halmon replied, shaking his head then looking around before speaking in a lower tone. "In truth, I would prefer to not take the field against the Lannisters either. I do not believe Lord Edmure or Lord Stark committed treason, but there are so many differing reports of what really went on in King's Landing that I can't tell which is false and which is true."

By this point Renly, the Queen's and Stannis's version of events in King's Landing had begun to spread along with rumors, which were the only things faster than raven wings. Lord Renly was declaring that the children of the queen were all illegitimate, though he did not know their father. He had information from the maesters to back it up, notes from a genealogy study that showed that every time the Lannisters and Baratheons married, the boys took after the Baratheon line. There was no specific message about the female offspring of those unions but that could have simply been an oversight of the genealogists.

Stannis had taken it a step further. He had declared and sent messages out both on horseback and by raven stating that all three of the royal children had been the kingslayer's sons, that Cersei had committed incest with her brother. That was so beyond the pale that none would have believed it, yet it was coming from Stannis. Stern, dour and lacking in people skills he might be, but every lord who had met the man knew Stannis was not one to spread such rumors. Not unless he had proof. Though few were prepared yet to say they believed it, no one was willing to say they didn't either.

Then of course there was the Queen's version, wherein Lord Stark of all people had made a play for the crown in

conjunction with Targaryen loyalists, dragging in Edmure as well. That made no sense to anyone who had met Eddard or even knew anything of his character. Yet it was fact that the victors won the right to make the histories, and at first even those most loyal to House Tully were prepared to believe it. After all, Edmure wasn't known for his forward thinking, and could easily have been led into folly.

But that was where rumors began to come in. Rumors which said Lord Stark had survived. Rumors that said his son had returned from a mission to Essos then rescued Sansa Stark singlehandedly before retreating to the sea. That before he had retreated, Lord Stark had stated that the **queen** was a traitor, and that it was his proof Renly was mouthing.

Muddying that further was the fact that everyone agreed the Starks had opened their arms to Tommen and Myrcella, the two youngest of the three royal children. If they were illegitimate, then surely the Starks wouldn't have been willing to do that, right? And surely Lord Tully would never have sent so many men to the Starks if he had any idea they were going to commit treason? So no one really knew what to believe, but thanks to their lord Paramount's orders to follow their conscience, every house was doing just that.

"I would've said the same if not for this. It was passed on to me from Riverrun. I'm probably the first to see it." Hartwick replied, holding up a small raven message. He handed it over to the other man who took it, read it then smiled grimly.

"Interesting." Halmon said simply while handing it back, but he shook his head. "Still, I have the defense of Fairmarket to see to and that limits the amount of men I can send into the field."

"Bah, combined we don't have enough men to make any difference in a straight up battle against the Lannisters. Let that to the Noble Houses, they're apparently planning something over at the Kneeling Man's ford. Rather poetic frankly, if they can pull it off." Hartwick smirked.

Lord Paege barked a laugh then shook his head again. "I was going to say that we shouldn't field any forces against them, but we can match Nayland."

"Yes," Ser Grell said nodding his head grimly. "We can put Naylands back in their place, and guard Fairmarket. With its defenses and my own men added to yours we should be able to hold out until help arrives from Lord Mallister."

They both knew was true. House Mallister was one of the five most powerful houses in the Riverlands, but Jason Mallister had even more area he needed to defend. Not a single Riverlands lord was under any misapprehension of what the Ironborn would be doing in this time of calamity. As such Lord Mallister couldn't field his entire force. He had to keep some at home to defend Seagard, and had to keep some to go to the aid of any of the small villages in the Cape of Eagles. There weren't many of them, and they were all decently protected, but not one of them could call on more than five or six-hundred defenders even if it called up its entire male population.

As such Lord Mallister had sent word he was putting a force of three thousand men, mostly infantry and archers into the field. This let him his heavy and light infantry, and he had enough horse to add to their speed which would allow him to better protect the Cape of Eagles. His son Patrek led them marching down the Green Fork around Hags Mire before marching to Fairmarket on the Blue Fork which was not only a village but also the site of a bridge across that river. Once that force reached Fairmarket it would be a far harder nut to crack, one that even Lord Tywin would probably try to bypass rather than fight.

"But you have issues of your own." Grell went on obliquely looking at the men who were watering their horses behind Lord Paege. A few of his own men were coming out with bowls of hot stew and field bread for them, but they wouldn't tarry long before turning around with his own force to continue the march. They would be at Fairmarket within three days if they kept up their current pace.

Paege grimaced and nodded reluctantly. "I, I've been displeased with my sons-in-law for a while now. But this current business has brought that to the fore. Both Whalen and Jammos think we should follow Lord Frey's 'suggestion' and either remain neutral or join with the Lannisters." He scowled angrily. "Damn Freys, wouldn't know honor if it bit them in the ass!"

Hartwick laughed, shaking his head. "I'm just glad none of mine' are married into that damn family. Your daughters?"

"Somewhat fond of their husbands, but there's been some issues there with how they are training their children and how much time they and the boys spend up at the Twins." He shrugged. "They won't be happy with their husbands being restrained, but they will understand."

The problem was Old Walder Frey had been around so long, and been so... profligate that his sons had married into dozens of other lordly houses, but all of them were far more loyal to him than to their new houses. The Paeges were not alone in facing this issue, but they might be one of the worst off. Halmon had three sons and two daughters. Both daughters had married Freys, the thirteenth and fourteenth sons of Old Walder both of whom were very much their father's creature.

Also unfortunately, none of his sons had married just yet, his refusal to take a Frey as a daughter as well as a son-in-law into his house making that tougher. There were a few other marriageable age girls, but some of them were spoken for already, and for the others, the houses had turned down his proposals. Despite controlling Fairmarket House Paege was still a knightly house, not a lordly one, which hurt his prospects.

His oldest daughter Sallei had three sons, and had two miscarriages besides them. His other daughter Sylwa had one son and a daughter. Hoster was a likely lad, and had already agreed to squire for Halmon's youngest Garrett when he was knighted in two years. Jammos' three had been sent up to the Twins or other Frey supporters to Hoster, and come back changed. All three of them were likely to follow Jammos rather than Halmon despite Halmon being their head of house.

"I'm going to arrest them all if they keep pushing." Halmon went on quietly as the camp broke up around them and the men began to move.

Hartwick clambered up into his saddle beside his friend and nodded grimly. "Want some help with that?"

"No." Halmon replied, shaking his head. This is an internal family matter, and I hope to imprison them without further bloodshed."

Hartwick nodded his head, hoping it went as well as the other man wished.

Three days later they arrived back at Fairmarket. Fairmarket was a town of around three or four thousand souls, though it had swelled thanks to the current troubles up to six or seven thousand due to refugees from down past the Red Fork.

Lord Lannister's forces were not being kind as he marched over the Riverlands, unless the Lord of the land they were currently on bent the knee. More than a few had, but that hadn't saved their neighbors. Luckily only the Stone Mill and Mummer's fords were under Lannister control, allowing men to come across at the Kneeling Man's ford to make their way to Fairmarket or other castles, begging for aid and protection. There were also other groups here from the lands of other lords who had sent them here to get them out of the way.

House Paege's keep was a simple two-story keep made of stone set into the side of the outer wall of the village. That wall showed how Fairmarket was slowly changing. Where before it had been a simple wooden palisade now there was a wall made of stone along that entire side, with the stone continuing on until it reached the two towers, both new constructions, set near the river. The other side still retained its wooden palisade, and the two towers were still being built, but it was a decent defensive position.

Halmon's oldest son Robert rode out from the keep to meet them. After exchanging pleasantries with both older men he became grim. "Word has arrived from the Twins. By order of the crown, Lord Tully is going to be stripped of his Lord Paramount status if he does not send orders to get the Noble houses under control. According to the Freys, the Lannisters wish to name Lord Frey as the new Lord Paramount of the Riverlands. They aren't going to just yet, not until this present conflict is over, but that's a major carrot to tempt Old Walder with. It's made my brothers-in-law even more strident in their demands that we follow Lord Frey's suggestions."

Robert spat the words 'brothers-in-law' having never liked either man, even if he couldn't figure out if they were abusing their wives or not. Keeping them pregnant was dangerous and debilitating to them, but that wasn't abuse, not quite. Certainly not enough for him to take umbrage against anyway.

Halmon growled angrily. "It seems I have no choice. Will you be all right keeping your men out here for another hour or so my friend?" he said turning to Hartwick. "It seems I have to clean house before offering you hospitality."

Hartwick nodded and the two Paeges turned. With their men following them they rode ahead to their small keep. Inside they quickly dismounted, handing their horses over to one of the stable-hands before moving into the keep proper. Robert broke off there, heading into the first story barracks to alert the men of coming trouble while Halmon moved on inside up to the families private suites.

He was making for his office where he would call his sons-in-law in along with his grandsons, but was accosted on

the trip by the oldest of them. Jammos was broad shouldered, fair-haired and pleasant to look upon, but that pleasantness only ran skin deep. He was a true son of Old Walder, who thought himself intelligent and brave beyond what he truly was. "Father." he said, making that word a mockery almost, and Halmon noted absently he had a sword strapped to his side. "We have to talk. No doubt you've already heard but..."

"I have heard. Halmon said interrupting him. But my answer remains the same. "I am sworn to Lord Tully, not your father and certainly not Lord Lannister. My Lord asked me to act in the way my conscience dictates, and I will do so. I will not side with you Freys or the Lannisters. That is an end to it. If you keep on pushing this, I'll have no choice but to place both you and your brother under arrest."

The man shrugged as if it was no moment turning away only to come back, his sword flashing out of its scabbard. "In that case, I think it's time for House Paege to have a new Lord."

Halmon stumbled back astonished but still pulling out his own blade and blocking the younger man's thrust. "Traitor!" he bellowed, parrying and sending Jammos backward, before the two began to trade blows there in the hallway of his own keep. The noise of that conflict seemed to be a signal because suddenly all around them noises of battle began flared up from within the keep.

The younger man grunted, not showing any of his strain in his voice. The older man had surprised him by his speed and strength, but then again this was the first time they'd faced one another sword to sword, the older man disdaining tournaments. His father's orders however had been very specific. House Paege was to come over to their side, securing Fairmarket for the Lannisters before the Mallister force arrived.

Though Jammos didn't know it, Lord Walder was playing a long game. With Fairmarket and its crossing secure, the Lannister could then march up to the twins along the Blue Fork, smashing the Mallister forces out of their way to link up with the Freys before closing down that neck to anything from the North. Combined the Freys and the Lannister's first echelon would have enough strength to sit at the edge of the Neck where the Kingsroad entered it and fortify the position.

That was, if the North couldn't offer the Freys more than the Lannisters could or at least match them. Lord Frey wasn't about to risk his own troops until he was assured of gaining something. The Lannister's promises weren't worth the paper they were written on, enough for him to put his armsmen into the field, but not enough to actually order them into battle, not without some solid assurances.

Playing both sides against one another's was simply good sense according to Old Walder. He was a realist, and knew that many of his fellow Riverlands lords would look upon him askance for being elevated to Lord Paramount by the Lannisters, regardless of anything else, so was willing to listen to other offers, especially if they were more solid. After all, Ranma Stark was as yet unmarried, and there were the other Stark children to consider. (Needless to say certain tidbits of news had not reached very far just yet...)

Jammos frowned, backing away from the old man as Halmon pushed their locked blades closer to his chest, then broke the lock before trying a lightning thrust. But Halmon ducked to one side, his own sword coming up slicing deep into the younger man's arm. Jammos screamed, but that was all he had time for before his father-in-law's blade took him in the chest punching through his leather armor and out his back in a welter of blood.

Staring down at his son-in-law's body Halmon shook his head. "Stranger Damned Freys!" He then turned his attention to the battle at hand racing towards the largest concentration of noise.

He came upon his other son-in-law and two of James's three sons, fighting his own son Damon four on one there in the halls. Damon fell as Halmon approached, his leg pierced by a blade from one of his nephews. "Damn you!" he cried. "We're family! Why?!"

The boy who'd stabbed him, Mathis, backed away, looking down at his blade almost as if he didn't know why he was holding it for a moment shocked at the sight of his uncle bleeding from a blow from him, but Whalen moved forward his sword rising for a blow to finish Damon off. "That's precisely why we're doing this, family!" he sneered. "It's just House Frey is much more worth following than House Paege as it is now!"

Halmon barreled into them, slamming Whalen against the wall behind him as his own blade flicked out slamming one of the younger boys backwards from a blow from the side of his sword to the side. Walder grimaced in pain but he and Dickon recovered quickly, swords rising to attack their grandfather.

But around them the men-at-arms of house Paege were rallying. Jammos had brought back ten men with him from the twins on his latest return home. He and his sons had long known that battle might occur inside house Paege to

determine who they would follow and they were all determined to win. However, the men that Halmon had taken out with him to meet with Ser Grell had been just as prepared for violence when they got back. As Halmon fought his family, with his son Damon once more on his feet protecting his back, his men rallied in the rest of the keep, cutting down the traitors in their midst.

Several blows were exchanged further when Sylwa's son Hoster raced out of their suite of rooms further down the hallway. He was crying, and at eleven was the youngest boy there, but he held a blade in his hand, a gift from Halmon on his last birthday that his mother had taken control of when Hoster was not training with his uncles. Outside of practicing young boys often thought that once they had a blade in their hands they ruled the world after all, and Sylwa had **views** on her little boy wielding a weapon in that manner.

"You bastards!" Hoster shouted as he came. "You killed her, you killed my mother!"

Halmon's heart went cold at those words and looking into Whalen's eyes he saw the truth of it. "Why?" he said his voice of alloy of grief and rage. "Why!"

"The bitch would've warned you." The younger man growled, pushing back at against the older man's sword. "I refuse to let you bring this whole family down with you. Fairmarket is mine!" Actually, it would have been Jammos', but the younger Whalen had no illusions on what he would or would not do to gain control of the village.

Hoster slammed into Dickon and Walder, losing his sword in the impact but bearing the two larger boys, almost man at 16, to the ground. Both of them raised their swords to cut him down, but he was inside their grip, and his belt dagger flew stabbing frenziedly. Dickon screamed as it first found his side, then his guts.

Seeing his brother dying on the floor under his cousin , Mathis came out of his funk. He plunged his blade into the younger boy's back killing him instantly.

Halmon howled, and Damon, grief stricken, cut Mathis down before bringing his blade around to finish off Walder. Walder ducked rolling on the floor to dodge the blow, flinging his own blade up to slice into Damon's unarmored side. Damon slumped against the hallway's wall, gasping from the pain. With that done, Walder turned to help his father with Halmon his face almost blank.

Robert and several armsmen arrived at that point and looked in horror at the scene in front of them. Robert had been about to demand his brother-in-law's surrender, but seeing the bodies on the floor his own brother and the bodies of his nephews down he simply roared and charged. Not two minutes later it was all over, with both Walder and Whalen chopped down to join the others.

After ordering Robert to organize his armsmen to remove the bodies in the hallway and send for a maester for Damon, who still breathed, Halmon moved down the hallway. Passing Hoster's body he stopped momentarily to close the boy's wide, staring eyes, his own brown eyes filled with tears of grief. "Brave lad, you deserved better than this."

Leaving that scene of carnage, Halmon moved on. He soon reached the suites that Hoster had come from and looked inside. It was a small family suite like many found in castles the world over, one master bedroom, one child's bedroom set to the side, and the main sitting area. In the sitting area Sylwa, his youngest daughter, lay dead on the floor, her neck broken.

Halmon didn't know what happened here, and likely never would since his men hadn't taken any prisoners. But he supposed that Hoster had been ordered to remain in his room while his parents argued only to come out when he heard the sound of battle out in the hallway to find his mother like this.

"Brave boy." Halmon said, his voice gruff as he went to one knee by his daughters body, not having the heart right then to check on his other daughter, somehow knowing she too would be dead. Both of his daughters had been very loyal to their family, and would never have agreed to go against him, their father. "Brave boy and loyal too, the only one of them who knew what honor was. I should've never let the others foster where they did! No, I should've never agreed to let those two into my house at all! I'm sorry..." he said to the body of his youngest daughter "I'm sorry. Damn Freys, Stranger damned Freys!"

OOOOOO

A group of 20 men on horseback moved through the woods several hours in front of the main force of the Lannister forces. All of them were wearing the colors of the Westerlands House of Jast. These men were assigned to scout out the route ahead of the army. All of them were veterans and knew the troubles similar parties had run into before so rode with one hand on their swords and both eyes wide open, scanning the trees.

They would've done better to also have been watching where their horses were walking. As the first horses in the small party passed between two larger oaks there were two men covered with leaves and branches hidden among the roots of those trees. Barely able to see from under the leaves, the two men nodded slightly to one another, the rustling of their covering lost in the tramp of hooves on the ground. As the first horses came level with them both men tugged hard on a rope that lay between them. Snapping taut, the rope rose up out of the grass where it had been hidden to catch the second pair of legs on the two horses.

Those horses stumbled, the action taking the attention of all of the scouts for just a moment, which proved deadly. Out of the woods from all around them arrows flew, and suddenly the group of fifteen was down to five. Those five men at the back of the party turned and tried to race away, but seven men, all of them wearing dark green colors, purposefully dirtied leather Jerkins with bits of leaves stuck here and there, the better to blend in, suddenly popped up, spears raised and slamming up into the riders, piercing their leather armor and smashing them out of their saddles.

Two more men came out of the woods wielding short swords that had been purposefully darkened and oiled to make no sound as they came out of their scabbards. Moving methodically through the downed men they slit throats while also taking the dead men's pouches. Their leaders didn't care if they looted the corpses of the enemy, so long as it was the enemy dead, not their own.

Suddenly an owl, a nocturnal hunter hooted, causing all the men there to look up into the woodlands towards the sound. This signal followed by four more hoots. At that signal they all quickly faded back into the woods, racing off and away from the ambush point.

One of the men paused just a moment to pull out of his backpack a spare tabard. On it was a shield quartered with two squares of black with a white tower, and two squares of white with green dragons on them. "Blood for blood." He muttered, tossing it down onto one of the bodies before racing off into the woods.

OOOOOO

Mules marched through what was formerly House Smallwood land, being led through the woods by men of House Lannister, along with twenty men of the Bloody Mummer's guarding it. The Mummer's men were cocksure and not watching their surroundings, still full of themselves for the sacking of Acorn Hall. The Lannister men **were** paying attention but this wasn't their land. While they knew to look for movement in the woods, they couldn't spot an ambush point coming up in this strange land of large forests, hills, small streams, and glades. Their fellows had been paying for that lack of knowledge for several weeks now.

One of the men guarding the right flank of the small party paused quizzically, looking up into the trees.

"What?" said one of the others.

"I could've sworn I saw a red..."

That was as far as he got before an arrow seemed to grow out of his eye, splattering his fellow with his life's blood. The surviving man cried out in shock then screamed as an arrow found his side, his leather armor little protection against a heavy bodkin arrowhead, which punched deep into his gut.

What they lacked in actual martial ability or situational awareness the mercenaries made up for in survivor instincts. As one they all turned in the saddle, trying to race away through the woods. Instead they ran into more men, suddenly appearing from under bush or behind tree. Spears flashed up into their faces, short swords stabbed into their horse's bellies, and the men went down.

Tyos Blackwood, lord of House Blackwood, pulled his sword out of one of the mercenaries, leaning down to spit into the man's face before slitting his throat. "You've murdered your last child!" he growled, his face a mask of fury over his beard.

Raven feather cloak swirling, Tyos stood up moving to his men and those of House Vance who had joined them for this ambush, a squad of five to add to his own twenty. Other groups like this were spread out all over Smallwood lands and many other houses that were on the route Lannister's men had followed up to this point. In times of peace that would be an act of aggression against those houses, but now Tyos and the Vance youngsters could not care less. Blackwood saw it as his duty to oppose the Lannister invaders, above and beyond not wishing to bow to a child of incest, while the remaining house Vance wished to avenge their cousins. "What were they transporting?"

"Flour and medicines on this one." Said one of the house Vance man, a youngster named Cliff Aleris, an archer and

an excellent shot despite coming from a smallfolk family of farmers.

"Arrowheads and cured meat on this one." One of his own men said, an armsmen named Saros.

"We'll eat well tonight then." Tytos said laughing and slapping both of the men on their shoulders. "Now away. We'll keep moving for the rest of the day, we won't rest until deep night, I want us to put at least two of the small rivers between us."

Small rivers were the name of all the unnamed little brooks and inlets that dotted the Riverlands, whether or not they fit into larger bodies of water were not. No mapmaker had ever tried to name them all, you would have been able to see the land for the names.

They turned to their local guide, and armsmen of Smallwood who, like a few others had survived the battle of Acorn Hall. Terrence Corbeck decided to link up with the groups of raiders, taking bloody vengeance on the invading army for his home. Terrence nodded and led the way off through the woods while Tytos quickly organized the race through the woods, divvying out the spoils to his men. *Little things here and there*, he thought to himself, *none of us have a strong enough spear to gore the lion, but even a lion can die from enough bee-stings.*

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Lord Tywin scowled, looking down at his map while around him his officers shuffled uncomfortably. Not normally one to allow irritation to show except under extreme circumstances, that he was doing so now was a sign of the trouble they had run into of late. *Dammit, Hoster's move was even shrewder than I had feared. The Riverlands lords might not be capable generals in a pitched offensive, but little skirmishes and delaying actions, on their own ground? That they can do quite well apparently. Over six hundred men I've lost in the last week alone!*

At first after the example of House Vance of Wayfarer's Rest, things had gone smoothly. The Lychesters had then bent the knee, a small House, they had known better than to try to fighting him.

The Goodbrooks were next, and had been very shrewd in how they had fought him for all of two days. They had set several small deadly ambushes for his scouts, killing two dozen of his men for little return, fading back into the woodlands and away from his army's angle of advance. That had ended when one of his nephews had set up an ambush of their own, riding their initial party of ambushers into the ground.

The Goodbrooks, a house that had never recovered from Hoster's retaliation against them for following the Targaryens, had lost both their lord which probably meant they were now extinct in the long run considering the only survivor of the house was a uncle who had married a Frey girl. Their keep, which had also been nearly demolished by Hoster along with the small village around it, was several days out of the way however. This plus the fact the he house was too poor to support his army in any way meant Tywin was willing to let him, his wife and their two children be since he surrendered and vowed to support the king.

Crossing the Red Fork had also been relatively easy. A small force out of Pinkmaiden including Lord Piper's heir Marq had tried to ambush his scouts, but been ambushed in turn. Apparently the young fool had been a friend of Edmure, and had acted without his father's approval in leading that attack.

With the heir captured, Lord Piper had negotiated for his return. Lord Piper was a shrewd character however, and had already evacuated everyone who was willing to leave the village of Mummer's Ford into his castle. Despite its idiotic name, Pinkmaiden was a hard nut to crack, a fully modern castle. The Pipers were also a decently strong noble house, with the numbers of armsmen on hand that title implied unlike house Vance of Wayfarer's Rest, which Tywin's economic moves had crippled over time.

From this position of strength, the agreement they reached was almost even. House Piper agreed not to support any attacks on Lord Lannister's forces as well as supply a force of two hundred scouts, and to keep Mummer's Ford open for Lannister traffic, with an agreement in the future to bend the knee once the 'position of the Riverlands in relation to the crown was less fluid'. In others words, Piper would bend the knee the moment doing so wouldn't set the majority of its neighbors on him.

In return, Tywin promised the honorable treatment of the other Piper men captured, and guaranteed his armies conduct while on Piper land, plus provender for two thousand to be paid from the village stores. In all House Piper had lost two-hundred-and-eleven men thanks to Marq's idiocy, but his father had saved their house for now and Lord Lannister had crossed at the Stone Mill's ford without further incident.

The geography of the Riverlands meant that on a straight line march, the fastest march he could do, up to the Neck



meant he would have to cross the Red Fork again later on. The Red Fork, the slowest and most meandering of the three great rivers, made a half loop down from the mountains to where it intersected the other forks at the Trident.

But since that first crossing, his army had begun to take niggling losses here and there. Not a day went by on the march when some small group of scouts were not ambushed and when his scouts missed those ambushes his men on the march took losses as well. No one of any importance had died as yet, but fifteen light cavalry here, one or two knights there, a dozen infantrymen here, it added up.

*Wiping out House Vance was a mistake I realize that now,* Tywin thought. *Yes, it sent the message I wanted to, but I should've realized that House Vance of Atranta would take it poorly.*

Vance of Atranta was one of the three most powerful Riverlands houses of the on this side of the Red Fork. Led by an old blind man, Tywin had thought possibly too cautious to raise arms against him when he had the crown's approval, or barring that, the sons too young and untried. But that had not proven to be the case thus far.

*But they surprised me. I thought that if they did they would try to stand up against my army in a straight up fight, possibly with Blackwood and other families of the region beside them. Ronald 'the Bad' isn't known for his martial ability after all. That way I could smash them in an open contest without being forced to root them out of their castles. Instead house Vance of Atranta seems to have put forth its strength in little ambush groups here and there.*

Despite finding out that Acorn Hall and House Smallwood had fallen to a surprise attack by the Bloody Mummies, the attacks on his scouts but more importantly his supply train and line were telling. Of course that was because while Acorn Hall had been sacked, its stores had also gone up in the fire the Bloody Mummies set on the wooden keep.

Nor was there any sign of Lady Ravella Smallwood, or her daughter. Tywin had the ruins and the Bloody Mummer's camp searched in particular for any sign of them, having a description of both and no wish to let potentially important tools be ill-used by Hoat and his lackeys.

When it came clear to Tywin that the Smallwoods might have escaped the sacking of their keep, he had Hoat brought before him, then executed the man some called the Goat for gross incompetence and overstepping his bounds. One could have been excused without the other, but Hoat and his band were almost as bad as the men Tywin had collected to put under Gregor's command. They had to be shown there were limits. Moreover, Vargo had dared to speak to Tywin as if he was an equal. Such things could not be allowed to pass, but thankfully the Goat's execution seemed to have gotten his message across.

So despite his progress, Tywin was in danger of stalling here, which had forced him to consider an action he had hoped not to. He looked up, his face once more composed as Lord Bracken was shown into his tent.

Jonos Bracken was brown eyed man of Tywin's generation though not as tall as he, with broad shoulders and arms, a sign of his youth when he was a well-known wrestler. He wore plate and mail, with the tabard with the color of his house proudly displayed, a red horse on a yellow shield with a brown frame while he carried a great-helm with a horsehair crest under one arm.

"You will supply my men with the supplies they need." Tywin stated firmly. "If you do that I will aid you in destroying House Blackwood, as they have taken up arms against the crown. I will send a force from my second echelon to siege and take their castle in conjunction with your own men." Blackwood men had also been seen attacking Tywin's supply trains. Tywin internally wondered if Tytos Blackwood was the one who had shaped the Riverlander's strategy so far, it seemed far too intelligent to come from the oldest Vance boy, Ronald.

Bracken growled at Tywin's tone, but nodded. "I'll agree to that, so long as I have your word we'll destroy them, root and branch." The Blackwoods and Brackens had been feuding for generations, longer than anyone alive remembered, and their hatred for one another's houses was the driving force behind Bracken being here. He couldn't care less who sat on the Iron Throne, nor was he truly close to House Tully or anyone from that family.

"You have my word." Tywin replied formally, before turning back to the map. "Now, how many men can you add to my force, and how fast can supplies reach us?"

Bracken frowned, pulling at his short cropped beard thoughtfully. For now, I'll say that the force I brought with me here, a little over a thousand armsmen, five hundred archers and a hundred heavy cavalry. If we wipe out Blackwood, I'll add another two thousand mixed levies and archers to that plus five hundred more armsmen."

Tywin went over those numbers in his head, comparing them to what he knew of Bracken's strength and nodded. That would mean stripping Stone Hedge, House Bracken's castle of nearly its entire defense force, but so long as

Lord Lannister controlled the side of the red Fork that would be an acceptable risk for the other house. After a moment Tywin nodded. "Very well. Now," he said gesturing down at the map. "Tell me what you know of our route, do you recommend one fort over the other?"

Over the next few hours after talking to Lord Bracken and his sub commanders Tywin decided on their course from now on. There were two Fords to get across the Red Fork going further north. One was at the Trident, where you could cross all three of the Forks at once, then take the Kingsroad up north. However, that would take Tywin and his army nearly a month out of their way marching east, and that was time that Tywin could ill afford if he wanted to get up to the Neck and defend it against the northern incursion.

By this time the ship carrying his granddaughter, the almost certainly alive Lord Stark would have already reached the North, and they might have already begun to gather their forces. With the Riverlands now broken into pieces thanks to Hoster's declaration and every lord responding individually to the events in King's Landing, there was no chance of any one family standing up and taking control of the defense against him, and for all his natural charisma Renly was untried as a general. If Tywin knew what Stannis was up to perhaps he would prefer to remain here in the south and meet up with his second echelon. But not knowing that and with forces already sent to bolster the defense of King's Landing, keeping the Riverlands divided and the North out of action was the most important thing.

Then too, if he could smash a few more houses without needing to be bogged down in siege after siege, the aura of an undefeated general and his own well-earned reputation for ruthlessness could keep the houses along the eastern edge of the Riverlands from acting. A few of them backed the Targaryens in the War of the Usurper, and were individually very weak still due to Hoster's retaliation.

The Houses between the Red and Blue Forks however were a different story. Those houses were well known to have friendly and deep ties to House Tully, and most of their heirs like several others were friends of Edmure which would push them to act against any rumor of his being a traitor.

Moreover continuing straight up to the ford at the Kneeling Man would allow him to keep most of his supply lines on Bracken land, making it much harder for them to be attacked. If they tried to follow the River Road though, the Blackwood's would become more and more into play and of course Vance's men would continue their depredations.

Over the next week this strategy proved accurate. House Bracken's men took over protecting his supply lines entirely, and waged a vicious campaign against House Blackwood and House Vance men to protect them. They did a much better job than his men had done thanks to being on their own territory and knowing where any ambush points could be set up. However, Tywin was faced with a new problem when he reached the ford.

Tywin sat on his horse staring through a small spy glass across the ford. Defensive bulwarks had been thrown up on the other side of the Ford, and there were several houses allied against him over there. "Interesting," he murmured handing the spyglass over to his cousin, Daven.

The other man looked through it and nodded. "I see banners for Blanetree, Deddings, Shawney, Lolliston, Vypren, and Vance of Atranta. Apparently the sons of the old Lord have decided they've had enough of playing bandits in the woods. Overall, Possibly...." he paused, thinking as he surveyed the defensive line. "Could be as many as seven thousand?"

"That was what I estimated yes." Lord Tywin said turning to look hard at Bracken. "You assured me that they would not ally with one another."

"I said that they probably wouldn't ally." Bracken corrected. "Shawney and Lolliston would always have stood against you here or soon after Lord, their standing together is not exactly unexpected, they've married into one another often enough. The others being here is a surprise, I'll admit."

Tywin stared hard at the other man, but Bracken wasn't just old, despite his bluster he was actually tough and he stared back unflinchingly. Eventually Tywin nodded and there was some respect in his voice as he replied. "Very well, your house has served the crown well enough so far, and your advice up to this point was good. And frankly this plays to our strengths as well."

Daven nodded. He was a jovial looking man, with wide shoulders, long yellow hair and a pug nose, which had been broken several times in his youth, but despite the pugilist features he was intelligent. Daven was known good leader and blade, much better than his father Stafford. Stafford had initially served as Tywin's second-in-command, but Daven was simply a better leader of fighting men, and just as good an organizer as his father.

To avoid familial friction Tywin had sent back Stafford back to the Westerlands to help Kevan raise the second muster

and then command its march. Kevan would have normally lead that army being Tywin's closest and most trusted relative but Tywin was loath to remove Kevan from Casterly Rock. He feared that the Ironborn would attempt to revert to their roots once more, and wanted a strong, dependable hand in place to protect Lannisport.

"We outnumber them, and while that position is good, it won't make up the strength difference. We can smash those houses now, and might not have to deal with more niggling losses on the other side of the river. Especially since the Vance boys are over there." Daven smirked.

"If we smash them in as believable a manner as possible." Tywin murmured, sounding skeptical. However, Tywin knew something that Daven hadn't truly realized: that the enemy was not a unified force, far from it in fact.

"Send over an emissary under the white flag. While that's going on, ready the men for battle." With that he began to give out commands briskly, assigning each Westerlands lord to a separate section, and putting Daven in charge of the heavy cavalry.

The Red Fork was a wide, winding, lazy river, not very deep for the most part, it seemed as if a man on horse or a cart could make their way across. But it wasn't the depth that made fords necessary, but the mud. The bottom of the Red Fork was a silt and mud mire, where a horse could suddenly go in up to its ankles in places. Attempting to cross anywhere but the fords at any time except for during a dry season was folly unless you had boats to carry you across. The defenders were at the Ford because that was the only place that heavy cavalry or carts could get across without breaking their legs.

But despite that, the land here wasn't very good for a defense, it was much too flat for any defending army to have a height advantage for its archers, and there were no natural defensive points save for the ford itself. The defenders had done their best, creating a line of makeshift bulwarks with a small step behind them and large wooden walls for the archers, but it was obvious the defenses were unfinished.

Looking at them closely, Tywin could see that the far right flank had actual rocks and gravel mixed into its bulwarks, and was much taller as well. Seeing this, Tywin knew he had to smash this defense aside quickly.

Within the hour the emissary came back, with the statement that the Lords would hold the Red Fork against the Lannister's army marching forward, but that they would not attack if the Lannister's remained where they were.

The man he had sent, Lucion Lannister, son of Damion, Casterly Rock's majordomo, shrugged his shoulders. "They seem confident my Lord, they think they can hold us here, and they think that help is on the way."

The man's squire, Willem Lannister, a nephew from Tywin's dead brother Tygett, spoke up. "Sir, I think I know why."

Tywin stared at the younger man, who gulped under his heart glare but stood his ground. After a moment Tywin nodded, gesturing with one hand for the man to speak. "While I was delivering your demand for them to move aside, I talked to a few of the other squires. They were smug about it, apparently Lord Mallister has already sent men. They're already on their way and nearly to Fairmarket already. And there was some kind of missive recently out of Riverrun, something about the North already on the march. That was supposed to be a secret but..." The young man shrugged.

Tywin's eyes widened slightly and he looked over at his other field commanders all of whom looked surprised at the news. Tywin wasn't surprised that the North would march, but if they were **already** on the march that was incredibly fast. *It should've taken them three possibly even five months to gather their forces, possibly two if they didn't want to gather their full strength. Then at least another month to get down to the neck with any appreciable force!*

After a moment however he shrugged. "It's a morale boosting trick. I have no doubt that the North might've already begun to muster, but that's not the same thing as being on the march. The Mallister force however, that is more worrisome."

"If they reach Fairmarket and join with house Paeye they might be able to hold Fairmarket against us entirely." Daven said worriedly tugging at his short cropped, neatly trimmed goatee.

"Agreed." Tywin nodded crisply. "That makes it even more imperative for us to push this up force out of our way and continue on."

If they could not take Fairmarket, they could not get over the blue Fork without moving all the way down to where it connected to the Green Fork, which would take them at least a month out of their way. The Red Fork had several fords of various sizes, but the Blue Fork only had a few, and only two of them were large enough for a full army to move across. The area around the Ruby Ford was too good a defensive position for Tywin to wish to chance it,

though it would get him across both the Blue and Green Forks. Worse, if Tywin went that way he might force the families on that side of the Green Fork to side against him, so he needed to capture Fairmarket.

"Very well, signal Lord Bracken to begin the arrow storm. I'll want the first and second infantry forces ready to storm across in ten minutes. The first will advance line across, the second in a column ready to exploit any openings in their defense."

His men jumped to obey as Tywin began to bark out further orders. He positioned his archers, around a thousand two hundred men, in two wings on either side of the ford, with his infantry set up into three groups. The first a group of nearly two thousand under Lord Brax, the second group another of two thousand five hundred under Lord Lefford, upwards of two thousand heavy cavalry waited behind them, with a further force of nearly a thousand light cavalry waiting at the back of the formation with the reserve, nearly another six hundred infantry. Lord Bracken's men made up a portion of the archers on one flank, bits of the light and heavy cavalry, and nearly half the second wave of infantry.

While the majority of his archers were waiting just outside of bow range, Tywin sent several hundred forward of his lines, and ordered them to start firing on the enemy bulwarks. This was more to give him a clue as to the nature of the enemy command than to inflict any real losses.

To his amusement this probing attack elicited a strong response. He stared through his spyglass as a large force of light cavalry raced across the ford towards his archers. "Tell my nephew to bring up the heavy cavalry, crush those light cavalry! Then bring up the archers in their entirety on the wings. If they react so strongly to a small probe, let's see what they do when we start to bring up our main forces. If we can pull them out of their prepared defenses..."

Within moments the archers he had committed to that initial attack were falling back seemingly in disarray towards his main force. Rather than turning aside, the light cavalry broke apart, some of its men pulling back across the ford their objective complete, while others pursued the archers. Those archers did not live to return to Tywin's lines, but their killers died under the lances of his heavy cavalry, or retreated in broken disarray across the Ford.

Under Daven's command those heavy cavalry did not pursue, pulling back while Tywin brought up his archers, racking the defensive line and the surviving light cavalry. From a makeshift stand at the back of his Army Tywin used his binoculars to observe the assault as his archers began to fire en-masse at the opposing line. He winced however when the archers on the other side began to fire back. Riverlands archers were better than Westerlanders, their bows larger and their pull heavier, not quite up to that used in the North or the Vale, but heavier than the Westerlands type. His archers began to take losses, despite the wooden palisades that protected them just like their fellows across the ford.

Under the hail of arrows from both sides, his first infantry column raced across the ford. With the archers concentrating on one another, they crossed the ford to assault the defenders line, and infantry began to die on both sides. The defenders were outnumbered, but had a prepared position, and slightly higher ground to fight from where they blocked the ford. The blood of the Red Fork truly began to turn red from the blood of the attackers.

Tywin watched this through his binoculars, his face carved from stone. "Order the second group to advance, tell them to concentrate on the left flank, and signal our first line to shift that way. Then tell our signal men to play the Rains of Castamere."

His fellow lords looked worried at that, not the song but the concentration of the infantry on the left flank. That was the strongest defensive position of the enemy, so why would you attack there? Tywin however had noticed that the defenders on that flank had become disorganized by the retreat of the remaining light cavalry into their lines.

Moreover, on that flank his archers seemed to be slowly winning the arrow duel. The other side showed the exact opposite, and the archers of House Vance had now split their attention, hitting his infantry as they tried to cross the ford. He could see dozen of his men dying from those arrows already, their chainmail and even plate no match for the arrows of their enemies at this close range.

The messenger raced off and moments later, the battle slowly shifted away from the right flank of the defenders line. Within moments of that, the song began.

Through his spyglass Tywin saw it happen. House Vypren controlled a portion of the line on the right flank, not the outermost portion which was given over to house Blanetree and Deddings, but the next bit, with Lolliston and Vance of Atranta holding the center and Shawney holding the left. It was the Shawney who were disorganized by the retreat of the light cavalry, and their line was already bending, forcing the small defenders reserve to reinforce them.

Over the noise of his army the song of his signal men reached across the Red Fork. The men under the Vypren banner, a black toad on a white lily pad backed by a green shield, turned to their right and began to assault the men of House Lolliston from the side. It worked even better than Tywin had expected, as he saw the banner of House Lolliston fall. He could make out one man falling from his horse who looked to have better armor than his fellows. Later on he would confirm that Lord Lolliston and his guard had all died under that sudden assault, the Vyprens proving to be vipers in truth.

With his infantry engaged with the rest of the defender's line holding them in place that left the heavy cavalry to exploit that breach. Without even being ordered to, they did so barreling into the suddenly disorganized House Lolliston line breaking it into pieces. As Tywin watched the men of house Loughton began to retreat in disarray, causing the breach to open even wider. "Order the infantry reserves in after the heavy cavalry. They are to exploit the breach, turn to the left as they get across, sweep the line and make certain that the Vance boys are either killed or captured."

Tywin did not want any of the House Vance troops to escape. They had proven far too capable in hit-and-run attacks up to this point, he did not want to have to deal with that again.

At the front of the line of heavy cavalry Daven laughed as he splashed across the Ford and into the disorganized Lolliston lines. His lance impacted one man as he spurred his horse over the defensive line of earthworks then pulled out his sword, cutting down one man then another as his horse galloped on through the infantry lines. The men whose spears might have been able to hold his cavalry at bay had turned aside to fight Vypren's men, and so were now easy meat for his horsemen. Behind him the rest of the heavy cavalry slammed into the already disorganized defenders routing them and moving on to circle back for another pass through.

Daven shouted orders to those around him, keeping a firm grip on his men while he turned looking for an appropriate target. He saw House Blanetree and House Deddings pulling back already, unwilling to stay and fight now that their initial infantry line had been broken by treachery. "Rally to me!" he bellowed, then pointed forward at the retreating Deddings. "After them lads!"

The Deddings were a small but relatively rich family, their holding like that of House Vance or Atranta actually on the other side of the red Fork. They had never been a powerful house, always hovering on the edge of noble and lordly status, but that balance was broken now as Daven led his men after them.

Lord Deddings turned, and saw the heavy cavalry racing down on his man. He tried to form up his infantry, tried to get a semblance of a spear line ready to receive them, but failed to do so in time, and the horse of the heavy cavalry rode his men down. Several horsemen were skewered from the saddle despite this, but the infantry's lack of a true line allowed the shock of the heavy cavalry hitting them to do its work. Deddings himself, his sons and two knights sworn to his family, realizing the battle was lost, spurred their own horses away. That was the final straw for his men, and they broke utterly.

Seeing the lord getting away, Daven rounded up two of his men and went after them, letting the destruction of Deddings's infantry to the other knights. Within moments he had caught up to the fleeing lord. Daven personally dueled with him for several moments, before an overhand blow shattered the other man's shield before cutting deep through his helmet, slicing into his head with a sound like a melon shattering. Over the next few hours Daven crushed house Deddings into the dirt, utterly breaking that house killing its Lord and both his sons, before harrying Blanetree, killing many of that houses' men over the course of the day, but failing to get Ser Blanetree himself.

Still staring through his viewing glass Tywin smiled grimly. "Push the light cavalry across. Their lines are broken, harry them into the ground."

House Lolliston's men stood and fought where they were grimly, but without their lord and with their flank open they were slowly ground under. House Vance and House Shawney fought similarly, with House Shawney's men regaining coordination then slowly falling back but under good order now. That screw up had been because the heir of House Lolliston sent out with the light cavalry to run the archer probe down had tried to give orders to his line when they retreated, but now he and his men were following Lord Shawney's command as well.

Lord Stephen Shawney was an able commander, having fought against the Ironborn numerous times during the rebellion and even spent a year in Essos as a mercenary before being forced to return when his father died of old age to take up the Lordship. He knew when a battle was lost, and began to slowly pull his men back from the defensive line.

House Vance of Atranta had played the game of war magnificently up to this point, but this one mistake, coming out into the open, doomed them. With their lines broken the three sons of house Vance who were present each had a

different idea of what to do, and as a consequence their men were stuck where they were.

That proved deadly, and as Lord Shawney began to fall back to the west deeper into their territory between the Blue Fork and Red Fork, House Vance's men were slowly being left behind. Without a central commander who knew what they were doing, they were quickly circled, more and more infantry coming up on every side and piling in forcing them away from prepared defenses and cutting them down.

Ronald 'the Bad' Vance, the oldest brother tried to break through with a force of hoarded heavy cavalry, but by that point there were too many of the infantry surrounding his position, and he couldn't get up enough momentum to break through. For any cavalry force momentum was everything, if a heavy cavalry man was pinned in place, he lost his greatest advantage, and that happened now. Ronald fell, pulled down by the infantry of House Lannister and slain. Yet his assault had given his two brothers, Hugo and Ellery, the chance to get away themselves with a small band of cavalry. They retreated from the battlefield, only to be caught the next day by Lord Marbrand and his House's light cavalry. Fighting to the death, they took an equal number of men down with them, but still fell.

In total, House Vance had lost almost all of the strength it had sent to war in this attempt to hold back the Lannister forces, having broken from their winning strategy and paying for it with almost total annihilation. If that would have been the case if House Vypren had not turned its coat would be debated years later by maesters who studied the War of Reformation, as this war came to be called. Reality however could not be changed, and the reality was that Tywin Lannister had won the day.

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The next day dawned with Lord Tywin in full possession of the Kneeling Man's Ford, but his losses had been heavier than he had hoped. Several thousand men now lay dead, especially among his archers and infantry. The Riverlands archers had taken a truly deadly toll among his own, killing two for every one of them that went down, and until House Vypren had turned coat, the infantry line had held against his own men, their higher position and wider line allowing them to wreak a deadly toll when combined with his inability to bring his full numbers to play before their lines were broken, not having the room to spread out in the Ford.

Staring at the blood-soaked battlefield Tywin sighed shaking his head. "We lost."

"Sir?" said Ser Tybolt Heatherspoon, head of a house of landed knights sworn to the Lannisters. He was looking at his lord now in shock. "We won the battle."

"But lost the initiative you young idiot." Tywin said shaking his head. "It'll take days for our cavalry to regroup, either light or heavy." Tywin wasn't worried about them overreaching or riding into anything they couldn't handle, he had faith in his commanders, nor was he prepared to call them back. He wanted those Houses harried as much as possible, though Shawney had retreated too intact for that to occur to them, especially with his heavy cavalry already chasing down Blaneytree.

He could've used them to break up the Shawney line, but he had mistakenly put them all under the command of Daven, who had gone after the first groups to break off rather than remaining engaged to hopefully be used against a better target. It had been an excellent tactical move, but showed his inexperience when dealing with a larger battle.

Tywin turned aside from the view of the ford to stare at Lord Vypren. The lord was a thin, sallow faced man who moved in fits and starts, but was reputed to be very quick, with a snake's reflexes. "You played your role well." Tywin said sparing the man a nod. "Fairmarket will be yours, once we take it. That will happen well in the future however."

Lord Vypren nodded his head. "I am of course at your service Lord Lannister. Never let it be said that we are traitors to the crown, after all."

"Of course." Tywin said smiling thinly.

Over the next few two weeks the news of his victory at the ford spread, bringing several new houses to his banner. House Whent, house Wode, House Darry, all houses on the southern side of the Red Fork sent messengers to him, stating that they would bend the knee to the King. He ordered them to muster their men, and to besiege Raventree Hall.

With the uttered decimation of house Vance's forces and the death of three of its sons, House Blackwood remained the only powerful house on the southern side of the Red Fork with its forces intact that had not yet bent the knee. Their men were still hitting his supply line, but if he put their Castle under siege, it would force those men back home to defend it. Obviously of course such a move would take time, and news of those houses marching towards

Raventree Hall would spread, giving Tywin the desired result.

At those orders Lord Bracken smiled his eyes lighting up with eagerness. Tywin looked at the man then nodded. "You may pull your forces back as well Lord Bracken. Leave enough men to continue to guard the supply lines from your castle up to our current position, but other than that go and claim your prize."

With that seen to, and news of Daven returning, Tywin dismissed Lord Bracken and the others to wait for his nephew alone in his command tent. He stared down at the map, estimating distances, travel times and other things. When he heard the flaps of his tent open and closed he said without turning around "I trust you have good news for me Daven?"

"Some good and some bad my Lord." Daven replied, moving in front of Tywin before taking a knee.

"Get up." Tywin scoffed, shaking his head. "What news?"

"My forces and I were able to harry House Deddings forces into the ground, if more than two or three of those men survived it would be a minor miracle. It will not include the Lord himself, or any member of his family that was here at the battle."

"Good." Tywin said nodding his head sharply. With Deddings out of the way that was one less family that could fight him on the southern side of the Red Fork. Their keep too would be a source of remuneration for his troops as well as supplies. "And what was the rest of the news?"

His nephew grimaced, tugging at his now unkempt goatee. "We were able to cut down at least half, maybe more than two thirds of the men wearing house Blanetree colors, that's what took us so long. But the rest of them reached the Ruby Ford, and I have to say that we made the right decision to cross here."

"That sounds ominous." Tywin said and though his words were lighthearted his gaze pinning Daven in place was not.

"I have no idea who is in charge over there my Lord, but those defenses made the ones here look like nothing. Ditches have been shoveled out of the earth on the other side of the Ruby Fork, with a full palisade thrown up after them, large ones, at least a man's height in places, and at worst coming up here on a normal man." Daven said gesturing at his waist. "Even worse, I think I saw some small catapults set up well behind the defense line. I lost over a dozen men trying to follow Ser Blanetree's men to archers, they looked like pincushions!"

Tywin grit his teeth shaking his head. He had hoped that the houses on the other side of the Green Fork would at least have taken a wait-and-see attitude, but if they had prepared that good a defense of the Ruby ford...

"We truly have lost the initiative." he said shaking his head.

"With respect uncle, I think we lost it the moment the Houses here joined together."

Tywin nodded. "I underestimated their loyalty to House Tully, or perhaps their hatred of us."

"The rumors that Lord Stannis has spread seem to have been the tipping point, uncle..." Daven said hesitantly, licking suddenly dry lips. "We took a few prisoners, and all of them were saying that no true man would, would bend the knee to a King who's..."

"Enough!" Tywin barked making his nephew shut up. "There is no way my daughter and son would have acted in such a manner, it is simply propaganda, well-chosen by Stannis I'll admit, but propaganda all the same." And Tywin was certain of that. Surely his catching them when they were young would have been enough to scare the two idiots. Whether or not that meant that the three royal children were illegitimate he did not know, nor care, really.

Tywin went on in a much calmer tone. "I've already sent word to my brother to push the second echelon through the Golden Tooth to us here. I don't know where Stannis is or what he's doing, but perhaps our being here rather than further north might prove advantageous to us."

Left unsaid was the fact that his losses among his infantry forces and most particularly his archers meant that taking the remaining castles even the few between here and Fairmarket would be too costly. They would bleed his army dry, leaving no men left to take Fairmarket, especially since by that point he had no doubt the reinforcements from House Mallister would've arrived.

"Should we retreat to King's Landing milord?"

"No." Tywin replied shaking his head. "We might've lost the initiative for now, but I refuse to allow us to be pushed entirely on the defensive like that. King's Landing will be reinforced by Lord Serret and the force I ordered sent there already. No, we'll wait here for the second echelon, then either march north in force through Fairmarket to the Twins or against Renly or Stannis. For now, the Riverlanders showed us what we need to do. We'll fortify the ford here then fortify Harrenhall as well before taking Darry and Harrowway. That will force the Riverlanders and the Northerners to fight us in set, defensive battles where we can bleed them while husbanding our own forces."

*Plus this will give me time to discover what Stannis is doing, and get an idea of how Renly is acting as a general. Perhaps it will turn out to be a good thing I was forced to remain here rather than moving further north...* Tywin thought to himself grimly.

"I don't like it uncle, if you don't mind me saying. We're facing too many enemies. I would recommend we retreat entirely if we hadn't already brought several houses of the Riverlands to our side. As it is, perhaps we should... figure out ways to let them take the positions of most glory in any battle?"

"That is a good idea, and I know we are facing too many foes at present." Tywin said, being more open with his family member than he normally was, but willing to for this one moment. "But I don't think the North will arrive as quickly as the Riverlanders propaganda said they would. In fact I can guarantee it." Tywin finished, smiling grimly.

Directly after the battle he had sent a raven forward to the Twins containing a very simple message. 'Hold them, harry them. You wanted to be Lord Paramount, earn it, or else.'

OOOOOO

Tugging at his close cropped salt-and-pepper beard Lord Blackwood stared out from one of the towers set into the walls of Raventree Hall at the army encamped outside his walls. "I think they brought enough men to the party don't you?" he said looking at his second-in-command, his firstborn son Brynden.

Both men had been leading separate groups of armsmen attacking Lannister supplies in Bracken land. That hated house had taken over the duty of supplying the Lannister army almost in its entirety.

Like his father Brynden was a tall man, thin of shoulders but quick of limb, and the same long hooked nose of their family. His eyes were also dark, and his hair long down to his shoulders like his father. In response to his father's comment he laughed though there was no humor in the sound. "For my part father, I would rather it was all Bracken men out there."

"Hah!" laughed the older man, shaking his head. "The Bracken's alone could never take Raventree Hall, not by siege and they know it." The castle of House Blackwood was old, but it had been renovated several times unlike many others in the Riverlands. It had stone walls five stories tall, with powerful towers at each corner and two more even larger guard towers over the only gate in the wall. It also had a moat around it.

"True," said his other son Lucas scratching at the beard he was trying and, his father had to be honest failing, to grow. For all that he was in his 20s the young man simply couldn't grow any hair on his face, much like his younger brothers. "But at the same time, I can't believe so many Houses went over to the Lannisters. I knew the Bracken's would jump at the chance to eliminate us, but the others?"

Tytos frowned, nodding his head at that. "Fear, ambition and the vagaries of battle have done for much of that my son. It would not surprise me to learn that many of those houses would back whoever seems strongest at the time." His contempt for that idea was plain to see and both of his sons nodded grimly though that didn't change the situation.

Outside their wall was an army, of around eight thousand or so, though only a bare two thousand were flying the Lannister flag. The rest were all made up of other Riverlands Houses, the Whents, Wodes, Lychesters, Darrys and of course Brackens.

"It's a shrewd move by the old gold shitting bastard." Tytos went on, shaking his head. "I don't think he really believes they'll be able to take us, not by assault at any rate, but they pen us in place, forced us to pull our strength back to defend Raventree Hall rather than raid his supply lines."

Indeed, Tytos and Lucas had both been leading such raids when news of the defeat at the Toad's Treason had reached them. They had immediately begun to pull their various raiding parties back but arrived back barely ahead of the first group of reavers to reach their lands.



Luckily, Lord Hoster's initial message to his lords had enabled Blackwood to begin to draw in supplies from his lands, as well as order his smallfolk to prepare to abandon their properties and pull back to his keep at a moment's notice. This added to the number of mouths they had to feed of course, but it also added to the force he could put on the wall, so much so he actually had more men in his walls than the besiegers, though not nearly as many were trained armsmen.

*And he thought grimly to himself, that'll force that army out there to bring in its own provisions. No army can really despoil the land as well as the smallfolk who own it, they'll learn that to their cost in the coming days. I wonder how long Bracken can continue to supply both the Lannister force and this army at the same time.*

Brynden nodded, unconsciously echoing his father's thoughts. "We've got plenty of provisions, plenty of manpower, and our own well. We could hold out for years here, tying up that force out there easily."

"We won't have to hold out for years." Lucas said grimly. "One way or the other."

Tytos looked at his sons smiling thinly, a smile they both returned. Three days before the battle at the crossing had occurred news had flown out from Riverrun on Raven's wings. The North was on the march, and the man who had killed the Mountain That Rode was leading them to the defense of his grandfather and his country.

"We can hold." said Tytos grimly loosening his sword and his scabbard. "We can hold until the wolves come to relieve us. And then." he said grimly looking over at his sons " Then we ravens feed on Bracken blood once more."

"Pity it can't be the Bloody Mummies." Lucas growled, his eyes flashing with anger. "What they did to House Smallwood still needs to be paid for, whatever rumor says Tywin did to the Goat."

Brynden scoffed, pushing his brother's shoulder playfully. "You'd only prefer that because you're enamored of Lady Carellen." The Smallwood ladies had escaped with the aid of a few loyal knights sworn to their house during the surprise assault that took Acorn Hall. Lord Theomar hadn't been so lucky, and had died when Vargo Hoat set fire to his keep. "Or is it lady Ravella you fancy? She may be old, but that body!"

While Lucas blushed and pushed his older brother back Tytos rolled his eyes at their antics.

Just then a voice shouted out from the army surrounding Raventree hall, ending the lad's merriment. Jonos Bracken's voice made Tytos and his sons all grit their teeth angrily. "Blackwood! I know you can hear me! Surrender, you can't hope to win! If you surrender now, I'll spare you and your family!"

Tytos looked out from the murder hole he had previously been using, trying to find where Jonos was, but he couldn't. *But I don't have to see him to respond appropriately to that little bit of idiocy.* He moved over to an interior murder hole, shouting down into the courtyard of his castle. "Hoster, Ben, could you give that bastard out there our response?"

Both his younger sons laughed, then began to work frantically with their men, loading up a large catapult that had been constructed inside the walls. Moments later a load of stones was sent hurling into the sky, to land among the besieging army, causing screams and cries of agony and shock.

Tytos raced back to the murder hole, shouting out. "That for your offer, your traitorous dog! I'll never submit to a child of incest, or to Bracken scum!" With that, the siege of Raventree Hall began.

OOOOOO

The small dock by the edge of the Neck where the Kingsroad wound its way out of the Neck was used by men of the swamps to transport their goods down into the Riverlands had no name. It never grew to need one. It was simply a series of buildings to house any trader heading down into the Riverlands, as well as their goods. Most of the time it had at least a few traders, but now however it was lifeless.

House Frey had put its strength out into the field, and the first move had been to send a small band of raiders to harass the crannogmen from house Haigh. They descended on the docks enforcing the crannogmen there to pull up stake and retreat into the swamp. None of the traders died, but several of them sported broken arms and bruises from the beatings of the Haigh men. These were not warriors after all, these were tradesmen, not even hunters really since the hunters gave them the goods to trade away.

The hunters of the crannogmen came out that night, and four of the five men of house Haigh on guard died under their bows and tridents before they faded back into the Neck as easily as a lizard lion. The next day, the men of House Haigh pulled back from the Neck slightly, and began to dig in, waiting for their lords to arrive.

All that however was a more of a sideshow at present. House Frey had sent a group of cavalry to reinforce House Erenford, another Erenford beholden to them. Erenford had put forth its entire strength under Ser Erenford down to the new port being constructed where the Bite was closest to the Kings Road. A hunter tracking a cougar had reported seeing the work, and gotten word back to Erenford who passed it on to Old Walder.

Much like the small dock by the Kingsroad the original position Ranma and the others had talked about was used irregularly at best, when House Manderly sent a raven indicating White Harbor wished to trade for medicines. The original dock was also close enough to the Neck to put men there in danger of the various bugs that carried diseases to those who didn't have any immunity to them. So after talking to a few ships captains, Wendel had made a command decision to start to create the supply depot from scratch a half day's sailing further down.

This position wasn't quite as close to the Kingsroad, being five days ride away rather than three days. The ground there was rocky hardscrabble and not very hospitable. Ostensibly under the control of House Erenford, there was nothing there to draw any settlers or even crannogmen to it. Here however the near constant wind coming off the Bite kept the bugs away, which was a major plus, and some of the stones were large enough to be used to help construct the depot in various ways.

The makeshift dock was still small, but it had allowed them to put ashore the men and materials to start work on the depot. Wood brought all the way down from House Cerwyn's land and then transshipped here was quickly put in place. The men, over a hundred carpenters brought down from White Harbor plus the infantry troops under their direction quickly went to work. Soon they had built longhouses for the men, which would double later as a way point for the army's supplies. From there they had then begun to put up a small barricade around the depot, but work on that had just started when the forces of Erenford neared.

Moreover, the entire force from House Manderly and Locke had been put ashore. But the horses, even after only two weeks at sea, needed some days to recuperate after the sea voyage to get their legs back. Therefore it was up to the infantry to protect the depot, backed by the bows of House Locke, five hundred archers sent down to represent them in the army the North had mustered.

It was this sight that greeted Ser Erenford at the head of a force of his own house, almost six hundred men plus three hundred more sent to him by House Frey. His orders had been simple: find out what they were doing on the shore of the Bite, and if they were doing something that would bother House Frey either in the war or in the long term, stop them.

Looking at the number of men already down there, as well as the defenses that were being put up Ser Emmon Erenford made a decision. This decision would haunt his house for its remaining lifetime which could, because of said decision, be measured in less than two months.

"We hit them now." He decided, looking around at his men mostly heavy and light cavalry. "If we can break them now, before those horses down there get their legs under them, we can drive them back into the sea and put that place to the torch."

"In fact." Emmon went on looking around at two men in particular. "Get some torches now, there's nothing like a fire during a battle to divide the enemy's attention."

Ser Erenford should not be blamed for his ignorance. Throughout human history, there has been a sort of misconception about cavalry, tied in with the ego of the human mind. A person who is sitting up on a horse looking down at other men tend to believe that he is a better man than they are, that he is somehow stronger, more honorable. Tied into this is that horses have always been the purview of the rich. But despite this, a well-trained, well led and **organized** infantry force that stands its ground and has any kind of polearm, a spear, halberd, a bayonet on top of a rifle, or a pike could eat a cavalry charge for lunch.

Now while his house wasn't rich, Emmon Erenford was a knight, a cavalryman down to his toes. He firmly believed in the might of the cavalry charge. Moreover, he could not see the organization in the work going on down there. He could not see that there was always at least one group of a hundred men standing idle near the edge of the supply depot.

He could not see that among the workers busily creating log houses, or enlarging the wharf for greater cargo capacity, were men who did not stray far from hidden bows. While Emmon could see the infantry down there were better armored than most, he didn't see the giant pikes the heavy infantry had been trained with. Those were hidden near where the infantry were helping the carpenters. Wendel was a wily man, and had prepared for trouble from the get go.

Worse, the terrain was against Erenford. The land here was hardscrabble with very few trees and only scattered boulders that a large group could use as cover to get closer. Even his scouts couldn't get very close without running the risk of being seen.

The Freys commander, one of old Walder's numerous sons shook his head. "I, I don't know Ser Erenford. That's awfully good armor those men down there are wearing, especially if they aren't expecting trouble. Besides, from what your scouts could tell us we barely outnumber them. I think we should wait for more reinforcements. We can keep them locked up instead, and find out why they're building a port here in the first place."

"No we can't." Erenford said shaking his head sharply. "Didn't you hear the scouts report about the number of heavy horses they've unloaded? Those aren't draft animals man, those are warhorses! My scouts might not know how to count very high, but they could tell that there were more horses down there than we've got. If we let those horses recover from their voyage, they'll be able to match us."

As a knight himself, Emmon knew that heavy cavalry could prey very easily on light. They weren't quite as fast of course, but they moved fast enough, and their heavy armor and heavier weapons made them deadly against the mostly leather armor of light cavalry. His force only had around a hundred-fifty heavy cavalry, less than a fifth of what was down there.

The Frey man looked at the scouts. Both of them nodded agreement. Sighing against his better judgment he nodded in turn. "Alright. That's a bit more overt than my father wanted us to be, but I think he'll understand the reasoning."

Within moments, a little under a thousand men on horseback thundered over the scrub towards the supply depot, coming up over the small rise they had been hiding behind. With no cover they were spotted immediately, but rather than the panic and shock that Ser Erenford had expected to see, three horn blasts rang out. First one horn sounded from near the edge of the depot, obviously some kind of warning. Then two more from deeper within the northerner's position, signaling some kind of order, Erenford thought.

In response the hundred men near the outskirts of the encampment grabbed up helmets and pike. Their sergeants, men chosen from among the levies for their intelligence and strength of character by Jon during their training, began to bellow orders. Quickly they moved out of the encampment moving into a tight line abreast two deep to face the oncoming rush of cavalry. The sides of their line were anchored on one side by the unfinished palisades stretching down to where the galleys and their scorpions could take the attackers under fire and on the other the wall of the outermost longhouse.

Elsewhere archers put down their tools, grabbing up their bows and quivers rushing for their positions while the actual carpenters ducked inside the nearest longhouses.

Wendel, despite being a knight himself was his father's son, an organizer. He had absorbed everything about the need for organization in an army, and had drilled his men on certain horn calls on the trip down here. Moreover the pikemen he had may have been levies from White Harbor, but they had been sent up to Winterfell to train under Jon Snow. These were not barely-trained levies, men taken from all walks of life from farmers to city folk suddenly given a weapon and told to go fight. Nor were they warriors, not trained practically since boyhood like most armsmen were, but pikes were a simple weapon in comparison to a longsword.

No, these were soldiers, and that made them a very different kettle of fish. If they had been dropped into Rome, the Roman legionnaires would've known their own despite their weapons. If they had been dropped into the army of Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, they would've fit right in with a pike regiment (after several more months of training and experience).

At another signal the pikes came down, held firmly in the hands of the men behind them, a bristling wall of metal points facing out against the Erenford cavalry that was attempting to ride them down. At the sight, more than one of the mounted men faltered, but the others, as infected with the disease of cavalry ruling the battlefield as their head of house, continued with the charge. Their horses however began to try and shy away, slowing their advance.

Archers began to fire and men to tumble out of their saddles but that was more of a sideshow to the slaughter that those pikes wreaked on the Calvary when the two forces met. Pikes outreached lances by a wide margin. Those heavy pike heads smashed into and through breastplates, slicing into horseflesh and riders with equal ease. Cries of the wounded began to abound, some even cried to the Seven to aid them, but there was no such help here.

Even where the weight of the charge got past the first row of pike, they only ran into the second. In one or two places where they could push that pike or this one aside in the second row, cut down a man here and there they couldn't enlarge the holes before more men came up, the dismounted heavy cavalry of Manderly cutting their horse's

stomachs from below. And always those pikes kept stabbing, stabbing forward.

Wendel bellowed commands to his men, backing up the pikes killing what few men could break through the two person line. Soon however more pikemen came up from behind them, reinforcing the two deep formation of infantry. "Hold them!" he bellowed, "Hold them!"

Killing one man by thrusting his sword up into his side underneath his chest plate, he pulled the man down. Then with difficulty Wendel lifted his heavy body into the saddle of the horse before it could bolt, regally not noticing that a few of his fellow knights had to push him up given his girth. He pulled the horse around as it tried to race away, maddened by the smell of blood and not particularly well-trained alas. Still, Wendel did not become a knight by not having horse skills. Seconds later he had his makeshift mount under control and turned it gazing out over the battle.

The front of the battle was a snarl now, the initial cavalry rush having broken against the pike but the man behind them still pressing forward for now. That wouldn't last. Their horses, mad with the smell of blood and hearing the screams of their wounded herd-mates would bolt regardless of what their riders wanted. *Unless they can get around the front of the pike line on the other side of the longhouse.* He spotted the next group of pike and shouted "Break into groups of twenty five, first two guard the left flank, one to a side!"

The men did so, their sergeants following his order quickly. Soon there was a line of pike on facing out from the edge of the longhouse, anchored further by its edge now being within range of the ships out in The Bite.

He held back the remaining pikemen, waiting, waiting for the moment when the cavalry charge rebounded on itself. Wendel was a veteran, admittedly more against bandits, pirates, and a particularly recalcitrant minor house from the former Bolton lands than real war. Despite that, he was extremely well-trained, and his father and Lord Stark had both gone on at length about 'the moment'. It was that brief moment when an attacker realizes his attack has failed, but before he does anything about it. When the attackers morale broke enough for them to start to run, but before they did so en-masse.

Wendel watched from his vantage point at the back of the infantry formation and saw it. The horses began to override their rider's control, and those riders too were now panicking, trying to break off. But those at the back, especially the few with torches, were stopping them from pulling away quickly. He signaled one of his men who had remained behind the main battle with a horn. "Sound advance."

With that command the last two hundred plus pikemen joined the battle. At the horns bellow all the infantrymen along the main line of battle began to march forwards, the men at the back pushing the men in front of them forward, their pikes all leveled in one direction.

The cavalry broke. No, it didn't break, it shattered. It had barely been holding the space it could when faced with two lines of pike, with five, and all of them now marching forward rather than holding station, they couldn't even do that. On that bloody field the strength of House Erenford broke, shattered in its entirety along with Emmon Erenford, who had been among the first to die having led the charge like any knight should. It was but the first of the death blows to rain on that house, and the losses among the Freys the first but not the last that house would take as well.

For the present Wendel didn't care about that, all he cared about was that the depot was safe for now. Even as he ordered the archers of House Locke forward to hunt down the remaining attackers, even as his fellow knights moved forward to finish off the wounded, he turned back gazing out into the sea. There, Wendell saw the quartet of galleys waiting patiently to offload. The sight, with his House's flag waving from every ship and from above the depot, made him smile.

OOOOOO

The Frey force that had been loaned to House Erenford was not the main force that the Freys put in the field. Realizing that Lord Lannister was more than ruthless enough to take umbrage at them trying to get by without actually doing anything, Old Walder had ordered a force of two thousand men to move out from the Twins and reinforce House Haigh as they set up shop on the Kingsroad as it entered into the Neck. Far enough away from the Neck that they didn't have to worry about diseases from the various bugs of the marshes but close enough that they blocked any army coming out of the Neck along the Kingsroad from spreading out into a combat formation to match their own defensive line, which was being built like a half circle, the inner curve facing the road out of the Neck.

That was all they did. They didn't act against the crannogmen scouts they saw, the Frey men even publicly executed two men of House Haigh in clear view from the marshes. Black Walder had been put in charge of this group, and he had been ordered by his father to make a point of seeming to be reasonable to any watchers from the marshes. They were also, at the first sign of a whole army coming down the road from the north to withdraw to the Twins.

Other than that he was simply going to stay there. If a force came up Kingsroad to join them, all very well they were already starting to put in place defenses. These were ditches and earthen palisades for the most part, since the only nearby source of wood were the trees of the marshes, which were much more trouble than they were worth.

Despite this, it could be a good defensive position, or they could be meeting up with a force coming down from the north. His men didn't know, precisely the way the Freys wanted it. Old Walder wanted to play both sides, to see which side offered him the best deal, though admittedly it would take a **lot** to overcome Lord Lannister's offer, something solid and immediate.

OOOOOO

Despite being hunters by profession, the men of house Reed also made excellent scouts especially on land so close to the Neck. While the Frey camp was a little too far away from the Neck for any scout to get close enough during the day, at night they didn't have that problem.

Listening to the reports Lord Reed laughed quietly. When Meera, newly returned from House Stark looked at him in puzzlement he laughed again, louder this time before speaking in his deep, scratchy voice. "The Freys aren't committing themselves. Every man in that force out there knows that they're only there as a show of force, to show the North that they could've made trouble if they wanted to, or to meet up with Lord Lannister, whichever comes first. They don't want to be pulled into full combat, but they don't realize that position is just as in danger as it is dangerous. Cowards all, and not an experienced man among them because that's the way Old Walder has always played it."

Meera nodded, shaking her head slightly at the duplicity of it. "They want to play both sides? Do you think that would work?"

"It might work for Lord Lannister. So long as the Freys seem to be following his orders he won't hammer them too badly, he probably won't be able to afford to at that point." Lord Reed shook his head. "If the Lannisters get up here first anyway. I doubt they are having an easy time of it though."

"But it won't work for Ranma. If the Freys don't change their tune when they hear what really went on in King's Landing he won't barter or bargain with them." Meera said in a tone that made her certainty plain.

" True enough. Still, the army will need to know what they might be running into. Meera, I'll be sending you in the morning to Moat Cailin to wait for the army. I'll send word to the other Neck Houses to gather up a fleet of our coracles, they might be needed."

Meera nodded, eager to see Ranma, Jon and Arya again.

Her father smiled, though inwardly wondered if she would be coming back to Greywater Watch anytime soon. House Reed did need to be represented at least a bit in the expedition being sent south after all. Meera was an excellent scout and hunter, as at home in a forest or on a plain as in a marsh. Only a fool would not see that and wish to add her to his army, and Ranma Stark was anything but a fool.

He shrugged inwardly, knowing that children often had to leave home to grow. He had no wish to see Meera hurt, but neither would he hold her back.

OOOOOO

At the same time that the Freys and their allies were making trouble for house Reed, the army had arrived at Castle Cerwyn, covering the same distance in a day that had taken a day and a half for Robert's party to travel. *It's amazing how not stopping every few hours to go hunting and actually pushing the pace does for said pace*, Ranma thought.

This was one of many thoughts occupying Ranma's head as he tried desperately to ignore the whispering going on behind him between Alayaya and Daenerys. Myrcella too was there, the three girls of course sticking together. Merry was even sharing a horse with Daenerys, the two of them far less weight than a man in armor even though Daenerys wore lizard lion plate, left over from the scales of the beast Ranma had killed all those months ago. But from what he could see of Merry's red face seemed to indicate that she was not taking part in the conversation.

*Oh, and now they've started to use hand gestures lovely*, he thought, having caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. Indeed, Daenerys was twisting her fingers in the air for a moment as if demonstrating something, while Alayaya was shaking her head in return. Behind Ranma's silver-haired wife Merry was now as red as an apple, her face buried in her companion's hair. *Oh look, now Dacey has fallen back to join them, even worse*.

He and Smalljon, who was riding beside him just then, shared a glance before Smalljon spurred his horse slightly and

Ranma nodded moving along beside him with ease. *At this point*, Ranma thought to himself as they raced on moving further down the column of the army, *I'd rather face lady Jonelle rather than hear more of that conversation!*

Several hours later Ranma was questioning that decision as he dodged a second plate thrown his way. "How dare you!" Jonelle shrieked, glaring at him. "No, my son is too young to go to war!"

"Now lady calm..." Ranma began then was forced to dodge again as Jonelle, showing a decent arm threw a plate like it was a Frisbee at where his head had previously been. It crashed against the wall behind him, and Ranma winced again while the copper of the plate made a ringing tone against the rock.

"I won't let you! I won't let you take my little boy to war!"

Outside the private dining Hall where this conversation was going on Lord Cerwyn turned to Jon. "So, lovely weather we're having lately."

Jon snorted, while inside the noise of a mother in full rage went on for several more minutes.

Rickard and Greatjon stood with them. Greatjon was laughing, one large hand muffling the sound for fear of attracting Jonelle's attention out here. Rickard however was looking rather askance, since it was certainly not normal for a Lord Paramount let along a King to have to calm down a noblewoman when taking her son to ward.

He didn't know how close Cerwyn and Stark had become of late, nor that Jonelle had a miscarriage before Cley, making him even dearer to her. Besides, Ranma saw the older woman as a friend, and if it helped her become accustomed to the idea of her son being away by venting at him, he was fine with that. Moreover, he didn't want his friends to see him as a lord first, just Ranma, and it was as a man taking her son away rather than her Lord Paramount that Ranma stood in front of Jonelle.

Soon Jonelle ran out of things to throw. Ranma breathed a sigh of relief as the last plate slammed into the wall behind him holding up his hands placatingly. "My lady please, I'm not going to let him fight in a battle or anything like that, I'm just taking him along as my ward. He'll help take care of the horses of the rest of the wolfsworn, help us take care of our tents, sometimes bring us food from the campfires, that kind of thing. You know regular young squire stuff, no pitched battles."

*At least I hope so.* Ranma thought but did not say aloud. There was always a chance that Cley would be forced to fight at some point in the future, but he would try to keep that from happening. But he wanted Cley along. House Cerwyn was the closest geographically to House Stark and they didn't have a representative among the wolfsworn at this point. They were the only powerful noble house that didn't since Hathan counted as coming from House Manderly.

Jonelle glared at him. Normally she had a soft spot for Ranma and Jon too. They were both good boys, and she could all too easily remember the days when Ranma began to stop by as his father's voice, always bringing such brightness and cheer to the castle. Now however, he had come not to bring cheer, but to take her little boy away.

"Promise me!" she said abruptly moving over to stand within inches of Ranma, glaring into his face. "Promise me on your honor as a Stark that my son won't be thrown into any battle, that you will try your damndest to make sure that, that he comes home without even a scratch on him."

Ranma opened and closed his mouth for a moment then asked plaintively "Do scratches from training count?" He quailed under her glare. One thing that had not changed from his old life to this one, Ranma did very poorly in the face of feminine fury. Still, he was getting better, at least he wasn't trying to run for the hills or insult Jonelle to start a completely different argument.

Across from him Jonelle began to tear up, and then she abruptly flung her arms around Ranma. Hesitantly Ranma put his arms around her shoulders as she sobbed into his chest. "Please, Ranma, he's my only boy, my son. I don't, I don't want him to, to come back like all too many boys do from war, scarred inside and out! Please, promise me he'll be safe!"

Without even a second's hesitation Ranma answered, his voice unwontedly formal. "I Promise on my honor as a Stark that I will do my best to keep your son safe, my lady."

"Good." Jonelle then smiled grimly, wiping away her remaining tears as she pulled back from the hug. "Now, if you could be so good as to send in my father, I wish to speak with him."

Ranma winced again, but didn't say anything, simply smirking a little after giving the older woman one last hug.

Leaving the room he spotted Jon, Lord Cerwyn and the rest of what he was mentally calling his command staff. Greatjon in particular had a wide grin on his face as did Rickard though his smile was smaller and he tried his best to hide it behind a hand. "I notice my lords that none of you were volunteering to explain events to the lady." He said glaring at them all though in particular Lord Cerwyn.

Jon and the other wolfsworn at least looked somewhat guilty at that, but the others simply laughed. Cerwyn's laughter stopped abruptly however when Ranma went on. "Oh and Medger, your daughter wants to speak to you." With that he walked off with the others Greatjon's laughter now booming out unrestrained, following him, leaving Medger to his uncertain fate.

He found Daenerys already ensconced in their room, still wincing as she walked. He shook his head. "I am sorry about that, I guess we did go a little overboard."

"A little?" Daenerys asked tartly, before calming down. "I'm sorry Ranma. I really would like to..." she blushed. "To continue from last night, but my lower body is telling me that would be a very bad idea, especially with days of riding to look forward to."

"That's fine, I rule my body, not the other way around." Ranma said with a shrug, falling into the bed next to her. He pulled Daenerys to him. "Instead we can just cuddle Dae."

"Dae?" Daenerys sat up looking down at him through narrowed eyes, reminding Ranma a little too much of Jonelle at that moment. "What is that?"

"Er, a pet name? Um, some couples make them up for one another." Ranma replied, slightly nervously. "Er, would you prefer Narys?"

"No, just no. When we're alone, Dae is fine." Daenerys smiled as she said that, leaning down to kiss Ranma lightly on the lips. "More than fine actually, I like it, it just surprised me, no one's ever given me a pet name before. Now, you were saying something about cuddling?"

Ranma smiled, gathering Daenerys into his arms once more. "Glad you like it, Dae." At the foot of their bed Fenris and the two draklings laid back down, certain now this was some odd bit of the human mating ritual nonsense.

The next day the army moved out, with Cley now riding a horse his grandfather had chosen out of the castle stable for him in the center of the wolfsworn. Cley was an eleven year old boy, stout and strong of limb, and eager to see the world and get to know Ranma better, who he had always looked up to. He was sad to leave his family behind, but what could you do? Roger and Eddy immediately began to quiz him about their route, while the rest of the wolfsworn talked about the coming campaign with Rickard and Greatjon.

The day wore on, with nothing untoward happening until after they had stopped for rest and a quick meal. The army was traveling as quickly as possible, so the stops happened four times a day but were short, just enough to drink some water and water the horses before moving on. The midday stop was longer, while the officers made certain the men were fed a light but filling meal before starting the march once more.

At the back of the column there was a rather short swordsman in House Stark colors whose fellows had noticed that he kept to himself. They would even be hard pressed to say if he had joined them in either the camp of castle Cerwyn's barracks the night before. At the edge of their marching formation he looked up as a direwolf suddenly slunk out of the scrubland around them. While around them the men gaped in astonishment he grinned, removing his helmet to reveal that he was not in fact a 'he' at all but a most specific 'she'. More than one man who had reached for his weapon gaped as Arya Stark pulled herself onto Nymeria's back, and the two of them, with Arya waving farewell at the men moved up to the front of the column.

At the front of the army Ranma was finishing up a discussion detailing the continued order of the march and assigning everyone the command positions. Jon was quartermaster, along with Daryn. The two of them had the best head for numbers of the group for now, though that might change when more maesters joined them later on.

He had split the heavy Cavalry into two wings, putting Greatjon and Rickard in command of each, with Hathar and Roger as their seconds. Ranma took personal command of what he was starting to call the First Grenadiers, the pike levees raised from house Cerwyn and Stark, while Edd and Dacey were given command of the regular infantry forces. The scouts were led by Brynden, easily the best for the job, with two mountain clansmen as seconds.

This was more for relaying orders in battle than anything else, considering that the men of each house already had

their own command structure that would see to the day-to-day needs of their man. Or so Ranma told Rickard and Greatjon. But both of them were wise enough to know that as the war continued, the lines between house affiliations would begin to blur, and Ranma was showing remarkable forethought in already putting a command structure in place to take advantage of that.

"With Jon along with the logistics position being second-in-command of your 'Grenadiers' odd name for the pike, but I understand a good name can put spine in the men, that only leaves the archers unaccounted for." Rickard said looking down at where Ranma was marching along.

He very carefully did not let his eyes stray to where Daenerys was riding beside Ranma, or the two direwolves that were carrying the two draklings as they loped along easily. While she had impressed him with her political knowledge and her forethought a time or two in the war council and she certainly seem to be able to think fast on her feet, her ability to lead men in battle was barely tested at this point.

Daenerys didn't know that, and was about to step up to volunteer to command the archers herself, when Ranma looked over to where Domerich was playing on his instrument again. "I want Domerich to take that job, for now anyway. We'll see who House Locke sent down with their men, but for now Domerich can command them." It wasn't perfect, and that hole in the command structure would need to be filled at some point, but Ranma had someone already in mind for that. Arya wasn't nearly as good a shot as Theon, but she'd do, especially if she was simply relaying his commands.

On Ranma's other side Daenerys frowned, and was about to interject when they all began to hear shouts and exclamations from the army marching behind them. It seemed to start near the back and spread forward and the command group turned. Seeing Arya racing up to them on Nymeria, Ranma laughed. "Couldn't wait any longer little sister?"

The rest of the wolfsworn laughed too, Dacey and Roger going so far as to reach out to the young girl and slap her on the shoulders when she pulled up beside them. "Oh you know me, always pushing!" Arya laughed shaking out her hair. She didn't have long hair, she much preferred it short, but having it under a helmet all day yesterday and this morning had bothered the heck out of her. She also couldn't take it off at night, lest she give the game away when the army had stopped the evening before at castle Cerwyn.

"What is she doing here?" Rickard said aghast. "Lady," he began looking at Arya. "This was ill-done. Your parents will be worried sick, you need to return immediately! A battlefield is no place for women, and we have too many of them already."

Daenerys's eyes were not the only one to narrow at that, but it was Daenerys who spoke up, patting Myrcella's arms where they were wrapped around her waist, the two of them once more sharing a horse. "If you are speaking of the princess here or my handmaiden, you will sing a different tune after our first battle my Lord. Their ability to aid the injured has already been proven. As for myself, of course I'm along. Who else would be able to control my little ones, or speak for me to those houses that still might retain some loyalty to mine?"

Rickard scowled. While he was willing to go along with things, much like the rest of the northern lords, their loyalty was first to House Stark and then in a very distant second to Ranma's new wife. That was how they thought about Daenerys, irrespective of her dragons. Yes, those dragons represented a massive force in the future, but right now they didn't represent anything but targets. Even though they could fly and breathe fire already, Rickard had seen the two at practice, they weren't powerful enough to get him to respect Daenerys as a force to be reckoned with. He had some respect for her mind, but that was all. Nor was he as quick to overlook what her father had done to spark Robert's Rebellion as Lord Stark or the smallfolk were.

To Rickard's side however Greatjon kept his mind on the problem at hand. He scoffed. "Bah, let her stay. I assume she's been training with the rest of the wolfsworn. You've really taken that name and run with it haven't ya Ranma?"

"Of Course." Ranma said laughing louder. We might not have chosen it, but it makes for a great name for my band of friends. And, if you haven't heard uncle Arya's already been blooded in battle."

Rickard frowned not having heard that while Greatjon looked over at Jon who nodded. "She was with us when we dealt with that raiding force of former Bolton supporters who tried a sneak attack on Winterfell months back."

Looking over at Arya, Greatjon then glanced at her sword noticing the odd shape of it as well as how thin it seemed. "Bah!" he scoffed again, shaking his head almost as if he was deriding the idea of the woman warrior entirely, though his eyes were shrewd as he watched Arya for a reaction. "That little toy of hers doesn't look like it could hurt a fly!"



Arya's eyes narrowed dangerously and with a swift move her sword was already in her hand the tip pointed towards Greatjon as Nymeria maneuvered around Fenris and Ranma to be in front of his horse making it stop its trot and back away warily. "My Fang's already tasted blood in defense of my family and my home, Lord Umber! Would you like a demonstration?"

After a second spent staring into Arya's eyes Greatjon bellowed in laughter, and slapping his thigh. "You Starks! Not an ounce of give in any of you."

"This is not a laughing matter!" Rickard said glaring at his fellow lord.

"Put it like this, uncle." Arya said turning back to him, using the honorific all the Stark children had taken to use with their distant kinsman. "You can try to send me home, in which case I'll simply run away again to rejoin you later. This way at least I'm already with the army, and my brother and the others can keep an eye on me."

"In that case, why don't you get down from Nymeria and march." Ranma said phrasing it as a question but his tone making an order. "Its good training." Ranma used the word 'march' because while they were going at a brisk pace, they certainly weren't running along, the infantry could have never sustained that, but the march was going as quickly as he could push the men without utterly exhausting them.

Arya scowled, but complied.

"Besides." Daenerys said coming back into the conversation. "There is actually precedent for girls her age to go to war. During the Dance of the Dragons there was a dragon rider her age that went to war. Arya reminds me of her in other ways too, Nettles her name was."

"I don't know that one." Arya said turning away from Rickard to look up at Daenerys.

"She was a Waters, a bastard from Dragonstone, who befriended and rode a wild dragon to war. She did remarkably well, and history says that she was Prince Daemon Targaryen lover during the end of the civil war, despite him being twice her age. The bards like to sing the two of them went into exile after he was sorely wounded in the Dance over Harrenhal."

"EWWW!" Arya blanched. "Don't compare me to her if she did that!"

That caused another round of laughter, and even Rickard snorted. "Fine, but if she gets hurt Ranma, you get to explain it to your mother. If you thought Jonelle was dangerous..."

Ranma blanched, but nodded willingly.

With Arya added to their party, the march continued. That evening she openly joined the rest of the wolfsworn in practice as the Army encamped all around them, with Jon leading the practices and Ranma organizing the army. Cley too joined them, with Roger taking over his instruction for now in a pattern that they would continue to follow until they reached the moat.

OOOOOO

That evening, Arya joined the other girls in their one, albeit rather large, tent. She stared around at them all, utterly exhausted from the day's march and exercising on top of it. But there was something that needed to be said here. "Alright, I know we're all girls, but I don't talk about girly things like dress or boys or anything like that. I definitely don't want to hear anything like that conversation you and Alayaya had on the first day out Daenerys."

Merry flushed slightly at the memory of that conversation while Alayaya laughed, but Daenerys merely cocked her head in question. "How did you overhear us?"

"I didn't, but the army saw you two talking, and that plus my brother's response to it spread quickly." Arya replied her eyes narrowing.

"You might not want to talk about boys now, Lady Stark, but you will eventually, trust me." Alayaya laughed. "At that point you should be so lucky as to have a lover as..."

"LALALA!" Arya shouted, her fingers in her ear. "I'm not listening!" That caused even Merry to laugh aloud, but after Alayaya stopped teasing Arya, the night passed much better, with Arya slowly becoming friends with the trio.

OOOOOO

By that point Arya's disappearance had been discovered back in Winterfell. Eddard had to sit on his wife hard to stop her from taking the horse and going after the army herself to drag Arya back. Catelyn was still unhappy that Ranma and Daenerys had been married so quickly, her son had become so willful while away, returning to his wild youthful ways. But she would be damned by the Stranger before she allowed Arya out of her sight!

However Eddard would have none of it and physically restrained his wife from heading out to the stables. "We need to let her go my love." he said, even as he fought Catelyn, his leg and shoulder making this a much more even contest than it would have been otherwise. "Arya is a warrior born, much like her older brothers. You can't force her to be home something she isn't. She is our child, not a doll we can direct against her will."

"I know that!" Catelyn barked at him, unhappiness written on her face even as she began to calm down from her initial response. The words had also struck her, as she remembered a conversation she had with Myrcella, how Cersei had loved her children but never truly saw them as their own people. It would be a cold day in the Stranger's hell before Catelyn allowed herself to be anything like that woman!

Yet even so, there were some aspects of being a noblewoman that Arya could not avoid so long as she was part of the family. "But she is still my daughter, and still part of this family. She has obligations she will need to fill in the future, and letting her run around like this will only make that more painful."

Eddard winced, deciding not to bring up the fact that he would never force either of his daughters into a marriage against her will. Arya was his sister come to life again, and Eddard refused to try to stifle her. *Maybe if we hadn't stifled Lyanna, she wouldn't have run away. Or at least not arranged the marriage to Robert, which looking back on it I can see was the final straw.*

"Yes, but surely you heard about Ranma's plans?"

At Catelyn's raised eyebrow Eddard laughed, knowing that this wasn't actually Ranma's reasoning, but it would do for now to stave off further argument. "He plans to take Cley of house Cerwyn as his ward on the march. And Cley is almost of an age with Arya..."

Catelyn suddenly laughed. "Oh that is devious, very devious my love. Did you and Ranma think that up between you?"

"I might have had something to do with it." Eddard said, smiling slightly now that the dangerous moment had passed and leading his wife back into his study. They had been there when the servants confirmed they couldn't find Arya anywhere and that her blade was missing as well as Nymeria. "That would be an excellent marriage wouldn't it?"

"You are so very devious," Catelyn said laughing now. She was still extremely worried for her daughter's safety off course. But now that the initial rush of rage at Arya's willfulness and her fear for her daughter had subsided plus the odd flash of thought comparing herself to Cersei, Catelyn knew that with her brothers beside her Arya would be almost as safe as if she was back here in Winterfell. And it was true that putting them in proximity might make something spark between her and Cley. After all they did like one another already as friends and friends sometimes did make that their spouses. "Very devious indeed."

Despite Catelyn's thoughts, however devious or cunning Eddard might have been it was proven fact that he had nothing on the experienced schemers in King's Landing...

OOOOOO

It was with a great amount of difficulty that Cersei resisted the desire to rub her forehead with frustration. "No Littlefinger, I refuse to send you to the Vale." She said, looking angrily down the table at the man. "For one thing, you probably wouldn't even be able to reach it. It's anyone's guess on how the Riverlands houses will jump given Hoster's little maneuver there."

Unconsciously echoing her father's thoughts, Cersei thought that had been a very shrewd move. It ensured that her father would either have to deal with each house, forcing them to bend a knee one after another, or deal with open rebellion in the form of small-scale attacks here and there. Since the Westerlands army was a veteran force and her father an excellent general against untried youngsters and for the most part weary oldsters that was easily the best way that the Riverlands houses could hurt her father's army.

Petyr scowled internally, while externally he kept the same passive expression he always did on his face. In the wake of the battle of King's Landing, the one that the smallfolk were calling the Battle of Two Truths, Petyr had lost practically all of his personal forces. Mercenaries were not known for their loyalty, or for their guts when their own was

in danger. The losses they had sustained in street to street fighting against the better prepared, better trained and far more physically fit Northerners had gutted his numbers, and the rest had taken their pay and left the city as quickly as possible. It would take some time to rebuild those numbers, if he could do it at all.

The only exception was the men of House Kettleblack. A knightly house from the Crownlands, they at least had some honor, but more importantly were in debt to him so much they couldn't have pulled back even if they had wanted to. That about 20 men all told under Ser Osmund, the head of that house, and his two brothers. That wasn't enough men to matter, barely enough to see to Petyr's personal safety unless he made a nuisance of himself.

So despite his position as Master of Coin Petyr was beginning to feel very nervous when it came to his personal power base. That Cersei was wary of him was no surprise, that she had been doing such a good job of trying to control him was. But so was the fact that Jaime was equally suspicious of him, and watched him almost constantly. The man's spies were ludicrously easy to lose, but his suspicion was not good for Petyr's long term prospects.

"Surely your highness, you could see your way to sending a ship? The Vale might not have that much in the way of an offensive force, but it could field some twelve thousand men or so, enough to make a difference if added to your father's forces when the North inevitably comes south."

Cersei actually smiled slightly, which puzzled Petyr, but the smile had nothing to do with what he had said. No, her smile was caused by the memory of Ranma's vow to protect her daughter. It was surprisingly liberating to know that young man, with all of his astonishing abilities, would guard her daughter with his life regardless of whether or not he would face her family across the battlefield.

A second later the smile was gone and she shook her head. "A ship is out of the question. We've had to decommission and take apart most of the royally owned ships already for their wood trebuchets. And even if we had a ship to send, are you so certain that you would be able to get past Dragonstone?"

Stannis' propaganda had reached King's Landing several weeks ago, and Cersei's initial reaction had not been pretty. She had ranted and raved for hours about the lies being spread, despite the fact that Petyr, Pycelle and Jaime all knew that they were not in fact lies. More to the point, the fact that Stannis was prepared to interdict any traffic coming in and out of Blackwater Bay was a given.

Petyr conceded that, but still persisted. If he could get to the Vale, he could convince Lysa to turn over most of the power of the Lord Paramount's seat to him, and with the Vale as a power base he would become both useful to the Lannisters, and independent of them somewhat. "I understand your reluctance your Majesty, and I am most heartened by your worry over my personal safety. However, I still think it would be an excellent idea to at least send an envoy. If not me, then who do you have that knows anything about the Vale lands?"

There was also Petyr's fervent wish to not be in the King's Landing when Lord Lannister arrived. Whatever else might be said about him, Tywin Lannister was an incredibly effective ruler, and had proven this both as Lord of the Westerlands and as King's Hand before he and Aerys began to fall out. That Lord Lannister would have no truck with Petyr's little games, or that he might see right through all of the tricks Petyr used to hide how he had 'helped' the debt of the nation along, was a severe worry to the man.

"No one, I'll admit" Cersei replied honestly. "However as I said, sending an envoy at this time is impossible." Then she decided to throw the man a bone. "When the first reinforcements from the Westerlands arrive with Lord Serret, then we will have the men necessary to send with you on an overland trip to the Vale so long as the houses in the Riverlands along the route to the Bloody Gate have not thrown in their lot with the Baratheons or the Starks. At that time we will come back to this discussion."

Knowing that was as far as he could get without some kind of lever to force Cersei to see his point of view Petyr bowed his head. With that done, Cersei turned to Pycelle and her brother. "How goes preparing the defenses of the city?"

His little, arrogant smirk as usual on his face Jaime shrugged. That expression would normally have set Cersei's pulse to racing but only made her even more tired at the moment. "The Stokeworth and Rosby men are fully integrated into our defenses. We finished work on the various barracks for them near the walls yesterday. It's good strategic sense to have the most battle ready forces closer to the outer walls, though Lord Stokeworth took umbrage at it. He didn't like the fact that they are billeted here in the castle while their men were all out by the outer walls. The man Rosby sent with his forces, Ser Adrian Waters, didn't have a problem with it."

"I don't care if they understand or are happy about it." Cersei said bluntly. "They can take it as a sign of distrust, but until the Westerlands forces arrive, we will keep them at arms-length."

Jaime nodded. "The goal cloaks are up to strength, my training with them has proved beneficial I think. Not so much in their battle preparation is in their organization, but they're prepared to defend the walls at a moment's notice. The walls themselves are ready, as is the port area, where I think the first assault will land. Frankly I have no idea why it's taken so long for Stannis to attack as it is. If he had any idea of how badly mauled we were after the Starks attempted coup he would've been here already. That he hasn't has been a godsend to us."

He was about to hand over the conversation over to Pycelle to talk about the defenses more, but the Master of Whispers interrupted, speaking in that soft feminine tone he used. "It has come to my ears that Stannis struck down in the Stormlands, using the fact his brother retreated to the Reach instead of Storm's End and to rally support. I know House Buckler has gone over to his side, and possibly Errol. Certainly their banners were seen with his army as they marched out of Bronzegate. Unfortunately the little bird that passed this on to me has no head for numbers so I cannot help you there. But they were marching further south rather than up the Kingsroad to assault us from that direction. What that means I do not know, I am not a soldier."

Jaime frowned, as both he and his sister tried to visualize a map of the Stormlands. "Any news of actual battles?" Jaime asked after a moment.

"Some, and some more talk about the red witch as well. Most of it is speculation and second hand information, but my little bird had a client who apparently liked to talk after he got his money's worth." he smirked slyly. "The man talked about having seen the red witch burned Brienne of Tarth. Not at the stake but with some kind of conjured fire. She summoned it up when the Maid of Tarth refused to bend the knee to Stannis."

Jaime winced remembering all too easily the former mad king's fascination with fire and more importantly killing people with it. "I wouldn't think Stannis would have any truck with such as that, but I guess I was wrong about his character. Ambition trumps all."

"Regardless," he went on shaking his head from bad memories. "We will need to be ready for a far larger force in that case. Dragonstone alone would not have enough men to take the city now that we've refilled the Gold Cloak ranks, and brought more troops in ourselves. That'd be true even if Stannis could bring one or two of the other Narrow Sea houses under his control."

Pycelle now spoke up. "We've already built three trebuchets, all of them situated near the port area." Though he wouldn't mention aloud, those three had been built from a design Tyrion had shown him once. They were massive with a range far beyond anything a siege army could build in less than a few months, and no ship would ever be able to match its range. "The alchemists have also built up a reserve of wildfire despite much of their hoarded stores having been sent up to the Wall. We are in the process of moving some of it to positions near the walls at strategic points. Of course we need to be very careful doing so, but it will certainly be a surprise for any attackers."

The Grand-maester was actually surprised and a little worried about how quickly the alchemists had been able to make good their losses and then some. Even as little as a year ago it would take a master alchemist weeks to create a single gallon of the stuff, but now it took mere days. There was talk of some of the steps going much more efficiently and thus quickly than normal, but no one had come up with an explanation just yet.

Cersei nodded. "How goes the ongoing negotiations with the Faith?"

"They are **finally** behind us now, and their men throughout the city have begun to pass on rumors of the red witch and Stannis being no friend to the smallfolk, as we asked." Pycelle scowled, not liking how much that had cost them, which Cersei wholeheartedly agreed with.

The High Septon's aid had been bought by Cersei promising to pay off the debt the Crown had accrued to the Faith in her name as a Lannister. A debt she hadn't even known was there! The thought of that almost made her glare at the Littlefinger again, but she refrained. For now the weasel was still useful, easily the best of them with numbers and keeping an ear to the ground within the city, much like Varys was outside it.

"Unfortunately, both the Faith and our own rumormongers are having difficulty." Petyr said, speaking up now and exchanging a glance with Varys. "There are rumors going around the city that have nothing to do with Stannis' propaganda."

"How is his propaganda being seen by the smallfolk, and what rumors are you speaking of?" Cersei said cocking her head to one side. This was the first she had heard about any new rumors since judging by the way he said it Petyr meant rumors beyond what had previously known about from after the battle against Starks.

"Strangely enough despite their hatred for your family the accusations from Stannis have not been believed." Petyr

said, not flinching as all three of the Lannister's present glared at him, even Joffrey now paying attention to his words.

And he was astonished about that, since those accusations were in fact the truth. "The smallfolk remember Robert and his growing approval for Tommen as well as the Princess and her friendship with the Starks and see that as reason to disbelieve it." *At least in their case*, he thought to himself. However he was not going to be the one to tell Cersei that protection had not spread to Joffrey, the only one still present in the city and the one wearing the crown.

In point of fact he doubted that the smallfolk would ever be fully on the side of the royal family ever again after this. The whole city was... not in open rebellion, none of the smallfolk had the spine for that, but a sullen acceptance of their rule rather than an enthusiastic one. There was nothing to be done however, and so long as the smallfolk actively didn't try to open the gates for their enemies or riot that was enough.

While his mother was very happy about this bit of news, Joffrey scowled angrily. *Even now you still take the attention that should rightfully be mine from me Tommen! I should have killed you sooner!*

Petyr went on. "And as for the rumors, there are rumors of prisoners taken in the battle against House Stark being tortured. It's been noted by many that there are far fewer of those prisoners than there once were, and one of the guards of the prison has spread rumors that they were transferred here to the Red Keep to be tortured."

Cersei frowned. She had known about Joffrey's attempt to break Sansa's spirit right after her father had escaped and while she would not have approved of it if asked her opinion, she understood the why of it. This however was something new.

Before Cersei could respond however Joffrey spoke up. "I know of that." he said startling his mother. Looking at her he shrugged. "Several of the men who took the Tower decided to take out their displeasure at how badly that battle turned out on a few of the prisoners. I tried to stop it." He said, his face set in a mournful look. "Torturing those people served no purpose, if they were rabble-rousers trying to get the other prisoners to act out I could've seen the point but as it was..." he shrugged.

Cersei frowned but took his words at face value as always. "I trust you had been discipline them?" As busy as she was with the small counsel and everything she had to deal with, Cersei hadn't spent any time at all with the Lannister armymen, and knew only a bare handful outside the new men added to the Kingsguard.

But Jaime was looking a little askance at his son. He didn't honestly know how to take what Joffrey had said. Something told him it wasn't the full truth but what the full truth was, he didn't know. Jaime was slowly coming to understand that he didn't understand his son all that well.

Next to Jaime Petyr too looked at the young king. *Joffrey's quickly becoming an issue*. While Petyr could bend Joffrey's ear easily enough, and had continued to befriend him, that didn't blind Petyr to the fact that the boy was a psychopath. He enjoyed hurting people, and had gathered several other men of similar disposition to him. Luckily his agents had kept that from becoming common knowledge among the smallfolk. Thanks to the gossipers among the prison guards the fact those prisoners were disappearing was well known, but it hadn't happened been connected to Joffrey just yet. He didn't want to find out what would happen if the smallfolk realized they had a monster as bad as Aerys on the throne again.

"Of that may be sure mother." Joffrey said nodding his head. "However, now that our reinforcements have arrived and the Gold Cloaks have been brought up to strength, could we not march to take the field against Renly at least?"

Jaime scoffed at the very idea. "The gold cloaks aren't an offensive army. I wouldn't trust them beyond the city's walls with hunting bandits, let alone fighting a battle. No, they'll be of use on the wall, but that's all. We'll have to leave offensive operations to your grandfather."

"Agreed." Cersei said before changing the subject. "Varys, do you have anything else to report?"

"There is a representative of the Iron Bank here to speak to you, your Majesty, he is in the foyer even now. I am waiting for some agents of mine to run down some of the sailors from the ship that Ranma took to Pentos, it has apparently made port in Duskendale. I think we need to know how that mission turned out."

"It would certainly make our propagandismore effective if we could instill some truth in it..." Petyr murmured.

The others, in particular Jaime and Pycelle, winced at the very idea of the Targaryens returning to Westeros, especially if Ranma Stark had brought them back. That would be very bad indeed, but thankfully they hadn't heard any rumors of that just yet.

"Very well, show in the Iron Bank representative. Perhaps we can make some kind of deal with them about a payment plan in return for more liquid capital now." Cersei growled finally giving in to her desire to rub at her eyes for a moment before forcibly shaking herself.

The Iron Bank representative was a tall, spare man with a bald head obviously shaved that way rather than from age, and a calm deliberate manner even when simply walking into the throne room. He was dressed in simple yet well-made clothing, and a heavy Iron and gold torque hung from his neck down his chest.

"Your Majesty, your grace, thank you for seeing me on such short notice," The man said, his voice calm, almost soothing yet stern sounding at the same time. "I am a representative of the Iron Bank, and I have come to speak to of the outstanding loans that the Iron Throne has accrued from us. To wit, almost one and a quarter million gold dragons. The former Hand had worked out an excellent system for the repayment of that loan, and we were pleased with his progress."

That was putting it mildly. That debt that the Iron Throne had accrued from the Iron Bank had been up to almost three million golden dragons but in his time in the capital Lord Stark had done wonders to work with their bankers to funnel small bits of monies their way to start paying it off, and had pointed out several places where their own paperwork had been falsified, the monies given supposedly to the crown not even showing up in the Iron Throne's books, and thus could not lawfully be part of the debt.

The man didn't let his gaze slide to Petyr, who some in the Iron Bank felt was the orchestrator of that. The only reason the man had not already been assassinated, messing with bank paperwork at either end was a killing offense no hyperbole there, was the fact they couldn't actually pin it on him. They weren't about to move on Petyr without that proof since doing so if he was not the culprit might make the real one disappear. "With Lord Stark gone, the setup he had put in place to repay us has disappeared, so we wish to come to an understanding with you about a payment plan."

Joffrey growled angrily standing up as if to threaten the man physically though he didn't have the height or body for that to come off well. He seems more petulant than angry really. "Who are you to demand anything of the Iron Throne?! Some little piddling foreign bank, come here to demand terms of us!? We're at war in case you haven't noticed, this is no time for penny-pinching! Come back to us when we have crushed these usurpers that are causing so much chaos in our realm, and you might find us in a better humor!"

"Wars take time, as well as money. If we do not have any kind of agreement with you about a payment plan, we can no longer forward you more money to pay for your ongoing expenses." The man said calmly, staring first at Joffrey than Cersei. "We are a business, our own bottom lines come first after all."

The young king was about to explode again but Cersei held up a hand. "Calmly my son, while you are right that this is a time of war, we do need liquid capital." She looked with scant favor at the man. "At present, I will only promise to pay a third of that gold over time. Most of that debt was accrued by the previous king, and as such it is to House Baratheon the majority of the debt should be addressed. As Storms End and the rest of House Baratheon have risen in treason against the house's real heir, we cannot be held accountable for repayment of the debt the former lord accumulated at this time. Nor I will not agree to any long-term payment plans, as doing so would tie up the money coming in from our own resources. That is the best you are going to get."

The man's eyes narrowed, showing how unhappy he was with that decision. "That is not enough. We have a reputation to uphold as well as our bottom line to see to. We will require that money to be paid in full or steps may be taken to reclaim payment via... other methods."

"Was that a threat!" Joffrey asked incredulously. "I should have your head cut chopped off for that!"

To one side Ser Blount moved forward one hand on his hilt as if willing to do just that right there and then, but he was blocked from a nod by Cersei moving Ser Swann in his way. The two men glared at one another, but it was Blount who backed down.

Cersei turned back to the Iron Bank representative, who had not given his name. That was deliberate she knew, he was simply a voice for the bank, not one of their movers or shakers. "A third." she said calmly. "To be paid over the next two years from the gold reserves of the Rock, after I get in touch with my uncle. That is the best you are going to get."

The man shrugged. "I will take your words to my superiors but remember your highness", he went on, looking between the now nearly frothing mad Joffrey and the calm as ice queen. "The Iron Bank always gets its due." With that he walked out, leaving Cersei with one more problem and a smiling Varys who was wondering if he could

somehow turn this to his own advantage and that of his patron.

OOOOOO

Several days later, the news of the battle of the ford of the Kneeling Man reached King's Landing, and none of the small council were smiling now. "I hadn't thought that much of the Riverlands would declare against us." Cersei mused thoughtfully, though her eyes were flashing with rage. She would rage later when she was alone or with just Jaime, right now she needed to keep control. Eddard Stark had shown her how controlled rage was much better than the shouting and screaming kind, if not nearly as emotionally satisfying.

While her father might have won the battle, and now controlled fully a third of the Riverlands, his march north had been halted, and that meant that it was up to the Freys to stop Ranna and the North. That was an impossibility, she was certain of it even if Old Walder had a spine equal to his ambition. This meant that soon they would have a third enemy to contend with.

After a moment spent grinding her teeth to keep from roaring out her rage and anger at this newest affront to her and her son's positions, Cersei turned to her brother. "How long before the North is in play?"

"Four, maybe three months." Jaime guessed. "Longer, possibly. Remember the North is nearly as large as the Vale, the Riverlands, and the Crownlands combined but with nowhere near the numbers. It'll take the Starks time to gather a strong enough force to send South, plus they've already sent men up to the wall, so I doubt it could be that large a force." Despite those words his normal arrogant smirk was in abeyance. If Ranna was as good at leading men as he was at fighting himself, that army would be **very** dangerous.

Joffrey slammed his hand down on the table, ignoring the pain the pain this caused in his hand to yell. "The North is a problem for later! The Riverlands are a problem for now! It's obvious that old bastard in Riverrun has fully followed his son's treason! As such his son should pay for it. We should kill him now, then send his head to his father!"

"That would serve no purpose." said Varys said coolly. "Worse, such a move would be certain to change the opinion of at least a few of the Houses who have joined forces with your grandfather, or have remained neutral."

"But the only good thing for a hostage is if they believe we will kill him if they act up, this is obviously them acting up."

"No I'm afraid it isn't." Pycelle said shaking his head. "Hoster's idea of simply informing his lords to act as their own conscience dictates has cleared him of wrongdoing in this case." He tapped the message thoughtfully, thinking hard. Ever since Tommen's death he had been taking his position much more seriously, and was much more likely to speak up if he had something to share. "Besides, the Houses facing Lord Tywin on the Green Fork aren't taking the field against us. They're simply taking the field against allowing anyone to march across their land. That kind of neutrality we can deal with. Killing Edmure would no doubt turn them against us. No, it's best to hold onto him."

"Grandmaster Pycelle's right I'm afraid my son." Cersei said, sounding actually regretful about that. "I would like nothing better than to show our anger at this betrayal, but it is best that we keep Edmure alive for now. It shows mercy on our part and also keeps Riverrun and the Tully forces from acting, no small thing."

Angered at being blocked from slating his inner sadist on what he saw as a worthy target Joffrey stood up abruptly and marched out of the room. Seeing this Cersei sighed faintly, her own initial rush of anger having disappeared as she tried to think of what this could mean in the long term before deciding she couldn't figure that out, and turned to other matters.

Jaime frowned looked after his erstwhile son, then motioned one of the men he had recruited in the Kingsguard, Ser Torrey Buckwell, third son of that Crownlands noble house. He was a decent swordsman and a man who took his oaths seriously, so had been perfect for the Kingsguard, though his skills weren't quite up to Balon Swann's level. Jaime whispered into the man's ear and Torrey nodded, then moved briskly after the two men assigned to guard Joffrey, both of whom had followed the king out of the room.

His sister hadn't noticed this little bit of interplay, having turned to Varys. "Besides the news of the Riverlands, which we cannot affect or change from this far removed, do you have anything else to report Varys?"

"I do indeed Your Highness." Varys said smiling faintly. "News has reached me from my little birds in Duskenale. The ship that Ranna Stark took to Pentos made port there, and its sailors are being very free with the news of what occurred. Apparently he brought back Daenerys Targaryen. She came willingly, the alternative apparently being sold by her brother, as we had suspected, to the Dothraki. She was not apparently a willing participant in that."

Cersei scoffed, motioning to get on with it. As if any woman would wish to be sold off like that. Normal marriages between Noble Houses were one thing, but at least most lords were civilized. She hated to think what the Dothraki were like, thinking them the equal of the Late, unlamented Gregor Clegane in the manner they treated women.

Obedying her command, Varys had to stop himself from smiling at the rock he was about to drop. Varys was still trying to wrap his own mind around the return of the dragons, but it was certain that they would help in the long run to muddy the waters here even more. He had already sent notes to a few of his factors in the free cities to search out fossilized eggs if they could find them. After all, if one Targaryen could awaken them, certainly another could. "But that is not all. "

"But here is the most, astonishing part, something I would not have believed except every sailor my little birds plied with their various wiles have said the same thing. The Targaryen girl apparently brought along two dragons eggs, which hatched within moments of her arrival aboard the ship. Two dragons, living, breathing dragons, are apparently hers to command. The sailors were all sharing tales of how she began to train them, commanding them with gestures and words as if they were merely dogs!"

He watched, allowing his own face to show shock at what he was saying while inside he laughed aloud at the look of fear on the face of everyone around the council table. "Needless to say." Varys continued. "I think we need to consider what this means long-term."

OOOOOO

Jaime excused himself quickly from the meeting after that. His sister had shown a remarkable amount of self-control when the bad news of their father's setback was shared, but this latest information had broken that control. Even as he walked down the corridor his ears were still ringing from her screeching, wild and above all impotent, fury. Cersei was magnificent most of the time, but when she lost it fully, even Jaime didn't want to be around her.

*Of course there's not much any of us can do about this particular problem.* Jaime thought, his lips twisted in something between a snarl and his normal smirk at the thought. *I'm good with a sword, but I can't fly, so my ability to deal with dragons is somewhat limited.*

Beneath that flippant thought however was a lot of fear. He could all too easily remember the mad king, and the thoughts of what another mad Targaryen could do with a real dragon terrified him, though he would never let that show. *I bet we could figure out a way for scorpions to range on them if we tried, need to talk to Pycelle about that later, after my sweet sister works off her temper. She's been keeping it bottled up lately, all the crap we've had to deal with has forced her to, so that might take a while.*

He looked up, broke out of his thoughts when a familiar voice called his name from further down the hallway he was walking down. "Ser Jaime?"

Coming down the hallway toward him was Tyrek Lannister. He had initially been one of the king's squires, though had been nearly forgotten since he didn't actually enjoy hunting, but Lancel had. Tyrek had missed the battle against the Starks because he had been down with one of the nastiest stomach maladies Jaime had ever seen. Even now he looked pale and wan, though that might have been his still having not gotten over Lancel's death. The two young men hadn't been close, but Lancel was possibly the first family member Tyrek had lost. Jaime was grimly certain however he wouldn't be the last. Since then Tyrek had been used as a general gofer for the queen and the Kingsguard, which was probably what he was doing now.

Jaime cocked an eyebrow at Tyrek and he went on. "Milord, Ser Torrey asked me to fetch you, he says to come to the Traitor's Walk."

Jaime's eyes narrowed and he nodded, walking briskly off. He found Torrey there, looking a little bemused. "Torrey, what happened, where's the boy-king?"

"He came here right after leaving the king's council but I think you were wrong about his temper getting the better of him, at least in severity. He shouted at Edmure Tully for a bit, had Blount and the others smack him every time he tried to open his mouth. The king said stuff about how his grandfather was going to wipe Edmure's father and the Tully's holdings out, how he was a traitor and all that. Then he ordered him to be moved from the top floor down to the bottom floor, but that's all." Torrey smiled now, looking very relieved he wouldn't have to try to stand up to the king, since given his oaths he would have had to obey Joffrey's orders over his commanders. "That's all, then he, Blount and the others gathered some hounds and armsmen then went out on a hunt."

At the remarkably blasé account Jaime breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe the boy really wasn't involved in the



prisoners' deaths then. *If just smacking Edmure around like that was enough for Joffrey to get over his anger, maybe I was jumping at shadows.*

OOOOOO

He wasn't, but after his mother's words Joffrey knew he couldn't take his full displeasure out on Edmure. So Joffrey had gone hunting, letting his anger out on a fox his dogs ran to ground. Later that night however, he, Boros Blount and Alfred Edgerton, a knight from a Crownlands House of similar disposition, slipped into the prison. Heading down to the lowest level, they found Edmure asleep.

Before Edmure could rouse from the light of their torches, he found his head being covered by a burlap sack. Edmure woke up with a gasp, trying to jerk away from the hands he felt on him, but being chained to the wall limited his ability to fight back, and months of being in prison, even in the better quarters reserved for lords, had sapped his strength. "Damn you, you bastards! If I could see I AHH!"

The four hands on him pushed Edmure flat on his back and then Edmure felt the chains around his legs pulled taut. The chains on his hands were also pulled taut and Edmure found himself spread out like that. A blow landed on his back, causing him to grunt in pain. Another blow slammed into his forehead, causing him to nearly black out. Moments later, he wished he had, as the lashes began to fall, and he screamed.

Near the entrance to the prison cell Joffrey smiled. *Mother said I shouldn't kill you, and all the others agreed with it, so I suppose that's correct, but that doesn't mean I can't hurt you for your fathers treason. For now merely a whipping with a cat o' nine tails, be grateful it's only lashes rather than skinning. But if my grandfather keeps running into more problems, well, a prisoner doesn't need the fingers on his sword hand does he?* That thought made Joffrey smile even wider, while all around them, the other prisoners woke up to the sounds of torture, and shivered where they lay.

OOOOOO

Despite being much closer to King's Landing than Highgarden, Bitterbridge was still far away from the Riverlands, where war had already begun. For all that however, there was still martial glory to be had. Just ask Loras, who had just unseated his third opponent of the day. After pushing up his faceplate, Loras shook out his shield arm wincing theatrically. "A good try," he said jovially looking down at his opponent across the tilt where the man was groaning as he got to his feet. "If you'd struck a little more center of mass you might've beaten me there my friend!"

The other young man, Emmon Cuy, a nephew of House Cuy's current lord, laughed wheezily and waved him off. With that Loras turned his horse around to head back the way he came, dismounting with ease. He stood there for a time watching the next few matches, including his lover, Renly's. Renly seemed off his form slightly today, putting more strength into his lance thrusts than he should, but he still won his match easily enough.

When Renly joined him at the end of the tilt, Loras looked up at him, one eyebrow raised sardonically. "You seem a little out of sorts my friend, what's wrong?"

"You know damn well what's wrong." Renly said in a low tone, not bothering to dismount. Instead he earthed his lance next to him then pulled off his helmet before looking down at Loras. "Don't tell me you haven't heard the rumors?"

"I have, but you can't let them get to you, especially when it might cost you your next match." Loras replied earnestly.

"Why do you think I entered this tournament in the first place?" Renly replied growling a little. "I had hoped that coming to Bitterbridge plus taking part in this tourney would allow me to fight the rumors, but it hasn't worked."

Loras grimaced, but nodded. News had reached them from House Fell that House Buckler and a few others had declared for Stannis. There was also news of a battle against House Tarth that had completely smashed the force that House had been willing to send to war for Renly. That wasn't good, to say the least.

House Buckler had yet to take offensive action against House Fell, but Fell was no longer willing to send more than a token of its strength to war, and the other Stormlands lords were worried as well. He had received ravens from all the lords who had already gathered at Fawnton, and he had bit the arrowhead and sent orders back to them to send two thousand infantry to bolster Felwood, but ordered the others to remain where they were, preparing to march to the Rose Road to meet the army gathering here at Bitterbridge for the march up to King's Landing.

None of them had been happy about it, yet his promise to cede Bronzegate to the house that performed best in the battles to come had been a large enough carrot. But his power over them was badly eroded by this episode and certain attacks on his personal reputation.

The Queen's version of what had happened in King's Landing had spread like rumors often do, helped along by her ravens. Cersei's version painted the Starks as power-hungry in their attempt to take the throne from the queen, who was holding it as regent for young Joffrey, when their chosen heir, Tommen had died, killed by a third-party. It was hinted that they were doing so as part of a long term scheme cooked up with Targaryen supporters.

That of course didn't matter to Renly, but what that bitch of a lioness's version said about Renly himself did. It painted him as fleeing with his tail between his legs the moment combat was in the offing. It stated she had evidence that Renly had been in on it with the Starks, but the moment it seemed as if it would come to an actual battle in the streets of King's Landing he ran like a whipped cur.

It called into question his basic courage, and that was something no noblemen could stand. Especially not in the Reach, where honor and chivalry and the knightly virtues were seen as close to sacred as oaths sworn in the presence of the Seven. Not for nothing was the Reach known as the home of chivalry.

His friends here knew it wasn't true, and his close allies here and in the Stormlands were willing to ignore it, but those he hadn't befriended and the regular knights were beginning to mutter about his simply waiting here for his full army to gather rather than use the forces already at hand. Some of them obviously felt it might be a sign of his cowardice, but what to do about that was something Renly couldn't figure out.

The two young men's conversation was interrupted as Loras heard his name called for the next bout. Renly watched as his friend won the tilt easily, smashing a knight from House Merryweather out of his saddle with the first pass. Soon after that it was Renly's turn. He too won his match though it took him three passes to defeat his opponent, Ser Horas Redwyne.

The other young man stomped angrily off, muttering under his breath "Hmmpf, even a coward can have some skill in the joust I suppose. It isn't as if his life was on the line after all." That made Renly stiffen, and he gritted his teeth angrily while he wheeled his horse back to the starting point.

So it continued throughout the day, but Horas' words proved to be shared by many. He could see the glances, could see the sneers in all those but his closest friends and allies. It was spreading like a plague through his army.

*Endure it, he thought to himself. Endure it while the Reach builds you the largest army in Westeros. With that, I can smash anyone else who tries to stand in my way to the Iron Throne. At that point this will have been forgotten, and all they will remember it is the fact that I won!*

He smiled as Loras bowed to him, the winner of the tourney. Renly had reached the semi-finals and then lost to Ser Robar Royce. The second son of that Noble House of the Vale, Robar had travelled to Bitterbridge to pledge his sword to Renly's cause and hopefully win some glory for himself. But Loras had beaten the man in the finals.

"In honor of your victory Ser Loras," Renly intoned. "I name you as captain of my Rainbow Guard! May you serve me with just as much courage and dedication as you have shown here today!"

Loras bowed then took his place at Renly's side while Renly called for all the other young men who had distinguished themselves in the tourney one after another, putting together the rest of his Rainbow Guard. Renly's version of the Kingsguard, they would be his elite force to place against that force, and possibly the wolfsworn he had heard Ranma and others of the Northerners speak of before the events of King's Landing. Each man in it was also assigned a color, to match the rainbow motif, plus connect them directly to the Faith, which held the rainbow as a sacred sign. This was an obvious attempt to gain favor among the pious, but Renly knew it would work anyway, among the smallfolk at least.

That evening, after a drunken feast was held in Loras' honor the two men were walking the grounds of Bitterbridge, discussing ideas on what to do to combat the rumors, when a messenger found them from Lord Caswell. "Your grace, milord" The young man said, gasping a little. Milord Caswell asks you to join him in his study, there is a messenger here with news from the Gold Road."

Renly's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and he nodded, thanking the man politely. The two of them hurried off, and found their friends as well as Mace and several lords already waiting for them, all that were in Bitterbridge and sober after the party, though only just in a few cases. Randyll was there as well. The only one fully sober, he was pacing back and forth his face a storm cloud.

"What has happened?" Renly asked as he entered, looking at his future father-in-law.

Mace might once have cut a martial figure, with wide shoulders and strong arms in his youth, but he had since turned

to fat. His curly brown hair and triangle shaped beard held flecks of gray, showing the man was prematurely aging, helped no doubt by the ale he consumed at every opportunity he could away from his nattering mother. Of late he had soundly rejected his mother's advice, remaining close to Renly where she had said they should distance themselves, and look for other methods of securing the position. In Mace's thinking there was nothing ventured, nothing gained. Certainly backing Renly no longer seemed the certain course, but what did that matter? The reward at the end would still be worth it.

He looked at the messenger, a sharp eyed old man with a scar going down one side of his face and threw his eye on that side. Nonetheless he was wearing decent leather armor, and had a very good bow strapped to his back. "Tell them what you told us."

"Sir, I serve some Lord Shermer as a thief taker. I'm also supposed to look out for any unusual movements along the Gold Road and report. Well sir, there's of force of Westerlands men coming down the Gold Road hell for leather heading straight towards King's Landing as fast as they can go."

"Do you have any idea of the numbers?" Randyll asked quickly. It was obvious he had been merely waiting for Renly to arrive before questioning the messenger as closely as he could.

"Around 6000 or so my Lord." he said shrugging his shoulders. "There is a place along the Gold Road ah like, it's my personal favorite place to hide when I know a thief is tryin' ta get away that way." He smirked a little. "They never suspect it, since the tree looks darn near unclimbable, and the bottom's covered with poison vine. Anyway," he went on more seriously "I'm good at counting, and I'd say at least 6000."

"Their disposition?" Randyll barked.

At the man's blank look Randyll scowled but Renly spoke up before he could. "What my lord Tarly means is could you tell us what kind of men made up this force?"

That I can't rightly say." The man said with a shrug. "I only saw about a score o' men with bows, and the whole force were on horseback. But most of them didn't look none like knights or really trained cavalry. One or two of them looked about as comfortable in a saddle as a sack a wheat'd. But they had a lot of horses, two for every man."

"Most likely infantry placed in the saddle then," Randyll mused. "It's an old but good trick that lets you move your infantry as fast as a cavalry unit. Could you estimate how many men, as you put it looked like sacks of wheat in the saddle?"

The man shook his head. "Nay, milord, that I couldn't, not real like. I couldn't make out their expressions or anything like that for the most parts anyway, but I would say..." he paused thoughtfully. "I would say maybe a 1000 of 'em was real cavalry. Their armor was better ya see, and a few had heavier lookin' plate. Plus they all had lances."

Renly frowned tapping his thigh thoughtfully. 6000 more men on the walls of King's Landing would be a problem, but not an insurmountable one. Plus 6000 more mouths to feed would simply hasten the fall of the city anyway, since Renly knew that the more they felt the sting of starvations, the more the smallfolk would make problems for the royals and their backers.

He was about to say that aloud when Loras leaned in. "This is your chance!" Loras whispered.

Renly turned to him and Loras went on. "We ride out here with the army already gathered here to block that force from getting to King's Landing. With you at our ahead and if we fight well that can banish the coward label you've been laboring under." Loras too had been lambasted in the Queen's version of events in King's Landing, but few in the Reach truly believed that of the Knight of Roses.

Still, that didn't mean that his advice was wrong, and Renly nodded. *We've already gathered a force of 18,000 cavalry and 14,000 mixed infantry here. But I'll need to command the force we send on my own, not with Randyll or anyone else there to take away from the glory. It needs to be seen as my victory and mine alone.* "I think," Renly said instead. "That we have an opportunity here."

OOOOOO

Lord Rupert Serret was a wily old man of Tywin's generation who while on the short side was nearly as broad across the shoulders and was known to use a massive bladed axe as his personal weapon. He wasn't as well-versed in warfare as Tywin, but was no slouch either having fought in the Ninepenny King's war. And unlike most noblemen, he was also more of an infantry commander, since he had led a force of infantry in that war and knew well their strengths

and weaknesses. He also knew the value of good intelligence, and had a large force of scouts probing ahead and to the sides of his force at all times while he marched his forces as quickly as possible down the Gold Road.

They were nearly to the first crossing of Blackwater Rush when his scouts reported sighting the massive army of the Reach closing in on them from the front right flank. "And you say the army you spotted is entirely made up of cavalry? And not like our own, infantry simply thrust into the saddle?"

"Positive my Lord." one of the scouts said a young man missing an ear. But there was nothing wrong with his eyes or his mind. "All of them heavy horse, with a smattering of light out in front as scouts, a bare dozen I think spread out all along their front. They're not movin' quick, their horses will be well rested by the time they catch up with us."

"How many days until we reached the bridge across the Blackwater?" Rupert asked another scout, an older man who doubled as his scout commander.

"I'd say about two days or so my Lord, but they'll find us by tomorrow."

"I don't think we can stop them from catching us." Lord Serret mused scratching at the stubble on his face for moment. "No, we'll have to give them something else to chase instead."

OOOOOO

According to the scouts estimates Renly and his men were barely an hour away now from catching sight of the Westerlands force. Renly was feeling all the usual feelings of a young man before his first battle: fear, nervousness, a desire to get it over with and apprehension that he wouldn't do as well as he hoped.

He mastered that all however with a confident air as he rode at the center of his cavalry, having taken ten thousand of the heavy cavalry already gathered at Bitterbridge with him. With that many knights they would be able to smash the Westerlands force even if they tried to stop and fort up somewhere, which would be impossible on the Gold Road in any event. So long as they caught them before the Blackwater crossing the Lannisters would simply be hammered under.

The idea that an infantry unit could stand up against cavalry never even entered his mind, and though Renly knew enemy would have spotted them coming and made their own plans, he knew any plans would fail when matched against his heavier force.

The front of the Army began to ride up a small grassy knoll which would allow them to look down onto the gold road to see their enemies on the march. Suddenly the clamor of battle arose and bugles sounded the alarm from the front of the column.

"What's happening?!" Renly barked, standing up in his stirrups to get a better view. "My spyglass!" When the object was handed to him by his banner carrier he focused on the front of his army. There he saw hundreds of light cavalry dueling with his own, with his heavy cavalry already moving in to assist.

"It's a holding tactic." He said barking it out. "Split the army into three, the ones already engaged will hold that cavalry there, the rest of us will split in two and go around them to attack the main force." That was easier to do than say however. Everyone in the army tried to rush forward at once, eager to get in on the kill of this small force. Then more cavalry came up, snarling the entirety of his frontline.

"Stranger damn it!" Renly growled, pulling his face guard down and readying his lance. "We'll have to push them out of the way then. Rainbow Guard with me!"

With Loras at his side Renly barreled forward, the rest of his cavalry making way for them automatically then forming up behind him. The Rainbow Guard hit the ensnared light and heavy cavalry like a hammer, bowling over some of the light cavalry, actually knocking their lighter horses to the ground, while their lances, skewered horse and rider indiscriminately.

Renly himself skewered one man, and nearly froze as he saw the blood flowing from the wound before his training took over and he let go of his lance. Grabbing out his broadsword Renly whirled around, barely blocking a blow from east from an enemy's lighter sword, before his return stroke smashed the man out of his saddle. He killed one more man, taking a blow to his shield in turned which set his arm to ringing when suddenly there was a noise of bugles in the air.

Another force, this time of a hundred a hundred heavy cavalry slammed into the flank of his army, leading hundreds of unsaddled horses into his formation, disorganizing a his army further. They were soon enveloped however by the

rest of his cavalry, having gone too deep into his formation to get away.

The light cavalry on the other hand hadn't tried to penetrate his force so much as shave a bit of the front and were now breaking off. "After them!" Renly shouted, forgetting for a moment that there was anything else but the retreating light cavalry in this battle. Disorganized and slightly rattled by the wild horses still running amok in their own formation, none of the other commanders with him, all young men like himself eager to prove themselves, realized it either.

By the time Renly regained his senses, all of his army had started to chase off after the light cavalry. They eventually rode them to ground, but it took the rest of the day to that then reform the army.

Looking up at the sky from cleaning his sword Renly saw that it was nearly night, and shook his head angrily. "They bought themselves another day!" he said looking around at his Rainbow Guard and the other commanders. "One day more, but that won't save them in the end. We'll run them to ground first thing tomorrow morning!"

That won him a cheer from all the men around him.

It didn't quite work out that way however. The infantry kept marching on through the night, putting more distance between them and the larger Reach force. The Reach cavalry still caught up to them, but just as the last of the infantry crossed the bridge over the Blackwater.

Once the last infantrymen were across, torches were thrown down along the bridge, along with dozens of ale-skins and even several gathered bushels of hay from the nearby farmland. The bridge was huge, old and its base was made of stone rather than wood, but the wood that made on it was dry, and the fire caught easily.

With that act Lord Serret was free to continue down to King's Landing now unmolested. He had lost his entire cavalry force, having sent them to harry the larger Reach force and then break away. Those had been their orders anyway, though Rupert knew when giving them that it wouldn't work out that way, indeed he had counted on it. Thankfully for the rest of his men he was right. Those two thousand men had died, but the four thousand and two hundred infantry with him were saved.

*Technically it was a win*, Renly thought as he stared across the bridge at the retreating infantry lines, what could be seen through smoke of the fire on the bridge anyway. Below in the river hundreds of men had formed a chain and were using their helmets to throw water up onto the fire. Even if they put it out however, Renly wasn't about to trust the integrity of the bridge after that conflagration.

"I had really hoped we could ride the entire force to ground. Those light cavalry were but a decoy apparently."

His friends all around him nodded but Loras shrugged. "So we'll follow them across when the fires put out. They can't honestly expect this to stop our pursuit can they? And once we catch up we'll ride over them just as easily as we did their light cavalry."

"You assume the bridge will be able to hold our weight." Renly said pessimistically. "I remember this bridge; the causeway was destroyed a few years ago by a lightning strike and the crown billed for its repair since it is part of the royal road network. I don't think that the fire will have done any less damage. No, we won a battle, now it's time for us to win the war."

Loras and the rest of the Rainbow Guard looked at him and Renly smiled. "Send a message to Bitterbridge and Fawnton. Tell them to march to meet us at the Kingsroad. We'll march from here along Blackwater Rush to meet them. We'll besiege King's Landing."

At some of the quizzical expressions he laughed. "We don't have enough men to take it until the second echelon from the Reach arrives from Highgarden, but we do have enough men to besiege it which might be just as good. I bet my cold fish of a brother is already blockading the port, we can use that to our advantage. We'll block delivery even of the foodstuffs from the Crownlands while we wait for the main force, then attack the city once we see it's weak, and force my brother to come to the bargaining table at the same time. Even if the Lannister force already in the Riverlands turns down to us, that small a force won't matter in the open field against our knights, and we will win the war within a year!"

That caused all the men around him to cheer, and soon enough the army was on the move once more, while a trio of ravens winged their way toward their target castles.

OOOOOO

About a week into the march from castle Cerwyn the army had made camp for the night. After spending two hours practicing with Arya and the other wolfsworn, Ranma entered his tent, shaking his head slightly. While their meditation and ki manipulation exercises were proceeding apace, none of them would ever be as fast as Jon or Ranma. In fact even Ranma wasn't as fast in this life as he had been in his fast life.

Oh, he still was able to use a move he could call the Amiguriken in his head, but sustaining it? No, that took far too much ki, much like most of the actual ki attacks Ranma had learned. He could armor his body and speed it up, but not both for very long. And if he tried to use the Amiguriken without armoring his hands and arms against it, the very air began to feel as if he was hitting concrete, and his skin began to blister like he had thrust his hands into a fire.

Still, Ranma persisted training them, and now Daenerys and Merry at least a little, who at Ranma's insistence had joined them. Though she showed no aptitude for the physical side of things, Myrcella had taken to the meditation like a duck to water unlike Daenerys, who had major troubles with that aspect. Seeking the void just did not work for Daenerys at all, forcing Ranma to change the meditation method he was teaching her.

But Ranma was determined to get her up to snuff eventually, if only because building up ki would directly impact how long Daenerys could expect to live. Ranma in no way wanted to outlive his wife or friends, so was determined they would all learn as much as possible about using and building up their ki.

He reached down, touching a small bundle that Sansa had given Dacey to pass on to him. She had forgotten it among her own gear for a time, but finally remembered it that evening. He opened it looking inside and pulling out the contents, a banner that Sansa had made for them to signify his union with Daenerys. Once laid out on the ground of his tent he could see the design on it, and smiled. Attached to the edge of it was a small note, which he pulled off and read.

Daenerys came into his tent several moments later in search of Ranma to tell him the evening meal was ready. She stopped and stared at the banner, shaking her head. "Is that what Sansa gave Dacey to pass on to you? I am constantly astonished by your sister's ability with needle and thread, to create that in the time we were in Winterfell, that's amazing."

"Yeah, she's always been good at that, but what she wrote to me was surprising, and reminded me of something I had started to forget." Ranma replied, still staring down thoughtfully at the message in his hand.

"oh, what's that?"

"She wrote to me asking that we show mercy on the queen when we reach King's Landing. I liked that, that my sister shows such confidence in us." Ranma chuckled quietly still not looking up. "But she asks for mercy for Cersei because in the time after Tommen died, the two of them had become close. She writes 'even with all that happened Ranma, I can't forget how kind she was, how she mourned for Tommen. While that does not change any of her actions before or since, I ask you to show mercy for my sake.' It reminded me that not all the Lannisters should be lumped in with Joffrey or even Tywin."

"They're Lannister!" Daenerys growled, sounding very much like her little ones at that moment. "They're all child killing, raping bastards! You agreed with me before that they need to be wiped out, don't tell me that just because the chief traitress had cozened up to Sansa you're going to let her live?"

Now Ranma looked at Daenerys, his eyes blue ice to her fiery violet ones. "They aren't all like that. Tywin might have ordered the killing, and he certainly doesn't care about the rest, but even Tywin isn't himself a rapist. Nor did I ever say Cersei would not pay for her crimes, though I haven't decided on the type of punishment just yet."

"That doesn't matter, he was still the one who ordered it, and it was his family that profited the most! And if the queen hadn't committed treason neither of us would be here! They must be removed from power when we win, or else somewhere down the line the Lannisters will rise up again in response to our victory, they are that vindictive and hateful."

"True on all accounts, and I am not going back on what I said, the Lannister's will be removed from all positions of authority, their lands sized and redistributed. But I **won't** allow my hate to govern my actions, I won't paint the entire family with a single brush that's not honorable, or just! After all, there are people out there who will put you and Viserys in the same category because of the actions of your father. Would **you** paint Merry in the same light as the man who employed the Mountain?"

Daenerys' violet eyes widened in rage at her family being compared to the Lannisters, but the last sentence made her anger drain away from her. She closed her eyes for several moments and when she spoke, it was almost in a

whisper. "I've spent my whole life being taught to hate the Starks, the Baratheons and Lannisters all equally, to look down on even the Tyrells for not being there to defend their liege lords at our time of need. Everything was so easy, so straightforward then, my family was in the right, and everyone else was in the wrong, we were the Royal family, whatever my father might have done he was the king. Taking back our throne and punishing them for their betrayal was justice."

"But, but it isn't that simple, it never was, just my perception. First Domic told me to my face what the old king had done, and worse I read and found out more on my own, forever changing how I viewed my own father, and my family as a whole. Helped admittedly, by seeing Viserys falling into the same madness."

Her lips quirked in wry bitterness at the thought, but she went on regardless, wanting to get this all out now, much like pulling out a bad tooth. "And then I learned more about why your family rebelled, I could no longer blame your family for their actions at that point. And then, then at my lowest point, when all hope seemed lost, I met you. The starks changed from first enemy then to neutral party, then, in you valued allies and now family."

Ranma reached out, touching her cheek tenderly, smiling now. "And then you met Merry."

Daenerys leaned into his touch slightly, sighing now. "Merry, yes. I was so prepared to hate her, and she looks so **Lannister!** But there were so many parallels between her current circumstances and mine, and we bonded over murderous brothers and she was good with my little ones and so young and innocent in many ways, I could not look at her and see the ravaging, raping monster that all Lannisters were supposed to be." They were even connected by their feelings for Ranma, though she wasn't going to say it.

"But it is so hard to let go of my hate." She said, her voice even softer. "Yet you're right, we can't afford to let mindless hate color our actions. I broke away from Viserys not just because of his plans for me, which wouldn't have worked as he thought in any event, but because knew he would be a disaster of the first order on the throne. I, I cannot fully remove my feelings from my thoughts of the Lannisters, but I will not let them rule me."

Ranma smiled, pulling Daenerys into a hug. "It's ok Dae, if you ever start to go down that road I promise I'll be here to pull you back. So long as ya promise to do the same for me?"

He did not ask that to make Daenerys feel better. No, Ranma knew he had dark places in his soul, and a rage that could burn as cold as the winter winds. He knew he would lose it if he ever came upon a village after an invading army came through. The stories of rapine Eddard had once shared with him about Robert's Rebellion had filled Ranma's heart with fury, and once he loosed it, Ranma knew he would have trouble reining it in.

"I promise, my love." Daenerys said, leaning in. Their first real argument having ended, the two kissed for a time until Cley came with food of the two of them from the evening's fires.

OOOOOO

Margaery had remained behind in Highgarden when Renly rode out. This was because she and her grandmother had maneuvered Renly to declare that no marriage between the two of them would happen until he sat on the Iron Throne. It had been an incredibly astute move, though Mace had been furious about it. He seemed to think that the moment Renly and Margaery were wed that their future as part of the royal family of Westeros was secure. Margaery had never thought that way, and Olenna, who had at one point let herself be seduced by that thought, was now back in control of her faculties.

She, her grandmother and Willas were now meeting with Garlan, the second eldest of the Tyrell siblings. He was a belted and well respected knight, though not as well known as Loras since Garlan did not seek glory like his younger brother, eschewing the tourney for his own training. Already married, he spent most of his time at Cider Hall with his wife. At this moment they were discussing the latest news to reach them from all sources.

Olenna threw down a raven message from Lord Tarly who had sent it back upon receiving a message from Renly. "So, the idiot 'king' won himself a victory of sorts. It might be enough to combat the rumors about his personal cowardice for now I suppose." she drawled skeptically.

"For my part the news from the other side of the passes are more worrisome." Garlan said shaking his head. He had squired under Lord Randyll when he was younger, and considered himself at least half a march-man because of that. "I would've thought the Prince of Dorne would have been more cautious, but evidently his brother has a bigger influence on him than that." The news that Prince Doran had put Oberyn into prison had not reached the Reach, and the Marcher lords had a long memory. "Still, with half their forces at home the Dornish Marche Lords are well prepared for any invasion from that direction."

"Bah, that's merely saber rattling, nothing more." Olenna said shaking her head. "That army down there will march back and forth, up and down the passes but never come close to actually attacking. They know the Marcher Lords would slaughter their troops if they took the offensive."

"I agree if my friend Oberyn isn't in charge. If he is, all bets are off." Willas said. He smiled, amused as even Margaery looked uncomfortable at his mention of his friendship with Oberyn. Not only were Martell and Tyrell old enemies, but Oberyn had been the one to cripple Willas in a tourney years ago. Their friendship had been surprising, but deep for all of that.

After a moment he went on, his smile fading. "For my part I am more worried about news from Goldengrove and the western border. I think I should take a force out there to track and destroy these mercenaries that are causing so much carnage. House Rowan already sent their lord and most of their forces to Bitterbridge, they lack the manpower to run these reavers to ground by themselves."

Margaery and Olenna both looked shocked at that. Willas shrugged. "Who else? Besides, I may be the oldest but I am also the least tried, according to popular rumor, at combat. That needs to change. Just because my leg is lame doesn't mean I can't lead, and that wound did nothing to my sword arm. Besides which, Garlan was already selected to lead the men here up to meet the rest of the army for Renly's grand scheme." His amusement was rather withering at those last few words.

"No." said Olenna firmly. "I'll not send you out like that. I have another task for you."

In one wrinkled old hand she held up another missive, this one from another of her spies in the Crownlands. He was an itinerant tinker, who always traveled all over the place searching for business. This made him one of her better informers if a little intermittent in when he could send off messages. "One of the informers of our house in the Crownlands has passed on the fact that the Targaryens have returned!"

She looked over at Margaery, who like the two men had sat up abruptly. "Most specifically the Stormborn girl. The agent talked to a few sailors from the ship that brought her and the Stark boy back, they all said they were quite close. And that she brought two young dragons with her!"

Garlan was the first to respond, slumping forward and placing his face in his hands. "It just goes from bad to worse! How fast do dragons grow anyway?"

Rubbing his own face wearily, Willas shook his head. "I've actually studied dragons a time or two, purely for interest they are fascinating animals you understand. It will be around two years before they are capable of carrying a rider for any appreciable length of time. But every month that goes past they will be able to fly a little further alone. Unfortunately I have no idea how long it would take for them to start breathing fire, though I don't think they would be able to until at least their first year, to breathe any appreciable size of flame at any rate. But I agree with my brother, this is... bad."

"Could we..." Garlan asked looking at his grandmother. "Could we arrange for an... 'accident' to occur to Renly? With him gone we could say we had been led astray by wrong counsel? Our House **was** after all known to be loyal to the Targaryens during the War of the Usurper."

"No." Willas said shaking his head. "The Starks believe in honor, if we throw over Renly now, what will that say of us? That we can't go the distance, much as we did it in the last war? Oh, father makes a big act about how he was the only general the Targaryen had that won battles against Robert Baratheon, but what did that do, simply take him out of position to be of any use whatsoever when the Starks, Tullys, Lannisters and Baratheons came calling on King's Landing."

"No, if Renly dies of natural causes or in battle that is one thing, but if he dies mysteriously..." Willas shook his head. "Margaery's right, we should never have pulled her out of King's Landing, now we must make a good enough showing to show how we could hurt them if they don't make peace with us."

Olenna frowned at that, but knew that Willas had a point. *Besides*, she thought to herself, *poisons don't have to be used on people alone after all*. Olenna personally held no loyalty to House Targaryen. She only had loyalty to her own family and keeping them safe and powerful.

Margaery shook her head, having recovered from her own shock. In truth, she couldn't blame Ranma or this Stormborn girl for getting close as it were, no matter how much that pained her to admit. She had been pulled out of King's Landing, and while their friendship was strong, neither of them had allowed any attraction to grow between them, Ranma because of his desire to keep Margaery at arm's length, and Margaery because of her parents orders



to also play for the brat who now sat on the throne.

"Send me." she said aloud. "Ranma will listen to me, even if he and the Targaryen girl have become close." she did notice how she spat out those words, "he'll still listen to me at least politically. And despite Loras not backing his father, he won't have much of a problem with me or our family. Not yet anyway, so we can safely ally with the North and the Targaryens now, regardless of what Willas says."

"Mace will never go for it, not yet." Olenna said shaking her head. She was frankly becoming very unhappy about her family being close to the target of so many people's ambitions, but they couldn't get out of it! Not with Mace and his ego in the way, as well as their current agreement with Renly. That didn't even consider Loras and his relationship with the Baratheon boy.

"No." Olenna went on firmly. "I'm not sending you to the Starks Margaery that would serve no purpose at all even if you could reach them from here. Unless it slipped your mind, the Riverlands are a war zone right now. Plus Stannis has declared his intention to become king, which means you couldn't go by sea either, unless you think you should go around Dorne and the Westerlands?"

Margaery scowled, conceding the point. The conversation continued from there, but none of them really had any good idea of what to do from here on other than to continue to keep their options open.

As her grandchildren left, Olenna pulled out two more raven messages, placing them on the table in front of her. *If the dragon girl has already descended into her family's fire-madness, steps must be taken. And even if she hasn't she might blame the Reach for not being there to defend her father and seek to take vengeance because of it.*

She paused at that thought, then shook her head. *No, I helped get my family into this cleft point by jumping in without enough information once already. I need to wait until we hear more about the Stormborn girl before taking any precipitous action.*

*Beyond the girl's character and intentions towards my family there are two questions we need to answer before even trying to plan out a course of action. First, how will the rest of Westeros react to the dragons return, specifically the other noble families of the Reach? And second, if the Targaryen girl returned with two dragons and the Stark boy's aid, what happened to her older brother? As oldest, he would be the one to be seen as the legitimate heir of that family. Until we know those answers as Willas said our best bet in many ways is to continue to sail the present course. Besides, it isn't as if we have welded ourselves to Renly irrevocably, nor are we lacking in alternatives.*

Rubbing at her nose wearily she set the two missives aside for now. Groaning a little she lifted herself out of her chair and made her way to her bed for the evening. As she left, the firelight caught the fire, allowing the sigils on both to be seen. On one was a fire edged heart with a stag's head over a crown, the sigil of House Baratheon of Dragonstone. On the other was the lion sigil of House Lannister.

OOOOOO

Later that evening, Margaery laid in bed staring up the ceiling. *I hate being on the sidelines like this! In King's Landing at least I could affect some things, and it didn't take a disaster to make Ranma listen to me like it did my grandmother! By the Mother, my father still isn't willing to listen to me!*

For just a moment the thought of Ranma flowed through her head, his blue eyes, happy smile and joking manner, and his serious air when training Tommen, and his fury when he tore the Mountain that Rode to pieces. Then the image changed to Ranma standing beside a platinum haired violet eyed young woman of indeterminate features. She scowled shaking her head to banish the image. She couldn't banish the thoughts however, nor the fear that it would be a while before she could once again act to truly influence matters.

The next day Willas left Highgarden over his grandmother's objections. He led a force of a thousand light cavalry, five hundred archers, six hundred infantry and two hundred heavy cavalry taken from the Tyrell forces gathered here in Highgarden. After bidding his family farewell, Willas turned then rode to the head of the column, his face grim. His objective was to hunt down the mercenaries wreaking havoc over the western edge of the Reach. And maybe, just maybe, he thought to himself, a bit more than that if the opportunity presented itself.

OOOOOO

It took the northern army two and a half weeks to cover the distance between Castle Cerwyn and Moat Cailin. It was an amazing time for an army of their size covering that distance, and it had only been made possible because of the way they set the pace plus the fact that their supplies all came with them, keeping their need to stop to forage for food

to a minimum. To aid in this the wolfsworn went forward every day to prepare the campsite for the evening and hunt up some meat to add to the stores. This kept the army's morale up and physically moving at a brisk clip despite spending so much time every evening exercising and, in the case of the pikemen, drilling in formation.

The wolfsworn too had been training. Ranma was happy to see that all of them had shown at least a little bit of being able to use ki, though Daenerys and Myrcella were lagging far behind of course. The only ones who could not strengthen their blades with ki for at least a few moments were Dacey, Roger and Smalljon, whose chosen weapons were much larger than the others, which probably explained it. Despite that, Ranma was pleased with their progress.

As they arrived Jon and Ranma were at the head of the column. Jon smirked, seeing several dozen carts full of goods waiting for them. "I see Lady Dustin has gotten over her funk, at least enough to keep that 'lady' in front of her name." he quipped.

"So far, though you, Domic and your factors should go over it. Make certain that everything we ordered is there." Ranma had been rather irritated with the woman not showing up for the war council and had jumped at Daenerys' suggestion there. Honestly Ranma had been looking for an excuse to remove her and place a more favored House in charge of Barrowton. A town like that was a major resource to any house, and Dustin was wasting it at this point, simply happy to live on with her anger and angst alone. Still he wouldn't remove her until she gave him good cause.

"Look who else is here?" Ranma said pointing to the side. Meera stood there, her trident sticking in the ground next to her and her bow on her back. Ranma ran up to her, as did Jon and they took turns pulling her into a hug laughing as she tried to beat at their shoulders to let her go. "Hey little Meera," Ranma said laughing as he set her down. "How are you, and where's your father? I'd expected him to be here. Not that I'm unhappy to see you, or the work done on the Moat though."

Indeed that was an understatement. Moat Cailin would never again be the massive fortress it had once been, before the land shifted and the Neck came in, but the tower and wall that had been repaired removed its one glaring weakness, that it was open to assault from behind and from the Fever River. Now the largest of the towers stood repaired, with a ballista on top and room for at least a hundred archers on the roof alone. Any one tower of the Moat would be a difficult proposition for an invading army to destroy or bypass. All three of them combined would be impossible, especially with the Crannogmen on the side of the defenders.

"My father's out with our scouts." She replied pushing Jon away breaking their familial hug her grin at the Stark boys' antics disappearing. "You see..." From there Meera went on to explain what the Freys had been up to and their houses.

Through it all Ranma frowned while the rest of the army arrived behind them. Daenerys and the rest of the command group arrived soon after, peeling off to join them save for Domic and a few other lieutenants who took charge of getting the army situated for the night. Travel through the Neck would be tough since Ranma wanted to move quickly enough so that the men wouldn't come down with any of the local diseases, at least not any of the worse ones. But that would mean sending them forward in small lots so they didn't get bogged up in any one area. It'd taken the Kings party two weeks to cross the neck. Ranma intended to do it in a third of the time.

Arya interrupted proceedings by pulling Meera into a hug of her own as soon as she saw her. "Finally, another tomboy! Save me from the girly talk!" She glared at Daenerys who was laughing at her. In truth the conversations most nights between the girls hadn't truly been all that 'girly' most of the time, but the few times it was had obviously been enough for Arya.

She turned to look at Ranma, not realizing her hold on Meera. "She's coming with us." Arya stated firmly. "I'll share a tent with her from now on, I refuse to listen to one more discussion about heraldry, what different cloth costs or anything about Daenerys and my brother's relationship!"

Daenerys flushed slightly at that while Meera looked a little interested before wiping the look of her face when Arya turned to look at her. Ranma however simply shrugged. "I'd been planning to ask you to join us anyway Meera. Great-uncle Brynden could use a second in command of the scouts, and you're one of the best I know of for that.

"You mean it?" Meera asked, her eyes shining. While she would never think to offend her home, Meera had long wanted to see other lands, and going south with the army would let her do that. Plus, she might eventually join the wolfsworn itself.

To one side of the conversation Rickard scowled at the idea of another young woman joining them, but he knew better by now than to object. Arya thumping him twice when he joined the wolfsworn in their exercise had a lot to do with that, as did the fact Daenerys almost did the same despite having only been trained with Ranma intermittently

since they meet.

"Yep, I'll need to clear it with your father first of course. For now though, keep going with the news about this blocking force in our way."

After listening to what was going on, Daenerys frowned. "They're just sitting there, just to make a point? If the Freys are really that powerful, should we try to make a deal with them? They control a very strategic position that we could use, one we must deny to our enemies."

"No." Ranma said shaking his head firmly. "The Freys have never proven to be trustworthy or even good allies. Late Lord Frey is what the old man is known as further south, because he never joins any war except at the very end when it's time to divvy up the spoils. He did it for the War of the Usurper, he did it for the Ironborn Rebellion, and even for the Ninepenny Kings War. That's especially damning since the Ironborn attacked Seagard and the Cape of Eagles, which given its position House Frey should have been quick to reinforce. They never did."

"All that means is that his strength has never been diluted before." Daenerys argued back. "Besides, this force is sitting right in our path. They've had weeks to build up that defensive position, they could plead our army badly if we decide to fight them."

"I think we should send a small force forward to talk to these Freys and see what they might want in exchange for their help. Depending on who is in charge we might learn more about the house's intentions." Domic said diplomatically, coming up behind them both

"Agreed." Ranma said nodding his head. "Myself Jon and the rest of the wolfsworn. Daenerys, you'll stay here. I don't want news of your dragons to get out just yet if we can help it."

Daenerys frowned, not having much faith in Ranma's diplomatic skills, but she nodded. It wasn't as if she could leave her draklings here after all. Oh, Myrcella and Jon were decent enough with them. Cley too had proven helpful, the draklings apparently willing to let young children near them where they would not adults. How much of that had to do with their natural temperament or Fenris' lying nearby his golden eyes piercing both of them Daenerys didn't know. Jon on the other hand seemed to connect with them almost as well as Bran.

But none of them could really control her little ones. At least not without Jon warging with them, which was unproven at this point. Nor would Daenerys allow that except under dire circumstances. It wasn't proven just yet if an animal could bond with more than one human after all, and Daenerys didn't want to let anyone else bond with her children. Befriend yes, bond no. That was selfish of her, and a weakness, but Daenerys couldn't help it.

OOOOOO

The next morning Ranma and the wolfsworn raced ahead of the army. Each of the wolfsworn on horseback taking three each with them so that they could keep up with the wolves as they entered that ground devouring lope of theirs with Jon, Ranma and even Arya racing along with them. Admittedly Arya had to rest once a day on Nymeria's back, but it was still an impressive feat. They crossed the neck in four days, an amazing time but one that had most of their horses lathered.

Ranma took one look at the horses and looked at Roger, Dacey, Daryn and Smalljon. "You lot stay here, hide yourselves back at that last campsite. Jon, Arya and I will go on."

"Are you sure you should take Arya?" Roger asked dubiously.

"Are you sure you can stop me?" Arya asked looking up at him challengingly. Despite having grown another inch since this march began Arya was still the shortest one there by a considerable margin. Unless you counted Daenerys or Myrcella, then she was still shorter than the former, but a little taller than the latter.

"Thought not." Ranma laughed, ruffling his sister's short, choppy cut hair for a moment before pulling himself up onto Fenris back. The wolf shifted a little irritably, and Ranma moved forward slightly which caused him to calm down. "Let's go make an impression."

The three Starks road forward on their direwolves, and Ranma was pleased to see that they were indeed making the correct impression on the Freys behind their barricades. He was also pleased to see that said barricades were not nearly as well constructed as they should have been given the amount of time that the Frey men had been here. *Which shows that House Frey really is trying to play both sides here*, he thought to himself. *Stupid, very stupid, since I doubt Tywin Lannister is any more forgiving of betrayal than I am, at least when someone is betraying him at any*

rate.

After a moment while the Frey men ran around and shouted, the three of them continued on, with Jon carrying a flag of peace while Arya held up the Stark banner, a gray direwolf on the black background. Just out of bow range they stopped, waiting. After a moment four men rode out, though their horses were visibly nervous around the huge predators. It'd taken nearly the entire march for the horses of the northern army to get used to them, so that was fair at least. Two of them rode forward under the banner of House Haigh, a knightly House that was known to be sworn to House Frey, and the one whose men Meera had told them had been the ones causing trouble.

The other two were both Freys, wearing their colors. The one in the lead was of medium height and looked wiry, with dark black eyes and a thin, arrogant smile on his face. The other was a fat man, older than the first, who looked as if he had... well Ranma thought he looked like he was OD'ing on something or just plain stupid. That man and one of the Haigh men stopped several horse-lengths back, while the other two kept coming.

The conversation got to that off to a bad start as soon as the men stopped their horses within speaking distance. "I am Black Walder of House Frey and I speak for my house and its allies." Black Walder turned to Arya, leering at her suggestively. "And is this supposed to be your offering for safe passage? I hope she cleans up better than she looks right now."

Arya proved Ranma proud with her response. Instead of doing anything she simply smiled back, her eyes like chips of stone so cold that the man actually flinched away for a moment. "You looked much more intelligent with your mouth closed, I think you'd look even better with your head separated from the rest of you."

"Enough." Ranma said smiling internally. "We came out here to actually talk, not exchange insults. "Why do you block our path? For that matter, I see..." he paused ostentatiously to count the men in the small defensive formation in front of them. "Something like, what, a thousand five hundred men here? Why aren't these men down south where they could be of use against the Lannister army?"

"But Lord Tully did not send any such message to us, all we heard was that Ser Edmure might be wanted for treason. The same as your father I believe." Black Walder went on ignoring how all three Starks eyes had turned dangerous at that. "Nonetheless, due to the number of different stories coming out of King's Landing, my great-grandfather Lord Walder Frey has decided to take a neutral stance in regards to this conflict at this time. My great-grandfather wishes to speak to you in person, to hear your insights on what really occurred to spark this conflict." Despite the words the man obviously didn't care about the truth of what had happened, his tone and rote words said as much, though his eyes were calculating as they watched Ranma.

"In other words." Jon murmured. "Your lord wants to see if we can match or exceed whatever the Lannister's promised you?"

"Exactly." Black Walder smirked. "If you can offer us something more real or tangible than the promises of the Lannisters, my family will join you. That'll add another four thousand men give or take to your army."

Ranma cocked his head staring at the other man, then asked bluntly. "And if I had proof that it was the Lannisters who committed treason first? And that your Lord Paramount's heir is being held as a hostage against his father's good conduct? Would that matter?"

"It might have mattered to my grandfather Stevron." Black Walder said with a shrug. "He had a bit of an accident a few weeks ago though, and that didn't leave many Tully supporters among us." The fact that Black Walder had helped create that accident wasn't about to be something he would share. Despite being the firstborn son, Stevron Frey had been sort of a disappointment to Old Walder, never showing the proper amount of ruthlessness that Old Walder prized so much and his children. His male ones anyway.

"I see. Would you recognize Lord Tully's handwriting by any chance?" Ranma asked almost lightly but his eyes were sharp as they gazed at the other man. One hand however tapped his thigh, a finger point past the Frey delegation. Jon saw this, and used the same signal to pass the silent message on to Arya on his other side.

"Not at all, and anything that the Old Fish wrote wouldn't change my mind anyway."

"Thought not. Well here are some thoughts for you, Black Walder. My grandfather has appointed me his voice, his deputy until Edmure is returned to him." Ranma said sternly. "As such I **command** you to move out of the way immediately. You may join my forces or not, I care not and need your men not. But you are standing in my way of protecting the Riverlands from the Lannister's, of going to my grandfather aid and seeking justice for the Lannister's treason. Remain here, and you will be treated as just another enemy."

Black Walder fingered his sword, smirking insolently at Ranma. "If that's your final word on it, that's fine. You go ahead and bring up your army boy, will see how many of you can die here."

"Against your rabble, be serious." Jon said scoffing and spitting and one side.

"The Freys haven't even fought in any of the last few wars." Arya piped up staring past Black Walder at the line of defenders. "You sure your men even know which way to point their spears?"

"You." Black Walder said his anger rising to the fore with its usual ease. "I'll save you for last girl. My men and I will have some fun with you."

"Your guts will look very pretty on the ground, I'll be sure to put them there personally." Arya said, her eyes glittering.

"We're done here." Ranma said turning away. At a mental command to Fenris he leaped forward, followed by his pack mates away from the former position. It was well they had, because as soon as Ranma had said that Walder had raised his hand in the air, and a dozen archers had fired at where the three Starks had been, having moved up during the talks using what little cover there was. There hadn't been enough however, and Ranma had seen them in time to signal his siblings.

Jon quickly ducked under one of the arrows that flew past where his head had been, while Ranma plucked another arrow out of the air right before it would strike Nymeria in the side. "Run!" Ranma barked. At this distance only Ranma would survive to get in close range with those archers, and that was unacceptable. Better to retreat for now.

More arrows flew after them as the rest of the Frey archers moved up to join their fellows, but the three wolves were already moving faster than the archers could track, dodging this way and that randomly. Soon they were out of bow range heading into the Neck up the Kingsroad once more. About twenty minutes later they came upon their friends, all of them resting on the ground of the small campsite, their horses tied up for the day and still looking knackered. Daryn saw them first and smiled grimly. "I take it diplomacy failed?"

"If we wanted diplomacy to work we should've brought a diplomat." Ranma said shrugging his shoulders. "And so should they."

"They sent Black Walder of all people!" Jon said shrugging his shoulders. "Great uncle Brynden said he was one of the worst of the lot. He hinted at the fact that the only one Brynden and Domeric said was anything, Stevron, was killed recently in an, an inter-family power grab I'd guess. If that's the case, the Freys have lost the one voice that had any sense of honor among them."

"Black Walder, really?" asked Roger. He and Hathan exchanged glances then shook their heads in unison. "That man's a rapist and a murderer, he's only gotten away with it because he is Frey. There been tales of him taking liberties with smallfolk girls and women for years, as well as his own female family members. I heard about one such episode when I went down to Fairmarket for a tourney once."

Hathan nodded agreement, having heard the same thing from a tourney held by House Darry several years back. "The tales say he slept with one of Old Walder's wives, and either coerced or raped one of his nieces, the man who shared that tale with me wasn't sure which."

"He's mine." Arya and Dacey said at the same time. Dacey looked at Arya and Arya shrugged. "He insulted me to my face, he's **mine**." Dacey shrugged her shoulders so long as one of them was going to get that bastard she didn't care.

"That means we'll have to take out the Twins too." Daryn said, working his shoulders under his plate armor. "That's not good. And I hate to say it, but their defensive position is pretty good. The only way to get an army out of the Neck is by the Kingsroad, and with their position they'll cost us sore to break through."

"You're making the same mistake they did." Ranma said shaking his head and getting off Fenris at last. "Just because no appreciable force can go through the marshes doesn't mean **no** force can, and just because the crannogmen built that dock by the Kingsroad doesn't mean that's the only place where marsh boats can go ashore. Trust me Daryn, we'll get past them."

"Your words are wise Lord Stark, and before I forget, congratulations on both your elevation and achieving it while your father is still around to enjoy his semi-retirement." A voice said from the swamp beyond the hardened rock and ground of the campsite's edge. All the Wolfsworn turned, most of their hands flashing towards weapons as over a dozen crannogmen paddled their small boats out of the marshes behind the small camp area.

Ranma however smiled going over towards the edge and catching the ropes tossed his way by the crannogmen, then

began to pull their tiny boats up alongside the Kingsroad. "Lord Reed, just the man I was looking for..."

OOOOOO

While Howland stayed there with his hunters to make certain that the small Frey force remained where they were, Ranma and the others raced back through the Neck, Ranma laughing quietly at how Lord Reed and he had been thinking along the same lines. By the time they got back to Moat Cailin dozens of tiny marsh craft were there, each of them with a single steersman.

When they arrived, Daenerys and the rest of the command staff were waiting, and she looked at Ranma quizzically. "I take it didn't go well? The arrow that Arya is playing with sort of gives me the clue."

Ranma shook his head. "You might say that." Once they were all gathered he gave the gist of the conversation, and was unsurprised by Greatjon and Rickard both taking umbrage at the attitude of the Frey man.

"Surely his entire family can't be like that can they?" Daenerys asked, looking a little sick at the past exploits of Black Walder.

"They weren't." Domic said promptly, as well as Brynden. Brynden waved his hand at Domic who he had discovered had actually been to the Twins several times before heading further south, much more recently than Brynden. Domic nodded at the older man then went on. "Stevron was a good man and took his oaths seriously. He acted as Old Walder's eyes and ears in the world abroad, though that was changing when I was last in the Riverlands, and he was taking over as the castellan of the Twins. But if he is dead due to interfamily politics, that removes the only voice of honorable opposition in House Frey that had any weight to it. Not good. Old Walder has made that place a cesspit, where every family member is out for their own gain and that of the family above any other consideration."

"So you're saying there's no chance of us trying to gain their support?" Daenerys asked looking a little crestfallen. "We could certainly use the aid, and having both the supply depot and the Twins on the other side of the Neck would be a great boon to our supply lines."

Greatjon scowled, but Rickard was the one who spoke up. "Even if we tried to make a deal with the Freys, and I don't think we should, we can't trust them to keep it. As the bard said, the Freys are always out for one thing, their own largess. They don't care about anything else, that's why the old bastard has had so many wives and killed all of them in childbirth. He's used his children like tools, or spider-webs rather, spreading his influence over the Riverlands and beyond. I've heard tell he even married one of his sons to a Lannister, which means they have already chosen their side in this conflict."

He looked at Ranma. "That's why myself and Lord Hornwood joined with your farther to argue your lady mother down on the idea of you marrying one of his daughters. Yes it would've helped in the short term, but in the long term..." Rickard shrugged. "It would be like having a viper in your bed, docile at present but ready to strike when it can. You can't trust someone like that, not someone who's willing to turn over to a new side the moment there's anything to gain by it."

"In any event, we'd have to match whatever the Lannisters promised him, and I'm not about to even try to do that." Ranma said, nodding his head in agreement.

"But that means we'll have to take out the Twins won't we?" Myrcella asked from where she stood by Daenerys, waiting to ask about medicine ingredients, having talked to Meera about them earlier. All eyes turned to her and she shrugged looking a little uncomfortable and embarrassed at the attention. "I, I mean, I've heard stories about the Twins, and it's supposed to be a very tough castle. How are you going to do it without losing a lot of men?"

Ranma smirked a little. "By playing to what Old Walder thinks is strength, but is in reality a weakness." Everyone looked at him quizzically but Ranma would say no more on that subject.

Later that night after Ranma had detailed given out his orders in preparation for the coming battle, he and Daenerys shared a room in one of the towers. The two of them, Myrcella, Jon and Arya had taken dinner together, and the others had all retired by this point.

Daenerys decided to try once again to broach the subject of the Freys. "Are you sure there is no way we could get them on our side? They would be such a massive resource for us going forward. I hate to see that going to waste, and I hate to think of what it might cost us to take the Twins."

"If it's just the taking of the Twins don't worry. I have a plan to at least minimize our losses as much is possible. Besides you saw how Rickard and Greatjon reacted." He said turning back to Daenerys after having divested himself of his jerkin.

The sight of his muscled chest caused Daenerys to shiver a little, looking forward to what was about to happen after they finished talking. They hadn't had much time alone on the march, neither of them having the privacy to indulge. One thing that had impressed Daenerys was that Ranma refused to live any better than his soldiers. While he had a slightly larger tent, he shared it with Jon and Cley, much like she shared her own, even larger tent with Myrcella, Alayaya, Arya and Dacey.

She tamped down her excitement with difficulty, concentrating on his words for now. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that the Freys have a certain reputation. Old Walder's been in command of that House for too long, he stamped it with his own image, and everyone who has dealt with them knows it. I have no doubt that if we allied with the Freys we would gain more than just that House, we could then call on the Houses it has connections to, but we would also alienate other Houses, including my own lords. You can't deal with a man of dishonor and assume that others won't come to think the same of you."

"I see." Daenerys said thoughtfully. "I hadn't considered that. I had heard so much of their power, and my brother and I and the magister had talked long and hard about how to get them on our side, I guess I'm just having trouble letting that go."

Ranma grinned, taking her into his arms. "You might know which houses are dangerous, or could be loyal to you are ambitious or whatever, the weaknesses in each realm, but that's all. I know people, and I know how the Freys are seen." Indeed, that had been the lesson that Ser Desmond Grell had taught him in King's Landing, and one that Ranma had taken to heart.

"Now, I think that's enough talking." he went on, picking her up and tossing her onto the bed where she landed with a laugh.

Daenerys then reached out, pulling Ranma down to join her and those were indeed the last words spoken for the rest of the night.

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By lunchtime the next day Edd, Meera, Smalljon and Domic had disappeared, taking the archers with them. They would soon be followed by nearly four hundred irregular infantry, mostly from the mountain clans. The operation had begun last night, with the small hunting coracles that Lord Reed and his people had supplied spiriting the men away into the marshes.

Able to move only four men at a pinch Reed had taken every boat his house and the minor houses beholden to him could supply. Even so they would still need to make two trips to bring over the full force assigned to this part of the battle. That force however would be split in small groups and staying well away from the area where the Freys were patrolling. That was something Howland and his men had noticed, the Freys were not patrolling nearly as aggressively as they should. Now they were going to pay for it. By the time the mend with Edd and Daryn were all across, Ranma, the rest of the wolfsworn and the heavy cavalry would be in position.

Once the Freys were smashed out of the way, Ranma would send Fenris back through down the Kingsroad to Daenerys, who along with Rickard would lead the rest of the Army through the Neck at a fast clip. They would keep on going during the night, only stopping for short hour-long rest to keep up their strength until they were out of the Neck.

This way they would be able to break out of the Neck within four or five days. Their speed would also be helped along by Lord Reeds' people. Once the gathered coracles dropped off the archers and infantry they would come back and start to drop off food and other supplies allowing the Army to move without needing to bring along their own baggage for this part of the trip, and would even carry most of the armor and weapons for the infantry.

The heavy cavalry took two remounts each, having stripped the light cavalry of their horses for this. They switched horses at every rest, but kept going during the night, exhausting themselves but crossing the entirety of the Neck within five days, a feat unheard of. Near the end of the Neck they rested along the same area of the Kingsroad where the wolfsworn had rested before, getting ready for the battle to come. Thanks to their speed only a few men had fallen ill, and all of them simply had stomach viruses from the bogs rather than any major illnesses. That was good, and this move had put the entirety of the northern heavy cavalry force, a thousand plus heavily armored armsmen and minor

lords, within striking distance of the Frey line.

It was deep night when they were ready. Ranma took the Stark and peace flag banner, letting them rest on his shoulders easily where he sat astride Fenris. He looked over at the wolfsworn with him and at Greatjon, who rode at his side. "Ready?"

"Ready to gut the dishonorable bastards." Greatjon snarled, patting the hilt of his heavy greatsword where it hung from his saddle. It was half again the size of his son's, which was a little longer than even Dacey's. That made him slower than either of them, but he had more than enough strength to wield such a weapon at least in the normal manner. "But are you sure that the Karstark and Hornwood boys will be in position?"

"I trust all the wolfsworn to perform their duty to their utmost, as I do every man of the North." Ranma said firmly looking over at Jon and Arya who also looked eager to get on with it. Both of them stiffened in pride, and he could see his words had an effect. Even Greatjon sat up straighter in his saddle.

Ranma smiled back at them all, his face showing his pride in them all. "Who is with me?" It was only the fact they had to keep quiet that kept Greatjon and many of the others from shouting out at that.

Seeing that, Ranma sent a mental command to Fenris who turned and began to lope out of the Neck. Soon he was within sight of the Frey barricades, lit up by dozens of torches along their line. Earthing both of the banners to either side of Fenris Ranma then took out a torch and lit it, holding it above his head.

The light drew the attention of the men on watch, and they shouted into the camp. It took what seemed forever but which was probably only half an hour before the men in the camp had roused themselves, moving to their positions along the earthworks they had thrown up, which hadn't been added to overmuch since Ranma had last been here. That was astonishing, but given their inability to bring in wood, he supposed it was the best they were going to do.

Once he was certain he had the defenders attention completely on him, Ranma cupped his free hand around his mouth and shouted in a loud clear voice. "This is your final warning. Disband, bend the knee to your Lord Paramount's lawful representative, or prepare for battle."

His response was jeers and catcalls, and more than a few arrows. Only one actually was on target, and Ranma negligently smacked out of the air whenever they came near him. He could distantly hear a voice shouting "See! I told you, no one believed me but I told you all, I saw the Stark boy catch an arrow the last time!"

Ranma laughed lightly while below him Fenris too snapped at an arrow that was coming towards him tossing it aside with a contemptuous noise deep in his throat. "So be it, your bones will feed the earth when we are done with you!" Ranma shouted, feeling a little foolish at how formal he had to be for this.

With that he turned, disappearing back into the neck. As soon as he joined Jon and Arya, he nodded at them. All three of them leaned forward, whispering into their direwolf's ears.

Greatjon and the rest of the heavy cavalry knew this was a signal, and every man there gripped the reins tighter. The three wolves sat there, their riders momentarily getting off their backs as the wolves howled. A normal wolf's howl was loud, and could be heard for miles around. A direwolf's howl could be heard for a dozen miles more, and three Stark 'pets' singing a duet was possibly the most terrifying thing many a man there had ever heard.

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Edd shivered where he stood with a band of thirty archers and ten mountain clansmen. The clansmen had led them so close to the Frey camp undetected it was astonishing given the lack of trees or other natural camouflage. "Okay, that is a little more of a visceral sound than I expected."

One of the archers spat to one side. "Don't know what visceral means, but if'n it means terrifyin' you're right milord."

"Yeah." Edd said. "That'll do. That was the signal, let's get started."

All around the Frey line groups of similar disposition were making their way towards them, using the darkness to come closer and closer to the well-lit Freys line. Several of the mountain clan scouts further proved their worth by silently killing the guards on watch elsewhere around the Frey camp that should've been alerted to their approach. Now, with the rest of the Frey force up and on their feet waiting for an attack from the front, Edd, Daryn and their men began to assault them from behind and to their left flank.

This would force them to retreat right if they could retreat at all, away from the Twins. There would no doubt be a few



who got away in the night, during the confusion of battle there could be no other outcome. But if the majority of men couldn't go that way, that was enough for Ranma.

Aimed thanks to the Freys torches, arrows flew, falling among the Frye men with deadly force. More than a dozen men went down, then a hundred as other small groups took up the barrage from elsewhere. Smalljon's bellow was almost as loud as his father as it came from directly behind the Freys defensive line. "The Giants Fury!"

Edd responded shouting his own family's words. "The sun of winter! The sun of winter!"

The effect on the enemy battle line was pandemonium. Black Walder wasn't a very innovative thinker except in areas where it allowed him to get into a woman's panties. The torches he had ordered lit the moment Ranma and his torch came into sight had robbed most of his men of their night vision, and now they couldn't see a damn thing while their attackers sent arrow after arrow into them with impunity.

Here and there men of both House Frey and House Haigh took command of the men near them and turned, ordering them to charge in the direction of the attacks.

Black Walder did the same, cursing inventively. "That Stark bastard's suckered us, he wanted us to concentrate our attention on the Neck, when he'd already gotten a few of his troops across. Dammit, how many of them can there be do you think?" he asked the nearest man, his father Ryman. He was ostensibly in charge here, but Old Walder had bluntly told his least intelligent son to let Black Walder handle everything.

What insight Walder thought his father could have given him at that point the man didn't know, and would never find out. Ryman would never answer that or any other question ever again, an arrow taking him in the neck at that moment.

It was about to get worse for Walder and his men. Back at the entrance to the neck all three of the direwolves had stood up, ears cocked and Ranma smirked. Soon even the humans could hear the sound of battle, and he pulled himself up onto Fenris' back once more. "I believe it's time for us to join the party, Greatjon."

Greatjon and the others laughed, and soon the heavy Cavalry cantered out of the neck, then formed into columns. Each column was headed by a wolfsworn or Greatjon and each of them had been assigned a very specific point along the defensive circle that was the earthworks of the Freys. Ranma was straight ahead, with Arya and Jon on either side their wolves howling as they raced ahead of the cavalry. Despite weeks of getting used to the direwolves none of the horses wanted to be any closer than they had to beat to the direwolves on the hunt, which was just fine by the three of them.

The other columns spread out, each of them hitting another point along the use circle of the Freys. What little heavy or light cavalry the Freys had begun to put together to chase down the archers shattered like glass when the direwolves and the cavalry behind them hit their line from their back.

Men were unhorsed by their rearing animals, frightened out of their wits by the howls of the wolves, the smell of blood all around them. Other men were simply hacked out of their saddles. Each column then spread, every fifteenth man carried a torch allowing everyone around them to see as the Freys, having left their earthworks to start chasing down Edd and Smalljon's men found themselves encircled and outnumbered.

Arya didn't care for any of that, she had a very specific target in mind. She made for the House Frey banner that she could see moving away from the battle trying to escape. That their line of retreat brought them closer to Smalljon's men didn't seem to register, but she didn't care about that either. She wanted Black Walder, and howled with joy, sounding almost as much of a wild animal as Nymeria when she saw him.

Walder had just noticed the banner man following him still holding the banner and he the man down yelling. "You fucking fool, you've doomed us!"

A second later Arya was on them. Fang sliced one man's neck open as she vaulted from Nymeria's back. Landing she rolled to dodge another blow, her small buckler slamming out into the outside of the knee of the man who had tried to take her head. He went down screaming clutching his leg, but not for long. Arya's sword came around punching into the side of his plate armor, before she pulled it out to engage Black Walder.

What Black Walder lacked in many areas too numerous to mention he made up for in skill with the sword and sheer viciousness. The two of them exchanged a few blows before he kicked out, trying to catch Arya in the knee, then an elbow that should've taken her in it her head. Instead Arya had blocked the kick with her buckler, then ducked backwards to dodge the elbow blow to her face, pushing it aside with her shield arm and then bringing her sword up

in a underhand blow to cut into his arm, sending it flying away in a welter of blood.

Walder screamed, falling back for a moment, using all his willpower to remain upright. "You bitch!" His sword came around faster than Arya had expected given his injury and she barely got her sword back in time to block it. Even so she was thrown back a few feet by the force of the blow.

He attacked her maddened at the loss of his arm forcing Arya ever backward. Then Walder overextended slightly, and Arya guided his blade downwards as she leapt up, kicking out with both feet, her boots slamming into Walder's face with pile driving force. His nose, jaw and many of his teeth shattered under that blow, and he flew backwards with a squeal of agony.

Impacting the ground Walder groaned, his sword lost as he had flown backwards from Arya's mule kick and the pain of his arm now overcoming is rage-fueled adrenaline. He looked up blearily to see Arya standing above him, Fang poised to stab down into his chest. "I told you I'd kill you 'Black' Walder, maybe in the next lifetime you'll learn how to speak to a warrior like me." With that she thrust downward, smashing into and through the man's good plate armor straight into his heart.

After the body had stopped kicking Arya tried to pull it out, only to realize it was stuck. She looked up as a man wielding a mace came at her, only to be hacked nearly in two by a giant greatsword as a cavalryman came up on her side. "There's a trick ta stabbing someone through plate armor lass." Greatjon said, almost conversationally as he hewed down another man, sending the man's head and arm flying with the massive overhand blow. "Best stick to necks and faces until you get the hang of it."

"I'll keep that in mind, my Lord." Arya said demurely, pulling Fang out finally and taking up position alongside Greatjon. Greatjon guffawed, and the battle continued.

Forty minutes later it was all over, and the only surviving Frey men were those that had surrendered. A few might've escaped in the night, but not many. The way out of the Neck was clear.

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After sending Jon and Ghost back up the Neck to start the rest of the men marching, Ranma consolidated his position. The archers had barely lost a dozen men during the night attack, though their mountain clan protectors had lost forty-two against the Freys. The cavalry had barely lost three, with two having severe injuries that they would live through, but which would force them to be sent back to the Moat and a single death from a particularly unlucky cavalryman who had run into a group of ten spearmen who had retained their position. Jon had slaughtered all ten of them after wheeling back through.

While Ranma was doing this, he also sent messengers towards where he had expected the supply depot to be. The men he sent however reported that the port was actually about twenty leagues further down. It was a far better position for the workers, but further away from the Kingsroad, and the land there was just as inhospitable as the Neck minus the threat of disease, but in a far different way. Ranma understood why Wendel had done that, and respected the man's decision. He wanted commanders who would act on their own accord if they knew something he didn't, and this was a prime example.

On his orders the Manderly pikemen remained at the supply depot with the House Locke archers, but Wendel, his heavy cavalry, the Locke maester and the supplies joined Ranma where he was. They arrived a half day before the rest of the Army began to come out of the Neck.

Now while Wendel and Jon Dmeric saw to the rearmament of the army Ranma and the rest of the commanders turned their attention to more important matters. After sharing a brief but very heartfelt hug with Daenerys, Ranma began. "We need to know where Lord Lannister is, and we need to know the current news. We've been out of the loop for too long, and I'm not happy about marchin' into the unknown."

"We also need to finish the Twins off." Rickard said. "Even if they hadn't decided to turn against us before this, they have no choice now. And the Twins is too good a position to leave in our rear if we stay on this side of the Green Fork."

"True." Ranma said with a nod. "But we still need information on what's on this side of the Green Fork as well. Brynden, Dmeric, that's up to you."

If it pleases you my Lord, I can be of some help there as well." Alayaya spoke up from where she had been serving them all drinks. Water, not ale or wine. Ranma refused to drink either unless all of his men could do the same, and

even then he wouldn't drink much. When all the lords looked at the Summer Island girl, she curtsied quickly. "I was one of Brynden's informers in the city, and served in that capacity for the former Hand as well. I know how to ferret out information even in an unknown environment. If there is even a small village nearby, I can get us some news."

Ranma shared a glance of Brynden who nodded slowly as if reluctant, but then seemed to change his mind, shaking his head. "I think Alayaya, that your talents would be useful in a village of any size, but the nearest village is..." He paused, thinking. "About a week's ride from here. It's a good idea, but I think we should leave off on it until we get down to where more villages and towns are around."

Understanding his point Alayaya curtsied once more. Brynden turned back to Ranma who nodded. "That's why I want you out there uncle, I want you to see if you can find one of the local lords, or at least someone who answers to them, a factor or something, to get us some of the news of what's been going on since we began our march."

"It might take some time." Brynden cautioned. "We have the initiative now, we can't wait here for that information."

Jon had joined them by this point and he broke in now. "It'll take us two days, maybe longer to reorganize and rearm the army, and get the baggage train settled down again. Our method of splitting up and sending the arms through by boats saved us a lot of time on the march through the neck, but will need to take the time now to redistribute it. Worse, the men are exhausted from the forced march, a few days rest would do them all good, let alone the draft and cavalry animals."

"We can wait here five days, that's it." Ranma decided. "I want scouts out in every direction, and the light cavalry is to take over hunting down survivors from the Frey force we smashed here. The heavy cavalry had been doing that job up to this point, but the light is much better suited for it."

"The two nearest houses to hear our House Haigh and Erenford, they're both rolled into the House spray, though from what Wendel tells us Erenford's military strength has also been smashed. We still might run into trouble though." Brynden cautioned.

"Then I expect you to handle it uncle." Ranma said smirking.

*If only my two little ones could fly further*, Daenerys's thought to herself, *that way I could have helped in scouting ahead of the army*. She'd recently begun to actually be able to see through their eyes for short periods of time even in flight rather than simply guide their movements. It was an astonishingly amazing experience, but they still couldn't fly very far, a bare five miles. Good enough to do close in scouting, but not distant.

Brynden nodded then immediately made his way towards the nearest batch of scouts, all of them mountain men. He led them off, leaving the camp that very hour.

"While that's going on, Domeric," Ranma said turning to the Bard. "Out of all of us you're the only one who's been to the Twins. What can you tell me about them? I want to know everything you can tell me."

OOOOOO

Ranma was going over some numbers with Jon and Wendel for the next supply run when Merry burst into his tent, looking as angry as he had ever seen her save when Joffrey came up in conversation. "Oooohhhh that, that **man!** ARGH!"

The three men who were speaking looked at one another than back at the young princess. "Um, you're going to need to be a little more specific there, Merry. What's wrong?"

"The maester of House Locke, Martyn, is an arrogant conceited asshole!" Merry replied, stamping around and waving her hands in the air. "ugh, I know my language is foul Ranma, but ugh!"

Ranma pulled her down into a one-armed hug, rubbing her hair affectionately. "Calm down and tell us

Merry fought back her blush at the hug. Her love for Ranma had yet to fade despite him now being married, and moments like this fueled her fantasies, not of winning his heart away from Daenerys, but of possibly... joining them. It was a thought that should never have occurred to a high born noble lady, even one whose true father wasn't known, but it had to Myrcella, and she hoped to someday talk to Daenerys about that idea.

She had other things on her mind right now however. "Maester Martyn, he's very particular about being called maester, ugh, is an excellent healer. He knows a lot about herbs, medicines and how best to actually put someone together. His organization however is awful, and his opinion of me is 'a little girl who should be playing with dollies'

rather than, as I was at the time, redoing the stitching on one of the injured men's wounds. His bedside manner is also atrocious, he acts as if the injured only become so to irritate him."

Though the fact the man she was working on had threatened to thump him had been gratifying. Indeed even after one battle Myrcella had become a hit with the soldiers, saving two men from gangrene and more than a few from fevers. If she had been closer she could have done even more directly after the battle.

Ranma decided not to point out that Myrcella was indeed still a young girl. Not little so much, but very young. That would not be a good move on his part just then however, so he simply nodded. "Is he unwilling to work with you at all or is it just he doesn't want you near him while he's working? Is he willing to continue your instruction?"

"No, he doesn't want me to even touch the healing supplies, and no!" Merry replied tartly. "He might be willing to let me handle the logistics aspect, but even that's a stretch, and I was serious when I said his organizing skills were awful. He somehow messed up the supplies he brought with him from House Locke, and somehow misplaced a full cartload of ingredients from Lord Reed!"

Realizing this was a real problem that had to be handled, Ranma stood up, letting his arm fall from around Merry's shoulders much to her hidden disappointment. "Let's go see this Martyn fellow."

After speaking to the maester himself, Ranma concluded that Merry was correct, and that if Arya or even the more mildly tempered Dacey heard some of his comments about women healers or warriors they would cut off his head. For now however they needed him. Good as she was Merry couldn't be called a full healer, and maester Martyn was the only one who was willing to come with the army.

Ranma sat them both down and explained that Merry would be in charge of organizing the medical area and handling the medicine and transportation of that and the wounded. Martyn would not be asked to train Merry further and would handle the healing, but if he refused to allow her to help after a battle, Ranma would break his legs.

"After all, you don't need working legs to be a good healer, now do you?" Ranma said, smirking a little at the older man's suddenly pale face. With that, the crisis was halted in its tracks for now, but it was yet another thing Ranma would need to think about in the future.

OOOOOO

It actually did take four days for the scouts to return with news, and it was mixed to say the least. "We were able to get past House Erenford's land easily enough." Brynden said, gratefully sipping on the water that Alayaya and handed to him the moment he joined the rest of the command group in their tent. He had been in the saddle since early last night, and he was getting no younger. "After that we were able to talk to a few farmers and get some news from them. Apparently there's been a major battle down south on a ford of the Red Fork. Lord Lannister tried to force his way across and succeeded in smashing the defending houses, but they cost him enough men he was forced to halt his advance north. He's consolidating his position down there. It's odd, at first there were a lot of refugees fleeing before his army, but that seems to have slowed now."

"Where is Tywin's army now?" Ranma asked, looking down at a map of Westeros spread out on a field table. It wasn't a very detailed map, there wasn't a single map for the continent that was, but it would do until he found one that detailed the Riverlands.

"Still on the other side of the Red Fork, sitting right at the ford they tried to use. They've reinforced there, and are apparently waiting for a second army out of the Westerlands. There were also refugees from beyond his line, so it's possible he might have split his army, sending groups out against the Houses on that side of the fork that haven't bent the knee to the kinslayer." That was the epithet used by the army to talk about Joffrey, and there could be no more vile appellation in the Northern lexicon. The fact the Freys seemed to be practicing it these days had spread among the men, and all of them were incensed by it.

"I can't believe that." Rickard scoffed. "Why in the world would they stop if they'd smashed the defenders out of the way! Fairmarket couldn't have been reinforced before they arrived, and no offense to the local knightly houses, but they couldn't have raised enough men to stop Lord Lannister from taking that town. If he had, he could already be marching up to the Twins on the other side of the Green Fork!"

"There have been other battles down by Fairmarket and in Hags Mire, though the farmers we talked to didn't know anything about the why of those let alone the outcome." Brynden said with a shrug. "The farmers were remarkably open about it with Meera and I, our cover worked to perfection." He and Meera had posed as a father and daughter searching for medicine for a sick mother, and the farmers had all been very helpful, insisting that going further south

was a bad idea and explaining why when asked.

It amused Brynden somewhat that he hadn't been recognized as himself, despite now being in the Riverlands where he had spent a lot of his life going from place to place. "But the Lords on this side of the Green Fork apparently banded together and moved down to the Ruby Ford, where the Green and Blue Forks meet before entering the Trident. They put up some serious earthworks there, even some siege weapons."

One of his senior men spoke up, a mountain man named Oscar Lebray. "Da farmer I talked ta said the houses might've made a deal with the gold shitters. So long as dey stay on their side of the river, da head gold shitter won't attack 'em, and dey don't need to decide right now ta bend the knee ta his kin-slayin' grandson. Don't know if 'at'll extend to not helping someone else attack them."

Ranma looked down at his map thoughtfully, tugging at his ponytail. "What can you tell me about the houses on this side of the Fort, uncle, Domic?"

"Not much." Brynden said honestly. "I know several of their heirs were friends with my nephew Edmure, he talked about them often enough in King's Landing. But whether that will mean they'll side with us against the Lannisters I don't know. It will probably depend upon whether or not they have begun to threaten Edmure's life in return for forcing the Riverlands to capitulate. Up to this point all of the Riverlands Houses have been acting singly, defending their lands from what they see as a usurper whose allies are despoiling them. The moment they help us though, they too will be labeled traitors rather than simply angered neutral parties. I don't think any of the current lords of those Houses have the stomach for another war. I know Wayn won't, it's lord is nearly as old as my brother, and his son untried. Nor will Ryger I don't think. They might have patched up their relationship with my house better than most that supported the Targaryens during Robert's Rebellion, but they were still hammered badly in terms of men and riches. But their heir is supposed to be very intelligent, and skilled in many areas, I don't know enough about him."

At that Brynden shot an apologetic glance at Daenerys, who rolled her eyes. "I know precisely how mad my father became later in life, and there is no way to justify his actions, not in the eyes of the law, men or gods, nor were his actions the only infamous ones my family ever did. I won't say I don't have hard feelings about certain events during the War of the Usurper, but I certainly understand the reasoning behind it, and know that a Lord Paramount would be obligated to... to put his own realm in order I suppose. Please continue..." she smirked. "Great-Uncle."

Brynden laughed and even Rickard smiled slightly, pleased that Daenerys didn't seem to be blind to the problems her family had caused. "Well, in any event, the only House that might have the stomach for another war is House Roote. They were awarded quite a bit of House Darry's lands, so might be powerful enough but I don't think they'd have the stomach for offensive action. According to the men we talked to they pulled back out of Harroway town, bringing with them all the town's residents who were willing to leave rather than face the Lannisters there."

Still tugging at his pony tail, Ranma frowned, calculating distances in his mind and trying to imagine, or remember really, what the land had been like around the Trident. While Ranma was doing that Daenerys questioned Brynden further. "You say the farmers said that the Lannisters were consolidating their positions on the other side, and that there were a lot of refugees. Was there any talk about any of the noble houses still holding out?"

"Blackwood." said Brynden and all three of the men he had brought with him to the council. They all looked at one another then the three mountain men nodded at Brynden. "Lord Blackwood pulled back to his keep the moment the battle at the Ford was lost apparently, and had already gathered in his people. They're holding out still, and could continue to do so for a long time."

"How long ago was that battle?" Rickard asked.

"About a month ago, though that isn't solid." Brynden cautioned.

"They control the Kneeling Man's ford then from there down to Darry along with Lord Haraway's town, which means they control the Red Fork portion of the Trident." Ranma mused aloud "but how good is their control of that land?" Ranma leaned back, closing his eyes as he went through some scenarios in his head. After a moment he opened them and nodded decisively. "Alright, here's what we're going to do. First we're going to split the army."

Before anyone could speak he went on. "The larger portion, the heavy infantry, half of the light, half of the archers and two thirds of the heavy cavalry will move down the Kingsroad. We'll also split the scouting forces, a third to go with the larger force, the rest to come with me. Greatjon, you'll be in charge of that along with Brynden. Smash Erenford and Haigh then continue on." He said looking at his friends. "Brynden, you'll be in charge of speaking to the locals, and I expect you and Greatjon to lead the army equally."

Ranma looked at both older men sternly. "I don't want you to start attacking the Lannisters, I want you to reinforce that defensive position and talk to the local lords. Find out where they stand, get as much information about what's been going on down south as you can, and send a messenger to find me when you do find out what the local lords are willing to do. I'll be taking the rest of the army to capture the Twins."

"If you're talking about a siege that'll last months, if not years!" Rickard protested. He was unhappy that he hadn't been given the command of the other Army until Ranma stated his own objectives, which made him even more unhappy but for a different reason entirely.

"Not if we have someone inside." Ranma said smirking. "I don't doubt that Old Walder is arrogant enough to let in a small delegation there to talk about peace terms. I mean to give him one more chance to bend the knee and mean it, or else."

"But that will mean you and however goes with you trapped inside!" Daenerys said leaping to the logical conclusion as to who would be going on such a mission.

"That will set the wolves among the sheep lady." said Jon smirking evilly, now understanding why Ranma hadn't assigned any of the wolfsworn to the army moving down the Kingsroad. "My brother proved as a young boy what he could do in enclosed spaces against normal armsmen and all of us have been trained in that kind of thing."

Ranma nodded grimly. "The wolfsworn will fight our way out of the hall and opened the gates, all of the gates, for the rest of the army. We'll still lose men, that's unavoidable, but this way we'll be able to avoid the horrendous casualties of a full blown assault or spending too much time on the Twins."

"Remember, the moment the Lannister's second echelon reaches him Tywin is going to start north again, and with that large an army even if Fairmarket has been heavily reinforced they won't be able to stop him. I doubt even the earthworks you mentioned could do that. We need to get down there and be in a position where we can react to his moves quickly or better dictate our own and that means taking out the Freys fast and dirty."

There were some objections, Daenerys in particular was very vocal about it being too risky. But Ranma simply kept on referring everyone to what it happened when Bolton head overreached, and eventually that won the day.

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It took the now much smaller northern force barely two and a half days to march to the Twins, which they timed deliberately to coincide with the dawn. Once they were in sight of their target, Ranma stopped, mentally comparing the castle to what Domic had described, and found he had nailed it from one end to the other.

The Twins consisted of two seemingly identical stone castles, one standing on one side of the Green Fork and the other on the other side, with heavy barbicans between them connected by a massive stone bridge. They had high walls, about ten stories tall and were each surrounded by a deep moat carved out of the side of the Green Fork. The bridge supports rose from the mighty river far below. In the bridge's center was a tower almost as tall as the two castle's main keeps, called the Water Tower according to Domic. The only crossing point of the Green Fork until the Trident, the Twin's was a major trading junction, and it had made a lot of money for the Freys, as their family motto attested to.

The army settled in nearby just out of bow-range, not even close enough to have it be called a real siege, while Ranma and the wolfsworn rode forward. Jon was once more carrying a white flag, but it seemed as if their complete destruction of the Frey force they had put out into the field had worked. They were hailed from the wall, but the portcullis was opened for them quickly, and they were met with several people who took their horses away.

A man with a thin, almost rat-like goatee, a weak chin and a pointed nose bowed to them all while the servants led away the horses. "My lords, I am Aenys Frey. Please, permit me to show you to where my lord father is waiting to receive you." He looked askance at the trio of massive direwolves, who were making deep rumbling noises at one another. "Your... beasts will of course be cared for here."

"They will come with us." Ranma said flatly, getting off Fenris' back. "It takes them a while to trust someone enough to be near them."

Aenys frowned, almost sneering before apparently thinking better of it. "In that case my lord, I must ask they be sent back to your army. I cannot allow wild beasts, no matter how well trained, into the presence of my lord father."

Before Ranma could say anything, Jon spoke up. "Well, I've already sent mine back. Besides Ser Aenys is right, the

wolves are too wild to be let into a diplomatic function."

Looking around, Ranma very carefully hid a smirk. Ghost was in fact still there, standing silently between Dacey and Roger, but he doubted if even the two of them noticed the beast was there. Ghost lived up to his name, slipping somehow under people's conscious notice, not like Ranma's own Silent Thief technique, but somehow similar. If anything, Ghost's was a little better, since it also muted sound as well.

Outwardly he frowned. "Very well, that's a point Jon. Arya, we'll send them to Rickard." Ranma wasn't about to mention his wife here, none of them could figure out how the Freys would react to that bit of news, and were not willing to tempt it.

Moments later, Fenris and Nymeria were streaking back to the army, and Ranma turned to Aenys. "There, now, show us to Lord Frey. We have much to talk about."

Ranma looked around, frowning slightly. For some reason this place felt odd. The armymen strutted around the place like they owned it, while the servants scurried everywhere, eyes darting this way and that. As they entered the keep, Ranma kept looking around, his frown deepening. "What is it?" Jon murmured out of the corner of his mouth as the two of them led the wolfsworn down the corridor.

"I don't know." Ranma said honestly, "it's just a feeling I guess."

"This place does, well..." Dacey paused thinking of the correct word. "It feels mean if that makes any sense."

"That's part of it, I suppose. And the fact they don't seem to like to have a lot of light in here, but I haven't seen a single made or out woman at all." Hathan said, looking around. Indeed, the central keep had no murder holes on the first floor, and very few torches to make up for it. Once the door of the keep closed behind them, with an ominously final sort of thump if Ranma was any judge, the darkness of the hall was very apparent.

"If we were besieging the place and had come to talk peace that would've been normal." Edd replied, keeping his voice low. "So either they've heard about... recent events and are just trying to spring a trap, or it's normal for the maids to do their best to be invisible."

"Perhaps Black Walder wasn't the only one who took liberties with them." Arya growled, one hand touching Fang's hilt, her eyes glinting dangerously.

"Easy little sister." Ranma's voice barely carried to her let alone anyone who might be trying to listen in as they continued down the corridor after Aenys. "I've a feeling we'll be getting some answers on that score soon enough."

The group ascended a flight of stairs, noticing all the while how dark and forbidding the keep seemed to be at present. With every step Ranma became more certain that this darkness was simply the way the castle was kept normally rather than for their benefit. Even at places where there were murder holes letting in light the light didn't lighten the atmosphere.

Several moments more of walking down another corridor found them in front of two large oaken doors. Aenys pushed them open, bowing the northerners in. It seems to be the dining hall of the castle which doubled as the lord's receiving hall, much like the one in Winterfell. On either side wall were large tapestries, which covered both walls from one end of the room to the other. Most of the tables had been removed except for one which had been pushed into the center of the hall directly in front of the large black oaken chair in which old Walder sat. On the tables was a small plate of bread and dipping sauce, with two bottle of wine.

Walder looked ancient and brittle as he sat on a chair that was much larger than his shrunken frame. He was also bald and toothless and his skin looked as white as parchment and just as fragile. He wore expensive looking silks and there was a small circlet of gold on his forehead. It was almost but not quite like a crown, which told you a lot about the man by itself, let alone everything else that Ranma had learned about his family.

On either side of the man were armed and armored knights, their greatswords grounded in front of them, but their helmets off. There seemed to only be Old Walder, his two guards and Aenys in the room, but Ranma wasn't about to believe that. Nonetheless he led the wolfsworn through the hall, marching along the long dining tables length until they all stood to one side of it right in front of Old Walder. "Lord Frey." he said nodding his head slightly.

"So the Young Wolf has come south with the rest of his northern friends and an army behind them to save his grandfather's realm from the war that his own father began. How sweet, house silly and naïve. I note it is a much smaller army than I would have thought even the North could muster." The old man said condescendingly, his voice

thin but sharp. "Did you somehow lose the rest of it? And where exactly is my great-grandson, oh and his father I suppose, fat fool that he is. But where are my manners, please eat, drink, we have much to talk about."

Ghost had taken one sniff of the food by the table and shook his head, before gliding around the table, unnoticed somehow by any there. Jon turned, as if looking at an image on the tapestry, subtly shaking his head at the others, who obeyed, none of them reaching for the food on the table.

"The rest of my army is none of your concern, nor will I break bread with you just yet." Ranma reposted coldly. "What is, is that I speak with my grandfather's voice. I am his deputy, to act as I see fit to get his heir, my uncle back and protect his kingdom. Your son Black Walder said you wanted to speak to us, here I am. Now will you bend the knee, and join with us, or not?" Even as he asked that his eyes were scanning the hall, the rest of the wolfsworn ready for action despite their easy nature. "As to Black Walder, where is your other son Stevron? As I understood it, he was an honorable man."

"Honor!" The old man spat as if it was a curse. "The only honor that matters boy, is the duty to family, that and the ambition needed to grasp every advantage you can to make your family more powerful. Stevron never understood that, believing too much in honor and oaths rather than blood and power! He never understood that an oath of fealty was never worth anything unless the one given it could enforce his words, and it has been some time since Hoster could do that."

"So you say you want me to bend the knee, you give me hard words and demands, calling on my honor! Well, the Lannisters have offered me the Lord Paramount seat of all the Riverlands. Can you offer anything even remotely like that? Of course that is a mere promise for the future, not a solid gain. I understand you're unmarried so far. I have many a beautiful daughter, and the marriage would be something far more solid than a promise from the Lannisters."

"I'm already married." Ranma said smiling grimly, delighting in the slightly widened eyes of all four Frey men. "And even if I wasn't I would not marry a Frey. You're grasping too much Old Walder, too ambitious and too unscrupulous. I would never help your family along in its ambitions, or pair my own with yours. I say again, will you bend the knee to your lawful Lord Paramount's orders and follow me?"

"I think not." The old man said setting his cup of wine down sharply, banging it on the armrest of his chair twice. To both sides of the hallway the tapestries came down, revealing small alcoves there with archers pointing their bows at the wolfsworn. No, I think that the Lannisters will truly make good their promise if I can hand them your head, boy. Did you honestly think I wouldn't know what had happened between your army and my grandson's? How arrogant of you, and to think you could come here and make demands on my honor? Hah!"

Actually Old Walder had never intended to parley fairly with the men who had smashed his field force and killed his son and grandson. Oh, if the North had offered something substantial he would have overlooked it, Black Walder and his father were not his favorites among his brood, for different reasons admittedly, and the men with them weren't family so mattered nothing to him. He had even baited the trap further, making it seem as if he hadn't heard from a few survivors of the battle what had occurred by not moving himself to the castle on the other side of the Green Fork.

Ranma raised an eyebrow his hands not anywhere near Ice where it was strapped on his back, one hand simply resting at the edge of the long table, as if he entirely at ease. "We came here under token of parley." he said simply. "Breaking that is almost as bad as breaking guest right, you would be denounced by any right thinking soul for this."

"Again just words boy, I told you the only honor that matters is that to the family. Everything else is but a tool. You offered me nothing but hard edged commands, you thought honor would be enough!" Old Walder spat the word again. "Whereas the Lannisters offered me a seat of power and gold for your head. No choice there for 'any right thinking soul'."

"I suppose from your perspective that might be right, but you know what, there's something about me you seem to have forgotten. **Now!**" he shouted suddenly, lifting up the giant oaken table with one hand before hurling it at the archers on the far side of the table. Ghost, who had been already waiting by the nearer wall, leaped on the archers on that side of the room. Jon, Dacey and Arya charged after him, dodging arrows or blocking with their shields, moving faster than any man there could believe, cutting the men down. Eddy and Hathon sprinted over to the men who had been smashed to the ground by the table, finishing them off quickly.

The two guards had already pulled up their greatswords to the guard position when the tapestries fell, but it didn't really help them. Roger and Smalljon barreled forward into them. Roger's axe came up in a wicked arc, blocking his opponent's blade and smashing it up and away from his body, opening the man up for Roger's next blow, which crunched into his side, cutting through his armor and side with equal ease.



Smalljon locked blades with his opponent, pushing back at the other man's two handed grip with his own, slightly shorter blade held in one hand. Then he reached forward, grabbing the other man's neck right above his gorget and ripping it out with fingers of iron. The man collapsed, dropping his blade as both hands went to his neck, vainly trying to stop his life's blood from escaping.

One hand negligently holding Aenys still where the man had tried to bolt for the door, Ranma kept his eyes locked on Old Walder's throughout the carnage. When it was over for the moment, he leaned forward. "You seem to think I'm an idiot old man. I knew I couldn't trust you, by the old gods even though I wanted to give you one last chance, I knew you wouldn't go for it, in fact I counted on it. All you did trying to set this ambush rather than fight my army on your walls is let the wolf into the sheep's pen. I tore apart the Mountain that Rode old fool, and I'll do the same to the Twins."

"You'll never get out of here alive! I have over a thousand men here!" Old Walder blustered, but his eyes showed how terrified he was right now. "Even if you use me as a hostage, there are enough children and grandchildren of mine who would like to see me dead that won't work!"

Ranma shrugged. "That's nice, but I never wanted you as a hostage. As for the number of men you have, well I didn't have anything better to do today. You should have listened to that blasted wolves of winter song old man, this won't be the first castle I've fought my way out of."

At that point Jon and Ghost moved over to join Ranma. Jon whispered into Ranma's ear a moment, causing him to nod. "Is that the only entrance into this room?" he asked Old Walder.

The old man didn't answer, and Ranma reached forward, grabbing Walder's, palsied arm and placing his thumb over the veins on his inner arm. "I'm going to ask you again, is that the only door into this room?"

Outside the alarm had already begun to spread, apparently the guards outside the door had enough sense to spread the word rather than just charge in. The rest of the wolfsworn moved over to take position by the doorway, waiting grimly.

The old man didn't say anything, but his pulse gave him away. "Search for some kind of hidden passage!" Ranma shouted to the others.

It was Arya and Ghost who found the hidden door, much like it had been Ghost that gave Jon the idea there might be one in the first place. Arya followed Ghost who seemed to be trying to figure out where the slight breath of air was coming from, pulling at the sconces of the torches as she went, figuring those were the most obvious place to put a secret lever.

Turned out she was right, and the two of them had gotten to the far right-hand corner when the sconce pulled forward out of the wall. The wall directly to its left began to move slightly, opening just wide enough for a man to enter. "Found it." she said shaking her head.

Ranma frowned, thinking then shrugged and was about to issue orders but at that moment the door to the dining hall burst open. Dozen or armsmen charged through only to be met by the wolfsworn. The first to meet them was Edd. His spear with its heavy, leaf shaped head took the first man in the gut before he pulled it out quickly twirling it around like a staff, blocking two swords and then smashing one man off his feet with the end before turning quickly and chopping another man's leg off with the side of his spearhead just below the knee.

To his side Daryn danced forward, dueling with five men at once with his longsword. His shield flicked out smashing into one trooper's shield throwing him into one of his fellows disrupting that man's footing just enough for Daryn's sword to take him in the throat. He pulled back quickly, ducked under another blow from a man wielding a flail of all things, running him through. He then smashed the side of his shield into another man's face cutting it open before the man could bring his own sword to bear.

Dacey, Smalljon and Roger went about their work with brisk efficiency, protecting their friend's back and killing ten men in the next few moments with an ease that was frightening. Ranma, his siblings and Ghost didn't even have time to join their friends at the door that first group of men were down, or running away in terror.

Ranma smirked looking back at Old Walder, who looked almost ready to pass himself in fear after seeing that display. "Smalljon, grab this old sack of shit. I don't want him to die, not yet, he needs to stand trial for breaking his oath to my grandfather, as well as anything else we decide to stick on, including breaking right of parley." Ignoring Smalljon's only half humorous mutter of 'why do I have to be the one to carry people, get someone else to do it' Ranma addressed the rest of his friends. "Follow me. We make for the Gates, we open the portcullis and the rest of the army

should be ready to move again."

With that Ranma led the rest of them out into the corridor, Hathan beside him. At every turn of the corridor, at every doorway in the corridor they faced opposition small and large. Most of this came in the form of armsmen, but one or two servants also attacked them, though why was in question.

They all fell regardless. It was simple butchery for the most part. Imagine Special Forces taking on a group of high school bullies and it would be close. Like Arya had said, the Frey men had never been a part of an actual war before, or even skirmishes with bandits. They were well equipped, but most of the knights and armsmen hadn't even been to tourneys. The wolfsworn went through them like a hot knife through butter.

The only serious threat came when one of the Freys organized a defense at the far end of the first floor corridor consisting of several dozen archers behind a shield wall of four knights. The archers were already aiming at them as the wolfsworn bulled their way down the last staircase, several more defenders retreating in front of them.

While Hathan and Roger cleared out the last of the group they had been fighting Ranma bounded over their heads, clanking off the corridor's roof, landing on the other side. He was immediately taken under fire, but he smacked the arrows away, his hand toughened by his armor strengthening technique for a moment as he bounded forward. The men frantically tried to fire again, getting off one or two shots each. Most of those shots went wide, the men not taking the time to actually aim before Ranma was on them.

Ice sliced through one shield into the knight's body as Ranma landed, his weight crashing down on one of the archers. Ice then skewered another archer, splashing his fellows with his blood as Ranma kicked out, sending two men to the floor. The archers try to run for it, but couldn't get away from him and he cut them all down, along with the knights who had been supposed to protect them. This seemed to buy them some time, since no further attack appeared yet.

Eddy joined him, resting on his spear for a moment. "You now we'll have to open the other keep as well right? If not, the ones in there can hold out against us, and that Water Tower on the bridge is also going to cause issues."

"I know." Ranma said grimly. "That was what made the Twins such a fantastic defensive position, almost as good as Riverrun. It was two castles in one, with each castle being on a different side of a massive river that didn't have any nearby ways across. You could only get at one after taking the other then moving across the bridge where you would be under fire for the majority of your assault.

He looked over at the others, smiling as he saw Smalljon carrying Old Walder along under one arm like a sack of potatoes, old man's finery now splashed with the blood of the men he had thought could protect him. Taking a quick glance around, Ranma nodded. All of the wolfsworn were dinged up a little, cuts and bruises here and there, but nothing serious, not yet. And his endurance training was definitely paying off for them all, since none of them, even Arya, looked winded just yet.

Nodding he came to a decision. "Arya, Roger, Jon, take the gate and open it for the rest of the army. Smalljon you know what you need to do."

"I know and I'm not happy about it." Smalljon growled. "At least this one out will make a good shield against arrows as I run away though." He said shaking Old Walder in his grip.

"You're dead, you're all dead! Do you hear me!" Old Walder yelled. "You'll never get out of the Twins alive!"

Arya laughed coldly. "You haven't yet come up with anything that can stop us old fool, I wonder how many of your sons are going to die because of your lack of honor before the end of the day."

That was harsh but true Ranma reflected while Jon led his group off. Normally Ranma would have felt sympathy for a father who would be forced to outlive his son, but it had been obvious by the way he talked about as Stevron's death that he didn't really care about them as individuals, merely as pawns to enhance his house's power. "The rest of us." he said aloud turning to his own now much smaller team. "Are going to take out that tower, and open the other keep. We race straight across, don't stop, if we stop they'll simply pepper us full of arrows."

"What about the tower?" Dacey asked. "Are we going to leave that in our rear? I have to tell you, you may be able to dodge arrows, but the rest of us can't."

"I have plans for that. Wait for me to cross, then follow me." Ranma said smirking a little and flexing his fingers. *Thank you Ryoga, all those times you use that damned move on me allowed me to learn it. Now I'm going to put it to a hell*

*of a lot better use than you ever did pig-boy.*

For a time they followed the other group, not running into much more combat since Jon and his band had taken out most of the defenders in their way already. After clearing a group of twenty men formed up by the doorway the two groups finally split. Ranma's broke off as they got out into the courtyard of the castle, racing to one side where the bridge arced out of the courtyard, defended on this side by a gatehouse, though the gate on this side had yet to be closed. Hathan and Dacey paused a moment in the gatehouse to make certain it wouldn't be closed in the future, while Ranma raced out onto the bridge.

Immediately he came under fire both from the walls of the castle above him and the Water Tower in the center of the expanse. Running forward he soon was close enough for the men manning the walls of the second castle to fire on him as well. Both groups however seemed slightly undermanned in comparison to the fire from the castle on the eastern side of the Green Fork. Apparently Old Walder had anticipated some trouble from the rest of the army after taking Ranma out of the equation.

Ranma dodged or ignored the arrows coming his way, racing across the bridge. He passed by the tower's right side, touching it with a gentle finger and intoned under his breath "Bakusai Tenketsu!" Suddenly the exterior of the tower where he touched it exploded inwards, the stone shattering for several feet in either direction as if it had been smashed by a large trebuchet shot.

Shouts and cries of dismay echoed throughout the tower and the arrows from the tower stopped, but Ranma went on with his grim business, shaking slightly. Funneling his ki into the rock to shatter it had taken almost as much out of him as firing a Moko Takabashi did in this world. *I wonder why I can armor weapons and myself in ki, but can't press it into stone or extend it far from my body here? Something to think about another day.* Ranma moved on touching the tower's outer wall several more times destroying that entire side of the tower.

Without that structural support the other three sides of the tower could no longer sustain its weight, and it began to list badly. That worsened dramatically as Ranma went on, now only taking fire from the second castle, the Water Tower's wall blocking him from fire from the eastern side's castle. He grimly finished destroying another few segments of the tower's wall, then watched as it began to collapse, falling to one side and over the edge of the bridge. At the impact with the rest of the bridge the tower's top began to crumble, taking many of the men with it into the depths of the mighty Green Fork far below.

Ranma jumped up over the small amount of rubble left from the tower's base, hiding there for a moment as he rested, almost utterly exhausted for a moment before standing up again. This battle wasn't over just yet. He saw his friends racing toward him, now holding a large segment of the oaken door that had fronted the bridge's exit on that side of the Twins.

Arrows flew, but with Hathan and Dacey carrying the oak door, all four of them were able to get across the bridge safely, with only Roger taking an arrow to the side. His plate armor however defeated it, the range not low enough for the less powerful bow used here in the Riverlands to punch through.

Ranma joined them, taking cover behind the door and moving with them across the second half of the bridge. When they arrived at the portcullis on the other side, he raised Ice, its Valyrian steel gleaming with blue gold fire. "RAAH!" With a tinging sound the metal of the portcullis was sundered, and Hathan and Eddy reached forward, pushing it aside, while Ranma raced on, cutting through the interior door with as much ease.

It fell inwards, and Ranma led the rest of the wolfsworn in roaring. "Winter is coming, traitors!"

OOOOOO

Daenerys and Rickard were waiting with the rest of the Army. Ostensibly Daenerys was in charge, but she had learned over the past few weeks that her position at this point relied heavily on Ranma most particularly where it came to commanding the troops. It was not something that she particularly liked, but she was willing to put up with it for now. It did after all come with quite a few advantages... Despite the seriousness of the moment that thought nearly caused her to smile, but she didn't allow it just yet.

She heard a deep, basso rumble to her left. Looking to that side she saw Fenris and Nymeria stand up from where they had been lying to either side of her little ones. She took a moment just then to muse on the odd way the dragons and direwolves got on so well. Fenris she could understand, he had been around them since they hatched, and seemed to enjoy the big brother position just as much as Ranma did. Ghost, Summer and Nymeria though, their reactions were harder to explain. She discounted Shaggydog, since that one was decidedly unfriendly to anyone not of Stark or pack blood.

It was actually very simple, though it was based off how animals naturally thought in the wild merged with how the direwolves and draklings had been changed by their bonds to her and the Starks. In the wild, normal wolves and bears could coexist on the same hunting ground, not really competing for food or dens. Of course, direwolves did compete with bears all of the direwolves thought bears were delicious eating, and it would never do for another animal to think it was king of the forests. That was the reason why they were all willing to at least be neutral to the dragons. Dragons in the wild would not care about territory, and would not naturally feed on wolves unless there was no easier game.

This was combined with the fact that Daenerys was mate of the pack alpha Ranma and therefore pack herself. And since she, Ranma and Fenris all treated the draklings as pack, they were pack. Very odd pack-mates who preferred to fly rather than run, but that was okay. At least neither of them had the temper Shaggydog had somehow developed, and were well aware of pack hierarchy.

Daenerys laid a gentle hand on Fenris' neck. "What is it, Fenris?" The direwolf turned to her growling low under his throat and looking back at the Twins. Nymeria almost knocked Daenerys over, as she moved around the rousing draklings, rumbling slightly in her throat before turning back to look at the Twins. Daenerys rubbed her neck gently, while looking speculatively at the Twins, before looked at Rickard. "I think Lord Karstark you should start getting the men ready. Judging by Fenris and Nymeria reaction, what little chance of diplomacy winning out has failed."

Rickard scowled slightly at the Targaryen girl giving him an order directly like that, but couldn't fault her tone or words. And the direwolves did seem to be agitated... their connection to the Starks wasn't something Rickard looked too deeply into, but he knew it was there. So instead he simply nodded brusquely before moving off to do that very thing.

A tense hour followed then the noise of battle began to sound out into the morning air. The sound of shouting and alarms could barely be heard from here, but it was evident that Ranma and the rest of the wolfsworn were doing their bit. Daenerys stared at the castle, her eyes searching, then smiled grimly when the portcullis of the castle opened. She turned to Fenris, only to find him and Nymeria gone. She looked back at the castle and saw the two of them streaking along the ground faster than any natural wolf could move, with Fenris in the lead, his fur glowing slightly in the sun.

A moment later Smalljon raced out, some kind of bundle on his back. Rickard looked at Daenerys but she held up a hand, telling him to wait. Instead she turned to where her two draklings sat on the ground nearby hidden from sight by the same tent that obscured most of her own position. With a mental command she sent Sunfyre into the air, and he flew over the retreating a Smalljon.

Shouts of shock and fear went up from the walls of the Twins as they saw the dragon in the air, and more than a few archers tried to fire on it. But at the height he was flying Sunfyre could see their arrows coming and dodged them easily. He was also within range to hear what the old man-thing on the large bearded man-thing was shouting. Daenerys, riding his mind heard them too, and it was all she could do to stifle another giggle as Old Walder Frey kept on shouting. "Don't fire, don't fire!"

"Smalljon is coming back to us with a prisoner, I think we can take it as a given that you should begin your attack Lord Karstark." Daenerys said formally, while her other hand motioned to Rhaegon to join his brother in the air. Controlling both of them was somewhat difficult, but she had gotten used to it over the past few months.

The dragons flew in, staying well outside accurate bow range, flying easily away from the few scorpion bolts that came from the towers towards them, then breathed out there fire down at the defenders. The fire was more like a ball than a sheet of flame however. In point of fact they couldn't fly close enough to get any of the defenders without coming into effective bow range, but that was all right. They were mere distractions at the moment.

The real attack thundered forward on the hooves of the northern light cavalry, led by heavy cavalry men of house Manderly and Karstark and followed quickly by the rest of the Army that Ranma had led to Twins shouting the "North, the North, the King in the North!"

OOOOOO

Ranma and his group had barreled forward into the western castle, facing somewhat tougher opposition here since the men were fully prepared. But there weren't many of them, so while it slowed the wolfsworn down somewhat, they were still making good progress.

Hathan, Daryn and Dacey guarded Ranma and Eddy's back as the two of them lead the assault, breaking through every defense they faced. Edd's eyes were wild, almost bloodshot as he charged on roaring incoherently. Edd had several new bruises, even an arrow in the meat of his side but he just kept moving, his spear flickering out with speed

and power. Looking at him Ranma decided that the ice giant's club had knocked something loose in his friend. Where before he fought similarly to Daryn, with finesse and a slight bit of flair, now he fought like a berserker.

Soon they had cleared the entire barbican, then broke out onto the walls. The archers on them quickly retreated back into the towers behind them, and the way was clear. Across the bridge they could see the rest of the army had stormed into the castle on that side. The light cavalry continued on the moment they saw the portcullis to the bridge open on this side. After them came the infantry and archers, who fought their way up onto the walls and from there into the interior of the keeps.

"I want no wholesale butchery!" Ranma shouted continuously as he moved to join the men assaulting the second keep, whose door was still closed.

The men who heard him nodded in acknowledgement, but kept their shields up. They were still taking arrows from the keep after all. This fire soon faded when another force of archers had taken a position on the walls. They slowly began to overwhelm the defenders fire from that equal vantage point.

Ranma took up position at the head of the assault, still shouting orders. "No rape! No butchery! If anyone kills a servant save in self-defense or molests a servant or Frey girl, I will gut that man and string up their entrails up for the entire army to see! Understood?"

They'll shouted back at that the understood, and Ranma turned, raising a fist and slamming it down onto the keep's door shattering it with a single blow before reaching back over his shoulder to pull Ice out of its sheath once more. Around him his friends pushed their way into the fore, and followed him in, joining him in the shout: "Winter is coming!"

With the courtyard under their control, the attackers now were clearing out the keeps on both side of the river. Jon and Rickard led the assault on one side, with Daenerys staying back in the camp with her dragons, now unneeded as decoys, and a few others.

On the fifth floor of the western keep Ranma rested for a moment against a wall, now really feeling the effects of using the Bakusai Tenketsu. In that moment of silence he could tell the battle was starting to die down. However he soon was called up to the front by Dacey's voice. "Um, Ranma, we have a bit of a situation here!"

Ranma groaned, but pushed off the wall and moved to join her. He found her standing in front of a door, motioning most of the other men with them at that point on. Some of them went reluctantly, a few men even looking as if they were about to attack Dacey, but Ranma's appearance made them turn away. Seeing that odd reaction Ranma had an idea of what they had found but asked anyway.

"I can hear children and women's voices in here." Dacey confirmed, her eyes locked on a few of the men who were moving past them. "What should we do?"

"Let's find out if this is the entirety of the children and women in the castle first." Ranma boldly broke open the door and moved inside then his hand flashed out to knee level to grab a sword aimed at his knee by a young boy of about twelve or so. He pulled it out of the boy's startled grip easily, holding it by the blade between thumb and forefinger. "Oh no, it's a midget with a sword, or no sword now. So, what're you going to do now kid?"

The boy got over his shock quickly. He tried to kick Ranma's leg, only to hop around in agony after his toes met Ranma's calf. "Yeah, you're not the first person to make that mistake."

Ranma watched him hop around a moment, looking around the room. There were about fifteen kids of various ages, most of them boys, with six young girls all seemingly younger than eleven or so. All of them were looking fearful when he entered, but seeing him not strike out at the boy with the sword they were beginning to calm down.

He went down on one knee in front of the boy, looking at him, smiling slightly. "So, what's your name midget, or should I just call ya 'Hoppy'?"

The youngster glared at him, but answered readily. "I'm Luke Frey, and I won't let you hurt any of my younger sisters or brothers!"

"Good attitude there Luke, but I think you need some instruction on how to use a sword first. Tell you what, why don't I leave Dacey here, she'll help you guard your siblings okay?"

"She?" Luke asked, turning to stare up at Dacey, who smirked down at him. "But, but women can't be warriors, they aren't strong enough."

Dacey smiled tapping the tabard she was wearing. "I'm from House Mormont lad. The women of my house have all been trained as warriors for generations."

Some of the boys and girls now crept closer, apparently made courageous by hearing a woman's voice despite Dacey's armored body and the blood splattered on her. Indeed, both she and Ranma were covered in gore but the children didn't seem to realize what they were seeing.

One of the girls, a pretty nine year old girl who wore a dress that looked more in keeping with a much older girl of Alayaya's former profession came forward. "Please sir, um... ma'am? Um, could you tell us what's going on?"

Ranma tugged at his ponytail for a moment, thinking how to explain this, then spoke. "Well, my name is Ranma Stark, my grandfather is Lord Hoster Tully, do any of you know who that is?" The older children all nodded, and Ranma nodded back. "My grandfather is in trouble, some bad golden haired people, the Lannisters are attacking the Riverlands, but he's so old he can't lead his men against them, so he sent for me."

To his surprise Luke spoke up then, his eyes and face much more serious than they had been when he had been looking at Dacey. "I heard something about that, great uncle Stev and Oly were arguing with some of our other uncles and grandfathers about it..." His face clouded over. "After that, I went to see if Oly would continue to train me, but I was told he was gone, and not to ask more."

Ranma nodded seriously, reaching forward to ruffle Luke's hair, and decided to tell them flat out, in terms they would understand, but he wasn't going to lie to them or try to come up with a fairy tale to tell them. "Well I came here to talk to your family and get its help when I march further south, but... your family should have been loyal to my grandfather, but Old Walder and most of the rest of your family were poisoned by their own ambition, because the Lannisters promised them a lot of gold and other things for their support. Black Walder..."

He stopped as the girl flinched, as did a few others of similar age. Right then if he could he would have resurrected Black just to kill him again with a rusty knife. "He admitted that Stevron was killed for saying House Frey shouldn't back the Lannisters. There might have been others similarly removed as well, and I'd guess this Oly would have been one of them. He and his men tried to attack me and my men, but we beat them back, and Black Walder is dead, along with his father."

Not a single child in that room looked anything but relieved at that, and Ranma found himself once again contemplating necromancy and various methods of slow, painful death. "Because of that and other crimes, when your great grandfather tried to capture me and my friends after letting us in under flag of parley, I was forced to attack them."

The boy closed his eyes tightly, fighting back tears for a moment, while a few of the other children began to cry quietly. Ranma rubbed Luke's head again, then gently handed the boy back his blade, a short sword of excellent quality, whose edge was equally good.

The boy looked down at the sword in his hand in shock then at Ranma, who still was down on one knee in front of him. After a moment he asked. "Please, sir, what's going to happen to us?"

"I won't lie to you Luke, I came here fully intention to punish your family if Old Walder didn't agree to follow me, and that was only made more certain when we were attacked under flag of parley. The Twins are going to be destroyed, and your family name erased." He went on hurriedly as Luke and the girl looked horrified. "But that doesn't mean anything will happen to you or the rest of the kids. In fact, you all might have the chance to earn your own names in time."

That won Ranma some odd looks, but he went on, his voice deliberately upbeat. "After all, you can't be held accountable for the old guy's actions can you? And I bet some of you have thought about being, oh, a sailor or a blacksmith or a dressmaker?"

At that some of the younger kids to clamor, all of them shouting out what they had wished to be at one point or another. One girl even proudly stated that she wanted to be a painter, and boldly pushed her way forward to take Ranma's arm and lead him over to where she had some paint supplies. She had painted a pretty darn good tree, thought the Forest Folk in its branches were obviously her imagination at work.

After Ranma exclaimed over her talent, telling her she could surely get an apprenticeship with an artist somewhere, Ranma turned back to Luke. "That is for the future. For now though, can I trust you to keep your siblings safe, Luke?"

Luke nodded firmly. "Yes sir."

"Good, but I'll still leave Dacey here to help you. If any of you are hungry or anything tell Dacey, and she'll send a runner for some food for you." With that, and a final ruffle of Luke's hair, Ranma nodded to a faintly smirking Dacey and left the room.

As soon as he was out in the corridor, Ranma shook his head. "What a fucked up situation this is."

OOOOOO

The sun was high in the sky as smoke rose from the Twins. Ranma and Daenerys stood in the courtyard of the eastern castle with a few of his friends. Lord Rickard, Domic and Jon were absent, seeing to the counting and distribution of the treasury of the Twins. All told, the Freys looked to have kept on hand almost as much money as House Stark did as an emergency fund. Even with the fifteen percent that would be divided out to the men who took part in the battle, it was a huge amount to add to their ready funds.

Ranma's portion as commander would be enough to pay the wages of the troops for a year, or for the entirety of the little project he could envision down the road. That didn't even count the goods, worked items and tapestries, all of which added at least half again to the amount they had in actual coinage.

Right now however neither Ranma nor Daenerys were thinking that far in the future. They had enough problems to deal with right now. "How many?" Ranma asked incredulously staring at Edd.

Edd scowled angrily. "We found something like forty women of various ages, not including the servants. Well I say women, some of them are about twelve or so, and three of those are already pregnant! One of them claimed that she slept with Old Walder recently, and seemed proud of it! Two of them were servants daughters, and couldn't say no when one of the Freys came calling."

Arya turned abruptly. "Excuse me, I'm going to go killed that old sack of shit now, slowly."

Smalljon grabbed her shoulder while Ranma shook his head. "I like the sentiment little sister, but it needs to happen in the proper order. How many of the girls are of marriageable age, real marriageable age I mean?"

"Half or so." Eddie said after a moment's thought. There's several of them that are quite pretty, but a handful have already begun trying to opportune some of the men, it seems a learned move on their part. One or two of them haven't, and they're angry and rather arrogant shouting imprecations at the guards constantly saying we'll pay for this, that their family had friends in high places and in the rest of the Riverlands that will come to avenge this insult, that kind of shit. Roger and Daryn are down there now guarding them. While I trust most of our men, well..."

That was a good move, Ranma reflected. Roger was a married man and knew for certain that his wildling wife would cut off his balls and use them as a purse if he touched another girl, while Daryn had recently married his childhood sweetheart. Moreover, the army had received a raven from House Hornwood at the Moat while Ranma and his siblings had been heading forward to talk to the blockade force, saying that Alys was already pregnant. So they would be able to ignore any offers the Frey girls sent their way.

Ranma ran one hand through his hair, tugging at his ponytail in thought. "Any further trouble with the youngster?"

"No, though its disturbing only four of the women came forward to claim being mother of this or that child, and all of them looked younger than twenty." Eddy shook his head. "The women here, especially those married to Old Walder, die quickly, worn out by childbirth apparently."

"In your opinion," Ranma went on still tugging at his ponytail. "Are those young unmarried girls and married women going to be a problem? And by problem I mean try to rally support from the small folk around here?"

"I don't think we need to worry about the smallfolk my Lord." Alayaya said from where she had set out food for them all on a table brought out of the keep, her face set in grimmer lines than most there had seen it. "I talked to the servants, and... House Frey did not so much rule its servants as prey upon them. Oh there were one or two that didn't but they were a drop against a rain storm, and even that ended with Stevron's death. However, House Frey is connected to several other noble houses and House Charlton on the other side of the river is beholden to them, much like the Knightly Houses you've already dealt with. And the smallfolk elsewhere on their lands might see things differently for a time, until the ones who were employed here begin to spread their stories."

"Thank you Alayaya." Ranma said smiling at her. Even in a simple Castle like this, the former whore's ability to speak to servants in a manner as a friend was much better than Brynden's ability to discover information on his own.

Ranma had already decided that the two of them would split Master of Whispers duties in the future. Brynden would be head of the army's division of that, it being a bit of a specialty of his from his time in the Ninepenny Kings War, and would handle the rural areas and the Lords. Alayaya on the other hand would handle all the cities, villages and towns and the small folk therein. It would take time of course, a lot of it, for the two of them to build up networks equal to that of the current Master of Whispers but Ranma was confident that once piece came they would be able to do it.

"What about the children, how many boys and girls?" Daenerys asked thoughtfully.

"About eleven boys of various ages from three to twelve, and six girls ages four to eleven." Ranma replied from memory. At that moment Cley walked up, looking a little green around the edges. Ranma moved over to him, clasping the youngster to him with one arm. "You alright, Cley?"

"I'll all be fines milo-er, I mean Ranma." The boy stuttered, Ranma having been very clear that despite being his ward he wanted Cley to address him as Ranma rather than Sir or Lord. "I mean it's just, it's just all the bodies, the bits, the blood, and the smell!" His stories never mentioned the smell!

Just thinking about it seemed to cause Cley to go even greener, and Ranma rubbed his back. "I know Cley. Bards tales and all those who think that war is so glorious never really look at the battlefield after a battle. If they did, they'd know the only honor worth anything is surviving, and there's no glory to have."

The boy nodded against his stomach, and Daenerys looked around. "We need to figure out what to do, both with the prisoners and with House Frey as a whole. Talk to the servants again Alayaya. If any can point out specific armsmen or surviving Freys, as the ones to commit specific crimes, ask them to do so and we'll see justice done."

Ranma nodded. "For now, round all the prisoners up, and get them out of the Castle. I want **everyone** out. Put the armsmen under guard somewhere. Keep Old Walder and the surviving Freys away from their armsmen. Move the kids out of the eastern castle down the road a ways, I bet Dacey and you, Arya, can convince them it's a campout or something for now."

As Eddy and the others left, Ranma turned to Daenerys. "What do you think we should do about the womenfolk? I already know what I want to do about the kids. I hadn't really thought of them, but I refuse to just kill them out of hand! Whatever their father or grandfather or whatever fuck relation they are to Old Walder, the children at least are innocent."

Daenerys nodded, though inwardly she felt that was rather naïve. Children as young as nine could kill after all. But Ranma was also right in that they could not blame the children for the sins of the father brother whatever. "We've already had one talk along such lines. I would not condone such for the children in any event." she said nodding her head. "As for the women, I have an idea there as well, but first we need to speak to them as well as the servants. We need to deal out justice here, not blind reprisals."

Ranma nodded firm agreement of that, and shared his plans for the children and any armsmen found to not be guilty of personal crimes. Eventually the two of them hammered out the details of what they would do, almost merging their plan equally, with Ranma agreeing to Daenerys's proposal about the women, and Daenerys agreeing in turn about the children, while modifying his plans for the armsmen.

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By the next day, they had gathered enough evidence on the armsmen to split them into two camps. One were innocent of preying on the servants or smallfolk, but still had followed orders from the Freys willingly. This first group was a little over a hundred men. This was about half of the survivors, discounting the women and children.

Ranma and Daenerys stood on the ruins of the Water Tower with Fenris and the draklings on either side of them along with forty men armed and ready for trouble, with nearly two thirds of the archers with Ranma's army on the walls of both castles. The prisoners were led out onto the bridge, though many had to be pushed on when they caught sight of Daenerys. They had heard about the dragons in the sky during the battle, but to see a Targaryen and the dragons up close like this was astonishing.

It was a reaction the two of them had thought long about before deciding to cultivate. The dragons at this moment were not really a threat against a prepared, well-armed enemy, but how many people would realize that? While it was unlikely that the rumors of the dragons would win them any fights, it might make some lords much more uneasy about fighting them in the first place. Daenerys too hoped to connect the rumors of the dragons to her own actions and temperament in people's minds, further distancing herself with her mad father.



Having been coached on the need to be slightly dramatic at this point by Domic, Ranma let the silence build for a moment after the prisoners were led in front of him. Then he began in a loud, clear voice that carried easily across the entire bridge. "All of you followed your lord into dishonor. That you kept your oaths to him is no mark against you, but you still must be punished for following his unlawful orders. I was named by my grandfather, Lord Tully, as his voice in this current crisis. As such, House Frey should have taken the field with me once I informed them of the true traitors to the crown, that the child that sits on that throne now has not an ounce of Baratheon blood in him."

That caused a round of shock, not that the rumors, and more importantly Lord Stannis' propaganda hadn't reached them, but to hear it so boldly spoken was still a surprise. Some of the more cynical of the prisoners thought that saying such was a ploy, considering the Starks had jumped into bed with the Targaryens, but most took it at face value.

Alayaya and Domic had both informed Ranma of Stannis' declaration having heard about it from the farmers and then again here in the Twins from the servants, as well as a few other rumors about what was happening further south. The power of rumor was incredible, truly, but Ranma wondered what kind of evidence Stannis had about the incest part.

When Myrcella had heard about that part she had looked sick at the very idea, though they still couldn't say for sure that she wasn't a Baratheon. The Citadel hadn't been able to get back to them about that yet, and of course a raven couldn't find an army, so even if they sent word of it to Greywater Watch, it would take time to get to them.

Not that it mattered to Ranma, not really. He had made certain Merry knew that her parentage didn't matter at all to him. Daenerys said the same thing, though given her family's history it hadn't had the same impact as Ranma's declaration.

For now however Ranma had other things to concentrate on. "Instead of even hearing me out, House Frey's representative and Lord decided to try and play for whatever gain they could, and when I refused to play that game, they threw over their oaths to their lord Paramount in return for future promises of power from the Lannisters. For that House Frey is no more, and we could easily demand the heads of all of you and your fellows."

Daenerys spoke up then as the prisoners began to look at one another fearfully. "However, because those of you before us now have not been named by any of the servants here in the Twins as having preyed upon them as many of the Freys did, you get to live. But you don't get off scot-free."

Pointing towards the western side of the bridge Ranma brought the prisoners attention to a group of three hundred light cavalry led by Daryn Hornwood, along with a few other men who looked remarkably uncomfortable in the saddle. One of them was the smallfolk architect that Bran had recommended to Ranma. He didn't bear a weapon instead he carried a large satchel stuffed full of writing equipment and large sheaths of parchment, all of it covered with designs of what Ranma was thinking of calling the Royal Canal.

"You will serve the realm as workers for five years. You will be fed and clothed and treated honorably in that time while you work on whatever project myself or my representatives give to you. After those five years, you will each be given a hundred silver stags and let on your way. These men will lead you off now to head down to Seagard, where your first project will be organized. But first" he said sternly staring at them all. "You will each give your oath on your own names to only react in self-defense if someone attacks you, and to never bend the knee as armsmen once more to any lord."

He let the prisoners talk about it amongst themselves for a moment before beginning again. "Who will be first?" That process went on for some time but after it was done those men went off in rather high spirits. It wasn't often that armsmen survived the destruction of their Lord's house after all, and it was better than being forced to choose between death or the Night's watch.

The next group was simpler. This was the group of armsmen and Freys that had been accused of rape. Ranma's voice was even more stern and cold as he looked down at this group, nearly seventy armsmen and twelve men of Frey descent. "As armsmen and relatives, you could be excused for following your father or Lord into dishonor, but you all took a step further. Where some of your fellows went along with his orders but did not partake of his depravities, you all did. You each stand accused of rape, abuse of the servants that should've looked to you for protection, along with treason against your Lord Paramount siding with the Lannisters who even now are ravaging the Riverlands in return to seeing your father or your Lord raised to my grandfather's place."

Knowing the penalty for treason several of the prisoners tried to make a break for it at that point, trying to get up from where they had been forced to kneel, but none of them could get away. They were forced to remain there, each man held down by two of his.

At that moment Dacey and Alayaya led the maids and a few of the surviving Frey women, those who had not bought into their place in the Frey's world, who were raped or coerced by their own relations rather than play that game. This was Daenerys' addition to this portion of their day's bloody business, and Ranma, though a little worried about it, couldn't argue against it being a truer example of justice than most.

Each woman moved down the line of prisoners, staring at each man before selecting one man or another each. Many of the men cried out to the women, trying to get them to speak up, yelling at them to save them, but were answered with hard glares and hated looks.

Several women clustered around one of the Frey men, and a silent argument began on, Ranma supposed, who had precedence. Eventually one woman, an older, pregnant woman who looked about five months along won out, and was given a long, extremely sharp dagger. Like the other women, she took up position behind the man she had selected.

Now Daenerys spoke up. "Normally in the North, the man who passes the sentence wields the sword. But in this, we feel that it is true justice to have the victims carry out your sentence. For treason, rape, and abuse of those smallfolk who you should have protected instead, the sentence is death, to be carried out immediately by those you abused."

At her nod the men holding the prisoners pulled their heads back, baring their throats to the women. Ranma had thought that at this point a few of them might have hesitated, after all it was much easier to say you wanted someone dead then staring into his eyes and taking his life yourself. But only one, the youngest girl there, a servant girl barely Merry's age, even hesitated before plunging her blade into her rapist's throat like her fellow victims.

Ranma stared down at the carnage, shaking his head at the bloody business. Daenerys who had watched with pale face but stern eyes, squeezed his hand. "Just remember, more than one Lord would've included the children and the other armsmen in this, and wouldn't have cared about the rape and abuse. This way, the women gain some closure, and justice is served."

"I know, but it doesn't make me feel any better." Daenerys nodded wordless agreement, squeezing Ranma's hand harder.

The children were next, which was much easier. Thanks to Ranma's earlier actions, the boys and girls trusted him so when he told them what was going to happen to them they took it much better than would otherwise have been the case. The boys would serve in the army as gofers until they reached Seagard. Once there, if one of the lords or knights (mostly from the Manderly faction, which made up the larger portion of Ranma's present heavy cavalry) had decided to take them up to be their squires that would happen then. Any boys who weren't thus employed would be handed over to the maester at Seagard who would find them professions where they would take on their masters names for now until they reached sixteen, where they would then be able to choose a new name for themselves.

The Frey name was gone now, the House destroyed, its members scattered and the name itself taken from the survivors of their assault. Though there were still few Freys alive at Casterly Rock and in the Lannister armies, without their house to back them, they would be just another group of swordsmen. Or pensioners, and the Lannisters were not known to be kind to such. The boys and women taken captive here, those who were judged to not be trouble in the future, would be allowed to choose their own names. So long as they never called themselves Freys and never tried to become lords once more, that was enough.

The girls would be handed over to the septas, but would be able to leave that service at any time if they found a profession they enjoyed after finishing their educations to the satisfaction of the septas. The young girl whose painting Ranma had looked at was ecstatic about that bit. Truthfully the girl was so good already at painting that Ranma was going to leave money to pay for her education with Lord Mallister's household. He had no doubt that a few years from now she would become a famous artist.

The only exception to this was one the older pregnant servant woman and her child, a boy of three. They were allowed to go their way with two men of House Manderly guarding them. Her family had a farm within a day's travel, and she would be welcomed back there. Another exception was a young girl and her sister, one of the young girls. The two of them had been sent to serve the Freys in lieu of paying a loan back their family of farmers had accrued since their older brother had taken over the farm. They were sent further North with the severely wounded, those who would not be able to take the field again, and a few crannogmen scouts who had come along to report directly back to Lord Reed. They would be escorted to Greywater Watch, where they would enter Lady Reed's service.

Soon however the kids too were walked over the bridge to join the army's main encampment there.

The next bit Daenerys handled entirely, because Ranma crossed the bridge and began his work on the eastern

portion of the Twins. The unmarried and married women who had tried to either by threats or coercion escape the army's custody that they would all be sent further north via the supply depot then up to White Harbor to join the Silent Sisters, which had a sept there. They would be sent with a band of twelve men of House Ryswell, walking wounded who needed the time to heal before rejoining the army later on.

Halfway through that pronouncement there was a tremendous rumble sounded from the inner keep of the western castle. All of the women turned to look as the keep, which could be seen over the outer wall from the bridge, began to crumble down. Cries of dismay and shock rang out from them, but were silenced when Daenerys continued. Those women were soon led off to join their guards on the western side of the Green Fork, finding to their shock that the outer wall too had been demolished, torn apart by something that sliced through the wall low down then let gravity do the rest.

Ranma had used the Kijin Raishin Dan after making certain no one could see him, or, you know, was in range of the blades. The vortal blades were far more deadly and just a bit easier to use than the Bakusai Tenketsu, but because they were so deadly and couldn't be aimed, they were a weapon of last resort for Ranma. Moreover, Ranma wanted to keep them a secret weapon, since he feared that Viserys and the drakling Daenerys was forced to leave behind would be trouble in the future. If the dragon kept to the sky, the vortal blades of the Loud Thief were the only techniques Ranma had that he could use against them in this dimension.

Still here they could be used to demolish the Twins entirely. No other family would be able to come in and take it over. The only things left would be the two barbicans on either side of the bridge. Those would be held by a force of archers and infantry left here who would be supplied by House Reed, their leader a Stark man from House Forrester.

Ranma wanted it that way for more reasons than simply setting an example or shattering the Frey's power. No, the Twins had been too distant from the rest of the Riverlands, made too powerful by their tolls. Its placement had allowed the Freys far too much leeway, and he didn't want any other house to think they could try the same thing again. The bridge and the barbicans would be run by his men for now, and the crown in time, with the taxes to use it going directly to the crown. This would be but the first of many such areas which would be called royal reserves in the future.

With that done Ranma walked across the bridge to give the western portion of the Twins the same treatment while Daenerys went on to the more innocent among the women. They would be sent to Barrowton, where they would be given twenty silver stags and housing until they found work. If they could not, they would be remanded to the septas there. This group would be watched just in case, hence their going to Barrowton, whatever she lacked in other areas, Lady Dustin would be able to keep a firm hand on them.

That left Old Walder, who Ranma would see to personally. The old man, who suffered from gout and other issues due to his old age, had spent a very uncomfortable night in the tent assigned to him. His day however was much worse. It began when he was dragged through the ruins of what had once been his castle. He gaped around at the castle which had been destroyed, crumbling down into itself after Ranma had sliced through its first story. Plus more than a bit of work up top of course, just to make the ruin even more total.

He paled even more seeing the Water Tower down, and the keep on the other side of the Green Fork also having collapsed. He almost looked like he was having a heart attack just then, but he seemingly recovered from that, instead simply gazing around his eyes dead. When he spoke his voice showed his will had broken. "What have you done, wh, what have you all done!"

"What I had to." Ranma said grimly. "The Twins made you strong, the Twins made you think you were untouchable, the Twins are no more. Your name is gone, your castle is gone. Nothing will be left of either of these castles or your house's power base because you decided that your personal ambition was worth more than your family's duty to your Lord Paramount, more than the truth of who the real traitors were, and apparently more than your own word of honor."

Old Walder seemed to shrink into himself even further, but Ranma was not finished. "Walder no name, you stand accused of treachery, of breaking the peace of the realm by joining the traitorous Lannisters, of breaking the sanctity of parley and of inciting kinslaying among your own family. Do you have anything to say before sentence is carried out?"

The old man stared around at everything that he had thought so strong so inviolate, the rubble that Ranma had made of the Twins. Eventually he found his voice once more. "My family has members and men already serving with the Lannister force. They will avenge me, and rebuild our house. Your declaration of annulment of our name will not last longer than your own breathing boy. Do your worst." Even though the words were challenging and even brave, his tone showed how uncertain he was of that, and how fearful he was of death finally claiming him.

Ranma nodded, and said simply. "So be it. As my grandfather's voice I found you guilty, and as the man who gave the sentence, I will wield the sword." He raised Ice and swung it, once.

Old Walder's head bounced away for a moment before Smalljon, with a look of distaste kicked it off the bridge and into the water of the Green Fork far below. The man's body followed it, joining the men who had been executed earlier that day and Ranma at last nodded grimly. "Now that this little sideshow's done, perhaps we can concentrate on Tywin?"

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time that Ranma and Daenerys were meting out justice, two fleets were coming in sight of the ports they were currently making for. One of them was coming into sight of Planky Town, and the other was sailing into the port of Duskenale. Worse, fleets of black painted longships were also nearing their disparate targets. The game of thrones was about to get two new players, and Stannis would be once more on the move soon.

**End chapter**

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So, the Freys no longer have a power base, but there are still dozens of them out there, and while essentially powerless now, they might try to make trouble in the future. Now the riverlands campaign hits full swing, as the war becomes more deadly and convoluted.

For those of you worried about how Daenerys was starting to take center stage away from Ranma or become a Mary Sue, this chapter should have shown you she was still human, and will make mistakes in the future. One in particular will come back to bite them on the ass, HARD. Hope the bit with the Tyrell's talking about thier current course and thier options make sense, after all, if they turned coat too quickly, they would be seen like the Freys in many ways. I also found it odd that Willas, despite being the oldest, was the only Tyrell son to not be seen as a great knight. I hope to prove going forward that great knight doesn't equate to great commander, or vice versa.

Hope you all enjoyed this blood and violence, and as always please review.

## \*Chapter 12\*: Chapter 12

I do not own Ranma 1/2 of ASOIAF. Obviously.

Thanks go to Anthony44 for once more being my sounding board/source of info for all things ASOIAF and for betaing the chapter.

### Chapter 12 Blood In The Water, Arriving Flame

From where he stood at the front of the ship he had designated as his flagship for his triumphal return to Westeros, Viserys laughed quietly under his breath as he watched the small patrol boats of Planky Town scattering here and there. "It seems as if we have dropped a few stones into a pond here, my dear." He said looking over at where his queen was sitting underneath an awning on a bed of pillows.

Nodding, Arianne smirked a little. "I predict that reaction will not be the only ripple your arrival causes; my king." She always called him 'your grace' or 'my king' in public, it never hurt to butter Viserys up. It made him easier to control something she knew would be needed in the future. The edge she saw in him hadn't faded, indeed it had become more visible every time they talked about their plans going forward, but at least she had become very adroit at steering him using her various wiles. Arianne went on, looking at where Balerion was tethered by a heavy chain next to her husband. "Especially when news of your Balerion spreads."

Viserys nodded judiciously, but they both knew that it would be at least another year before Balerion was ready to be ridden. Though he did not know it, Viserys did not share the ability to meld mind to mind with his dragon that his sister possessed. That meant he could not allow Balerion to fly at any great distance or train him beyond a very limited amount. He allowed the quickly growing black dragon to fly occasionally tethered by a heavy rope to build up muscles but that was all he could allow, else the dragon slip his control before they were truly imprinted on one another. More, Balerion had yet to breathe fire.

"I think I'll let him fly around a bit on his tether when we start docking, that will allow the largest number of people to see him and start spreading the word. Shock and awe are potent weapons after all." Viserys smirked, before going on more seriously. "What should we expect from the officials here?" He had asked that question before, but it always helped to go over such things.

Behind their flagship the other ships that he, Arianne and Illyrio had commissioned were spread out across the ocean, all of them carrying the mercenaries they had put under with Ser Jorah acting as commander. They were without the Company of the Cat as yet since their factor had badly underestimated the time it would take them to get to Pentos from where they had been in the Disputed Lands. Instead, Viserys had to send half his ships to pick them up in Myr. The trip from there however would be far quicker than the trip from Pentos, so the Company was only about two weeks behind them.

"As their princess I'll be able to override any officious buffoon who tries to stop our troops disembarkation." Arianne said smiling thinly. "Planky Town answers directly to my family, and I have no doubt that all of the officials here will be sending word to my father the moment they realize I have returned."

Behind them Illyrio sat on his own bed of cushion, looking like a very oddly whiskered walrus as he waved his hand through the air trying to cool himself down. Pentos shared latitude with King's Landing and thus like that city was warm year-round. But here at the southernmost edge of Dorne it was **hot**, something Illyrio was not used to and which was melting the fat off him slowly. That had begun weeks ago however, so he was somewhat used to his body's complaints. "Will we wait here for Bloodbeard and his fellows?" Bloodbeard was the leader of the Company of the Cat.

"No." Viserys said chopping one hand through the air. "I want to confer with Prince Doran before I decide on a course of action, get the latest news and be prepared to give Bloodbeard his orders immediately as they disembark." He laughed harshly. "Even in comparison to the mercenaries with us at present the company of the Cat is not comprised of men you would wish to have linger in your town at any time, let alone after a sea voyage."

Arianne grimaced internally at the amusement in Viserys' voice at that but nodded. Such men were useful, but Viserys was right, she didn't want them on her family's land for any longer time than was necessary. *I wonder what my father will think*, she thought. *Especially considering that this was in fact the match that he wished for me, he shouldn't have very many complaints on that score. But finally being forced to choose a side, and to act openly? That might give him a heart attack.* For some reason Arianne could not find any sympathy in her for that response.

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Prince Doran looked at his chief factor from Planky Town and for once his face showed his emotions, which were a jumble of pure shock, dismay, and worry. "Could you say that again? I could've sworn you said that my daughter returned with a man under the Targaryen banner and a fleet at their back."

The other man, an elderly gentleman of age with Doran, licked dry lips but nodded. "That is indeed what I said my Lord, we spotted the Targaryen flag several hours out, and I went to the tallest watchtower with a spyglass to see everything I could before reporting to you. There were about twelve ships give or take. All of those I saw looked like transports, trade cogs not warships, and from what I could tell filled with rather disreputable looking mercenaries. A few of the ships were manned by troops who looked more disciplined, but those were the minority."

"Never mind that, man!" Doran barked sharply, bringing one aged hand down on his armrest. "Tell me more about what you saw on the flagship! Are you certain you saw the banner of House Targaryen?"

"Yes my Lord, it's quite distinct, a three-headed red dragon on a black background. And I recognized the Princess sitting under an awning next to a man who had silver hair." The factor licked his lips again and went on. "I waited until they were near to docking before coming here to see you my Lord, and as I waited, I saw something astonishing. The, the man, he, he brings a dragon! He let it fly around the ship on an extremely long rope before coaxing it back in with food. Everyone on the wharf saw it!"

News of Daenerys return and her two dragons had not yet reached Dorne, so this sighting came as a distinct surprise. In response Doran fell back into his chair almost in a faint, one hand clutching at his chest. His thoughts however were almost but not quite removed from the panic his body was going through. *This is the best outcome I could've hoped for from Arianne's little jaunt, it matches my own long-term plans, and yet...*

And yet now that it came to it, Doran was **extremely** reluctant to actually act, regardless of Viserys bringing a dragon with him. All of Westeros seemed to be falling into war, with only his own realm and that of the Vale untouched by it as yet. This however would plunge his people into that war, and Doran suddenly found himself having great difficulty reconciling that.

That was why Doran could not hide his dismay from his daughter's eyes when she and Viserys marched into the great Hall of Sunspear two days later. This was the same hall where Doran had greeted his brother's return with the Mountain's head, and the same where he had ordered his brother's arrest. Doran had avoided the place since, but for this he had to be formal.

Doran locked eyes with the Targaryen prince and shuddered a little seeing what was burning there. A need for blood and vengeance that he had seen in his younger brother's eyes more than once. *This is a man who burns for vengeance as bitterly as any of my family, but will it be the rest of Westeros or my family who pays the higher price to achieve it?*

Yes, Doran was **very** reluctant to finally start to act, and it was only his decades of experience that allowed him to keep his dismay from his face when his daughter curtsied floridly to his throne and declaimed loudly. "Father, may I present Viserys Targaryen, heir of House Targaryen, rightful King of Westeros, future rider of the dragon Balerion, and my **husband**." The way she said that last word showed that Arianne had discovered that her marriage had been a long term scheme of his, and that she wasn't happy he had kept that from her.

For a few moments Doran did not say or do anything, simply staring at his daughter and Viserys, his eyes and face not showing anything of his thoughts as usual. In reality, he was trying to get control of himself before he spoke. When he did speak the quavering his voice was easily mistaken for happiness. "You are welcome home daughter and you as well... Your Majesty. Your loyal subjects have missed you." *So my side is chosen for me, and nothing I can do will ever allow me to regain my neutral position. So be it, this is what I worked for, and it seems I must see it through.*

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How many days had it been since his own brother had imprisoned him here? Oberyne didn't know, and didn't care. The room was comfortable enough, and Doran's servants certainly fed him well enough, despite the fact that he had slain four of them when the guards had come to forcefully arrest him. That didn't matter either, all that mattered was that he was a prisoner, that he was being kept here rather than being allowed to seek out justice for his dead daughter.

*Justice, vengeance or what have you*, Oberyne thought his mind somewhat more lucid than it normally was these

days, as he had tried to drink himself into a stupor practically every day since being imprisoned there. *I care not which or what other people label it as. I will see that Lannister bitch dead and Robert too.*

That thought jarred him a little as his memory replayed something a servant had passed on from his brother's spies, something about Robert already being dead? But even so his brat was still around, his family was still around, and the bitch queen was still alive. All of them would feel the sting of the Viper's fangs eventually.

*Eventually my brother's guards will relax and I will slip my cage once more. Just one little crack, just one guard a few minutes late to his post or nodding off of a night, that's all I need.* Oberynd was overlooking the fact that given his current semi-inebriated state he probably couldn't have made it out of the castle without a great deal of luck, nor would he have cared if someone else pointed out. Not after hearing how his daughter Tyene had been sentenced to death, and his on-again off-again lover Daemon slain in her defense. *Will the Lannisters never stop heaping insults upon my family? All of them, every stinking golden haired lion or whore-son Baratheon will die by my hands!*

Oberynd looked up abruptly as sounds approached in the corridor outside his gilded cage. It wasn't yet dinnertime, so either the servant coming to serve him food was coming very early or something interesting was happening. He languidly stood up, moving with that precise sort of movement of the very inebriated, his hands flexing with violent intent.

He stopped however as the captain of the guard moved through the door, his heavy axe in one hand as always. Areo Hotah was a powerfully built man who hailed from the Essos city of Norvos, and had been trained by the bearded priests in his war craft. The axe he held, which had a shaft six feet long, was his wife as well as his weapon, signifying his loyalty to the one he was sworn to. In Areo's case that was Doran, whose service he had entered when Doran's wife, who also hailed from Norvos, came to Dorne.

"Prince Oberynd," Areo said, gesturing to two servants behind him. "These two will help you get changed dressed and shaved, you are wanted to take part in a war council."

"A war council?" Oberynd said, his voice slurring very slightly. "For what reason, so that my brother might figure out a better way to rattle his sabers on this edge of the passes, so that he can puff our numbers up further rather than actually use them? Why would Doran need me for that?"

"There have been events occurring Prince Oberynd beyond Dorne's borders, some of which require your brother to renege his refusal to allow you your freedom." Areo replied, his bearded face showing none of his thoughts about either Oberynd's imprisonment, or the events he was speaking of.

Oberynd's eyes widened, and then widened further as the man moved to one side allowing his oldest daughter Obara to enter. Her eyes were slightly red rimmed, not from crying, none of his daughters would waste water on that, but from rage at the news she had heard mere hours ago. She had never really liked Tyene all that much, but they had been sisters, and that was that. "I'm sorry father!" she said shaking her head moving forward to help the servants getting ready for the war council. "If I had stayed behind...!"

"I might well be mourning both you and Tyene now, and the Princess would now be in Lannister hands, a tool they would use to keep us from acting. I presume your return means that you and she have something to do with my newfound freedom?" Oberynd said, each word coming out with less and less alcohol-induced slur. He now straightened up, showing nothing of his inebriation. It was still there, but he had long developed the ability to function even while rip-roaring drunk, a must-have ability for mercenaries Oberynd had learned while in Essos.

As his daughter made to protest he slashed his hand through the air. "Enough, we will talk later tonight. We will mourn together for Tyene, but for now, justice and vengeance means we must keep a level head and put aside grief."

OOOOOO

The princes of Dorne met with Viserys, the captain of the guard and several others, including Obara and Nymeria Sand, another daughter of Oberynd's, to discuss what should be done. At twenty-five years old with a slender build, dark green eyes, full lips and a beautiful face framed by straight black hair worn in a long braid, Nymeria had all the beauty her older sister Obara lacked. Despite her elegance and poise however, she was just as much a warrior as Obara, and always had daggers hidden about her person.

Arianne was there as well, though she had taken the intervening time to grieve for her friend Tyene who had been Arianne's favorite among the Sand Snakes. Her eyes were still red rimmed from crying, and she did not look nearly as composed or lushly sensual as normal as she sat next to her husband. Yet despite being so tear stained her eyes were sharp and hard. Arianne would go back to crying after the meeting, go back to blaming herself for not having

brought Tyene along with her on the ship with Ranma, for wanting her to remain to watch the court, for getting Tyene killed more than anyone else could ever truly say. For now, they had plans to make, plans to bring their house to prominence in Westeros again, plans for justice and the ruin of their enemies.

Viserys took command of the meeting immediately as was his right as King, and there was a hard light in his eyes that matched those of his wife and Oberyn as he tapped the map laid out on the counsel table. He first went into their own preparations: the number of mercenaries he had gathered, how long it would take Balerion to be large enough to ride and thereby become an offensive force and the number of ships he had under his command. This included two war galleys, each of them armed with four scorpions on top of the seventeen transport ships, five of which weren't here yet since they were carrying the Company of the Cat from Myr.

Then he went on more reluctantly to mention the fact that his sister had absconded with two dragon eggs, and that she may be allied with the Starks. "But of course, she lacks the true fire of our family, she'll mollycoddle them, that'll make them useless for war, pampered pets if that. I don't doubt that they'll be fond of her, but Daenerys would sooner cut her own throat than use them in war, she's too soft to give the dragon the harsh training they require to be of any use. They'll be a symbol nothing more."

"I would urge reconciliation with her." Doran said promptly. "Regardless of how she treats them she has two dragons, one more than could be used. We could possibly find a dragonseed after the war is over to help train the third. Together the two of you could also prove a much more potent symbol than alone. Plus, if we make peace with her, she may bring in the Starks on our side."

"No!" Viserys barked, shaking his head, before going on in a more controlled voice. "She will never side with me. Daenerys has always been jealous that I was born older than her, but never so brave as to truly do what needs to be done. In the future we might be able to talk her into surrendering..." he went on reluctantly. "But before that she will do us damage by showing that our house is not united in our desire to take the Iron Throne."

"Could we send out assassins?" Arianne asked her father. "Either for Daenerys or against her dragons? As magnificent as they are, I would sooner have them dead than used against us."

Her husband looked as if he was about to explode at that last idea, but subsided slowly allowing Doran to answer. "No. For one thing, any assassin we send from here from our own... local resources would have to travel overland through all of Westeros into the war zone that is the Riverlands and then beyond to the North. That's a difficult trek even in peacetime. As it is now, there is no chance of it occurring. And paying for a true trained assassin, even a Sorrowful man rather than a Faceless, would cost as much as one of your smaller mercenary companies. Besides, dragons are almost impossible to kill by poison."

Despite that Doran wondered if it was possible, and thought about how the dragons had died out before. *If I had a way to contact Sarella in Oldtown, I might have her look into that for me based on certain... rumors, but as it is...*

"True." Viserys said thoughtfully. "For now, on to other matters. Thanks to the Usurper's death, all of Westeros is now ripping itself apart and I would like to hear what has gone on of late. We've been at sea for over a month now, what has happened since? What are the sides that have formed since the pretenders death?"

Doran spoke, his voice softer now. "Much has occurred. Rumors have come out of King's Landing about what truly happened to cause the break between House Stark and House Lannister." He briefly outlined those rumors, and then looked at his daughter. "You are the only one here who has actually been around the Baratheon boy in even somewhat close circumstances, what are your thoughts?"

Frowning thoughtfully Arianne took a moment to think before speaking. "I would say that there is not an ounce of Baratheon blood in him, that part at least is correct. But I saw no evidence of anything going on between the Kingslayer and Cersei, and I note that even Stannis isn't actually advertising the proof of that. I would say stay well away from that aspect in our own propaganda, a lie in such a thing could come back to bite us."

To her side Obara and Oberyn both nodded agreement. Oberyn expounded further. "I never saw any evidence to suggest he was the Kingslayer's son when I was there for the Tourney, though that doesn't mean much. He and his sister **do** look so alike there would be nothing physical to show that, but from what little I could see but the brat didn't have any aptitude towards weapons-craft or to anything else Jaime is known to be fond of."

Doran nodded and went on describing what else had been occurring of late, finishing with how the Lannisters had been stalled in their northern march, which made all of his listeners smile and frown in turn. They smiled because they liked hearing about the Lannisters facing a setback, and frowned because if Tywin Lannister had finished his march up north, he would've been too far out of position to do anything about their own movements quickly.



He did not know that the northern army was already in the field in the Riverlands, and had no idea that the Freys had already fallen. Nor did he have any idea about the former Mountain's Men and others being sent into the western marches of the Reach. Nor did Doran, not having any sort of real naval power, know that the Ironborn were on the move.

"The fact that Renly is making his own play for the throne isn't surprising." Viserys said thoughtfully, exchanging glances with Jorah and Illyrio who had helped the traitor Domeric give Viserys a decent grasp of both Baratheon brothers. "He's always looked down on Stannis and the Usurper's favoring him didn't help. But how effective will he be in the field? And while the Reach will let him field a huge army, how loyal are they really? Their House and your own, Prince Doran, were the two Lord Paramounts that were loyal to my family to the end. Despite the fact that they were led by that incompetent, Mace Tyrell, imagine becoming so embroiled in besieging Storm's End that you forget that the real prize so King's Landing and the Iron Throne!" He shook his head, half in amusement and half in anger at that bungle. The man would pay for that down the line, but at present that connection might prove useful.

"The Houses of the Reach may march in lockstep for now." Oberyn said musingly. "However, there are many lords that would be unhappy with Mace personally if they receive a setback or two. If they do, then Renly and his power grab may collapse internally if they are shown that they have other options. The Florents for certain would be looking for any excuse to change sides if they lose men in the field. And House Hightower as well, they've never been very happy with Baratheon rule."

Viserys nodded sharply. "If you have enough ravens here my Lord, I will pen messages to every noble house you can think of that might show more loyalty to us than to Renly the Pretender. It could not hurt after all to show that there are better options around now."

"But..." he went on his eyes hardening and lighting with eagerness. "In the end Renly's claim or his brother's do not matter! We will conquer the whole of Westeros by fire and blood if need be to claim my rightful place and gain your family's revenge!" Doran was the only Martel at that table who did not shout aloud in vehement agreement, and more than one advisor also nodded as well, though tellingly this did not include Areo Hotah.

After a moment Oberyn looked down at the map on the table. "So now we should talk about specific plans."

"I'm thinking of a large feint: a threat that the other side will have to honor, but which will draw even more of their attention elsewhere while we strike someplace else entirely." Viserys said looking at over at Oberyn. He outlined what he wanted to do, and Oberyn winced a little at the idea of trying to time movements like that over such large distances. Still, each segment by itself was workable.

Eventually they came to an agreement. Oberyn would lead the mercenaries up the Greenblood then the Scourge before marching through the desert to Yronwood. There he would join the eight thousand men already gathered there doing the saber rattling he had been so dismissive of earlier that day. Oberyn would then march through the Boneway to fall on the Stormlands. They were not to be bogged down anywhere in sieges however, they were the diversion. The real blow would land elsewhere, commanded by Viserys and Jorah, with the men of the nearby Dornish houses and those who could send their men to Planky Town that hadn't already been committed, a force numbering around twelve to fourteen thousand.

Not really having much to contribute to talk about the war effort Arianne leaned back, letting the talk wash over her. Though she would later help pen Viserys' notes to the Reach Lords, right now Arianne was wondering two things in particular. One, where Ranna and Daenerys were, and two, who really had poisoned young Tommen kicking off the shit storm in King's Landing that began the war between lion, stag and wolf.

OOOOOO

At around the same time that the eldest Targaryen sibling was arriving in Planky Town, Stannis was arriving with his fleet in Duskenale. Nearly every ship of the fleet was behind him, waiting their turn to come in and to disgorge the soldiers on them. The first ten did so quickly, before pulling away to let the next ten take their place. The disembarkation would take nearly four full days, given the size of the docks and the number of ships. The city also couldn't house all of the troops, not without causing a lot of dislocation.

The first thousand plus infantry moved with Lord Errol in command took command of the wharf quickly, making certain the rest of the disembarkation went smoothly. Not that the locals seemed in any hurry to try. Indeed the smallfolk were all dashing inside to get away from what they thought might be invaders. Barring issues, Sebastian Errol would turn that duty over to the next group ashore which was led by a knight from Dragonstone, before heading out of the city with his men to set up a base camp for the army.

As this was going on, Stannis and a party of three hundred moved through the town towards House Rykker's Dun Fort. It was the sight of the Defiance of Duskendale, which many saw as the point where Aerys began to sink into madness. *Why the fort was left standing after that is beyond me but if Rykker thinks to do aught but immediately bend the knee, I will rectify that mistake quickly.*

Despite that thought Stannis knew Rykker wouldn't do anything so foolish. He was a cautious man, who would follow whoever seemed strong at the time. Since it was his army disembarking into Duskendale right now, that was Stannis. *Of course that means he'll back someone else if they come close enough to threaten the city, but so long as he doesn't support them in the field I'll let that slide for now.* Leaving thought of Renfred Rykker for now, Stannis turned his thoughts to what had been happening in the past month or so.

While he had been traveling from the Stormlands up to Dragonstone, battling the weather most of the way, Davos Seaworth had performed in an exemplary fashion. First Seaworth brought both houses he had been sent to parlay with, Bar Emmon and Massey, to Stannis's side. This added a little under three and a half thousand men into his army from Massey, which had not been weakened much in Robert's Rebellion, and another thousand, two hundred from Bar Emmon, which like much of the rest of the Crownlands, had been badly hammered in Robert's Rebellion. Davos then acted on his own to negotiate with Salladhor Saan, a Lysene based pirate lord.

At that point Stannis had arrived at Dragonstone. After praising him for the work he had already done, under Stannis set Davos the task of leading a small group of galleys down to burn out House Tarth's port on Estermont. He had rejoined Stannis' main force barely a half day away from Duskendale, that mission accomplished. House Tarth no longer had any ships or the ability to make them, and was thus out of the war without even factoring the losses they had taken or their heir's death.

With Saan's ships taking over the blockade around King's Landing, which had added even more of the navy's men to Stannis' army. That gave him a force of around eighteen thousand, though the former naval troops would need constant training to become used to fighting on land. They were all trained in combat, but in maneuvers and working in larger groups, those they needed work on, and his cavalry arm was sorely lacking in numbers. The men he had taken with him into the Stormlands however would make a good training cadre. *I have an army now, but what has gone on since I left the Stormlands? That is the question.*

He glanced at Melisandre, his eyes showing a hint of anger. Melisandre's ability to see what was occurring elsewhere had not been reliable of late. Rather than the actual events, her visions of late consisted of imagery she had to interpret. He knew that the Lannisters had marched into the Riverlands, that they had been turned aside and that the wolves were in the Riverlands already something that he probably wouldn't be able to confirm here, but if true would astonish him. Details eluded them.

You couldn't get much detail out of Melisandre declaring 'the lion has been stopped at a river after eating it's full of the fish'. What river, where, what crossing, even what enemies? Or 'a peacock has tricked a young foolish stag and is strutting now to the city.' The young stag was obviously Renly, he was certainly foolish enough, but the rest? The only thing that kept Stannis from blowing up at the woman after having become so used to relying on her visions was the fact that this was very obviously frustrating her as well.

Melisandre was indeed becoming more and more worried about her inability to correctly discern the images R'hllor was sending to her, which had begun almost from the moment they took to sea again in the Stormlands. Had she done something for her God to turn his favor from her? Or was it simply the fact that she had been on the ocean, where the power of R'hllor was weak? But it hadn't bothered her abilities before... On the other hand, could it be a sign of something more sinister, the growing power of the Great Other? That last worried Melisandre the most, since she knew that Stannis would be very hard to turn aside from what he saw as the primary concern: gaining his throne. But he was the Azor Ahai, if he did not stand against the Great Other in the Far North, nothing would.

OOOOOO

Renfred Rykker was an unctuous man, who knew perfectly well he didn't stand a chance against Stannis' army, Duskendale having no navy of its own nor a city watch large enough to matter. Stannis didn't even get an opportunity to try to overawe him, instead Renfred came to him. Bowing so low he almost fell out of his horse's saddle there in the streets of the city he said meekly. "My Lord, my city and my house are yours, of course. May I offer you what scant hospitality Dun Fort can?"

Despite his best effort Lord Rykker couldn't stop his eyes from skittering across to where the red witch rode next to Stannis, her red hair cascading down her back like a wave of fire. He wondered if this was the rumored Red Witch and if so, what her powers really consisted of.

"You may." Stannis said, bringing the attention of the man back to him. "And while you are doing so, tell me what has been happening of late. I've been out of touch at sea for too long."

Later that evening Stannis and his main advisors gathered. He had the local Lord fill them all in on the local news, the news from the Riverlands. He also relayed that Renly was on the march with the Reach army along with the rumor that there had possibly been a clash of some kind on the Gold Road. Most worrying however was the news that the second army out of Westerlands had reached Lord Lannister.

Lord Ralph Buckler summed up their position succinctly. "While coming to Duskendale to offload our army seemed a good idea my Lord, allowing us to come at King's Landing from a surprise direction, we seem to now be caught between two enemies. Not close ones to be sure, but powerful enough to make me nervous. Is there any way your brother and the Lord Lannister would be willing to work together against us?"

"A chance for certain, but nothing more." Stannis said waving that away. "Beyond the distances involved, there are other reasons why that would never happen. My brother wants the throne after all, and Lord Lannister will be just as firm in his desire to keep his own blood on it." *I wonder what the old lion would do if he learned the true parentage of Joffrey or the other two?*

He put that aside for now as Seaworth spoke. "Regardless, putting our men on land again was a good move. One of the cutters assigned to watch King's Landing met up with the fleet a few hours ago." He looked over at his Lord. "The captain's still down at the port if ya wish to question him in person your grace, but I already talked ta him before coming up here. The Lannisters've put together at least three trebuchets that'd cover the approach to the port. The captain talked about other works going on that tell me the city is prepared for an attack from the sea."

"That's good to know." said Lord Bolling, frowning thoughtfully. "But it doesn't change our situation here. I would vote to move fast and strike hard at one or the other enemy my lord, before their own spies can inform them we've landed here. I doubt we'd be able to surprise them given the distances involved, but we can't stay here."

Stannis shook his head. "That thought never occurred to me in the first place. We might be caught between enemies, but the distances involved allow us quite a lot of new room for maneuver, and one enemy in particular is untried and much more fragile than the other."

He smiled thinly, remembering the discussion with his wife when they stayed on Dragonstone. He didn't like Selyse much, and didn't really understand his daughter very well either, but Selyse had thought up an interesting scheme to deal with the Tyrells, one that could bear quite a bit of fruit down the line if he removed Renly in some fashion.

"We will march further south to assault the army from the Reach after they move to put King's Landing under siege. If we can march fast enough, we might be able to get there before their second echelon arrives, in which case we will be laboring under only a two or three to one disadvantage in numbers, while holding an advantage in experience and leadership that they cannot match." *So long as my brother is in command rather than Randyll Tarly at least. Even there I wonder about his ability to role with the punches.*

"The Lannisters might come after us, but you're right my Lord, the distances involved mean we'll see them coming long before they can reach us. Duskendale isn't defensible either alas." Lord Buckler said thoughtfully, hoping no one called him on his moment of panic. He really wasn't the best at reading distances on a map. Moreover he naturally thought in terms of forting up, a natural mode of thought for him given Bronzegate's defensive position and Duskendale's lack in that area had thrown him. Here however, a war of maneuver was a much better idea.

"I hope they do, that would remove Tywin from his supply lines in the Riverlands and from behind the earthworks he's apparently been throwing up. Now Rykker, what can you tell me about the Crownlands themselves, have any of the other Houses sworn for the bastard king? How many are taking a wait-and-see attitude?"

"A few Houses declared for the King almost immediately my Lord." Said Renfred bowing his head obsequiously again. "Rosby and Stokeworth were the first. House Brych followed quickly, as did Edgerton, Harte sent a thousand man I've been told, nearly their full strength! Manning, Thorne, and Staunton all lost their lords and in Manning and Staunton's case, their heirs as well in what the smallfolk are calling the Battle of Two Truths fighting against House Stark. According to rumor they were gutted along with the City Watch and the forces the Lannisters had on hand. With the Kingslayer in command the forces in the capital have since rebuilt and been reinforced, but those families might never recover and are certainly no longer a consideration."

Stannis grimaced. If he had known that he might have chanced a lightning raid with his fleet, as ill-prepared as it had been for a battle on land. *Damnit, still for the Starks to do that much damage, they are a serious threat. Curse Melisandre and her urges, if I hadn't ordered their ship attacked Eddard would have declared for me! As it is, I'll no*

*doubt be facing the Mountain-Breaker across the field.*

Rykker didn't notice this and went on. "Manning, Langward, Wendwater, Rollingford, Cressey and Chelsted have all declared their neutrality. Chelsted is the only house there that has enough force to matter, but given what happened to their old lord, they won't want to get involved in a civil war."

Lord Chelsted had been a Hand of the king under Aerys, who tried to protest his plans to use wildfire to burn the city, and been burned in turn for it when he tried to resign, wanting no part in the plan. The house's troops had retreated rather than take part in any further battles after that, and the House had stood aloof from everything since. They were still a powerful house, but one that refused to take side, and no other lord could gainsay that, including Stannis.

"I respect Chelsted's position, their neutrality is enough for me." Stannis nodded. Actually Stannis didn't but he was worried about bringing a house with bad memories of fire into his army with Melisandre around. "As for the others, the Crownlands suffered during my brother's war and have not fully recovered their manpower. And House Chyttering, which you haven't mentioned, may side with me or Renly. For certain they will believe Joffrey a bastard, which may give us a thousand more men or so by the time the battle between us and Renly's force begins."

Davos looked worried. "My Lord, do you truly mean to fight your brother?"

"Renly has always been an arrogant, foolish boy." Stannis said coldly. "He's always wanted more than his own prowess and strength could ever win him, and Robert favoring him did not help matters. Now he is out there, trying to claim the throne that is rightfully **mine**, turning half the Stormlands against me, the Reach against me, and doing none of that before first even confronting me personally, the **coward!** Familial loyalty say that he should follow me, and yet he would ignore that as well as any of the laws of the land and succession to try and grasp a crown he has never shown the ability to control."

Stannis stood up abruptly, moving back and forth, every line of his body screaming anger before he turned abruptly to Davos, once more in control of his temper. "You ask if I will strike at my brother, my brother struck at me first by raising his own banner like this! Renly is in the wrong and that is an end of it Davos. If he surrenders, if Renly bows to me when we are face-to-face, I will welcome him back. But he will only get that one chance from me."

The Onion Knight looked into Stannis eyes for moment then nodded his head formally in submission.

Stannis knew his man needed a break after not one but two voyages with naught to do even on Dragonstone for the majority, therefore he needed to take time to let them rest, much as he loathed the delay. As such, Stannis moved his army out of the city to the camp Lord Errol had set up and then for the next four days rotated his men through the city, allowing them to take time with the fleshpots therein. At the same time the rest of the army was training and rearming. The smiths of the city worked around the clock to provide his army with chainmail and heavier shields, but in only four days couldn't make much headway in re-arming his former navy armsmen, who primarily wore leather armor. After four days however, his army was once more on the march out of Duskenale towards King's Landing.

OOOOOO

Twenty-five longships laid at anchor inside Blazewater Bay, far enough away from land to not be seen but deep enough in the bay to allow the ships to use it to protect themselves from the worst of the sea's weather. This far north that weather was capricious at best but you could not have told that from the young woman who stood with casual confidence on the topmost mast of one of the larger longships. Its name, etched out on the side, was *Black Wind*.

The young woman is lean, with little in the way of curves, her muscles tending towards being wiry rather than strong, built for speed. Her black hair is cut short, barely reaching her ears, and her skin, what of it can be seen under the heavy coats she wears, is wind-burned and her hands look strong, her fingers dexterous. Her hands are also calloused heavily, both from working on the ship and from wielding a sword. This young woman was Asha Greyjoy, daughter of Balon Greyjoy, self-declared king of the Iron Islands, and this was her ship.

Normally a woman in the Ironborn culture would never be allowed to even be a sailor let alone captain her own ship. Oh, the Ironborn gave lip service to the fact heir women could be warriors, but that was all it was, mere lip service with no truth behind it, indeed women in the Iron Islands were treated worse than anywhere on the mainland. But with the heir to the Seastone chair a captive of the Starks in the North that had allowed Asha some leeway. Leeway enough to prove herself, and she had. Asha had become captain of her own ship through blood, sweat and energy, crewing it with men she personally chose. Men who she could trust not to try to stab her in the back or bed her willingly or no, unlike most of the captains assigned to her but in this mission.

Seeing the longboats moving through the waves towards her ship, Asha scowled slightly then nodded at the watcher.

"Keep a sharp eye out, if you see anything unusual, anything at all either from those ships or beyond, shout out a signal."

The man nodded, not commenting. Every man aboard her ship knew that their captain's position in their society wasn't the best, but she had proven herself to them time and time again on raids against merchant vessels, mostly Essossi because their disappearance was much easier to explain away. She was good at picking their targets to get the most plunder and also keeping most of them alive while doing it. That made Asha a rare enough captain to gain her crew's loyalty regardless of her gender.

Without another word Asha clambered down to the deck easily. She arrived in time to welcome the first captains aboard, not even gritting her teeth at the way most looked at her like she was some kind of prize or an anachronism she was so used to it.

Women born into the Ironborn society from a mother of the same culture would become rock wives at best, salt wives at worse if taken in one of the internecine raids that occurred periodically between Houses. Even as a Greyjoy, Asha had to be constantly on watch for men who wanted to take advantage of her position. Women in the islands were at best second citizens, at worst thralls. Salt wives, wives taken in raids and kept as slaves in one manner or another were property, plain and simple. Even rock wives couldn't own anything, and were completely dependent on their husbands. If she ever married Asha would never able to sail again, a fate worse than death, and become simply the wife of a near claimant to the throne of the Iron Islands.

Worse, Asha had to be very careful of even taking lovers from among the Ironborn for fear of whoever she slept with trying to use it against her even if he didn't try to marry her. She had taken a few captives to bed, but their performance hadn't been as good as she could wish going by some of the stories the servant girls back in Pyke told. Among the Ironborn she had met, only the young man she had chosen as her first mate had proven trustworthy enough to let into her bed, and his performance there wasn't nearly as good as in battle. Frankly, Asha didn't really understand what people saw in the whole sex thing, it just didn't seem as interesting or as exciting as a good battle or sailing a ship through a heavy storm.

None of Asha's anger at her tenuous position showed on her face as she welcomed each of the fifteen other captains on this expedition aboard. This took some time, but eventually Asha sat at one end of the table in her ship's mess hall, with the captains arrayed down its sides in front of her. They were all drinking their fill from her ship's stock of strong mead and ale while Asha drank watered down wine. She took a moment to study them all as her first mate and lover, Qarl the Maid, laid out an extremely sketchy map of the Northlands on the table where they could all view it though it took a moment for the other captains to stop drinking long enough to notice.

Only two other captains were near her age. Ralf Kenning, the captain of the *Storm's Pride*, a newly christened longship, was one. She knew him decently well, and had been surprised when he accepted his new ship's captaincy over that of keeping command of his Iron Fleet longship. Apparently he wanted to be part of the raid on the north enough to give up command of an Iron Fleet ship, though he had also been placed in command of the other two ships from House Kenning assigned to this assault. Ralf was a stern, strict young man, with an excellent battle record but Asha felt not blessed with much intelligence. He had followed her uncle Victarion as Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet, so would be willing to listen to her, but might well go his own way regardless.

The second captain her age she didn't know half as well. Triston Farwynd was captain of the *Seal Eyes* and lord of House Farwynd, a small and not really well-thought House from Sealskin Point on Great Wyk, the largest island of the Iron Islands. Every branch of that family was queer, but it was Triston's looks that threw Asha. He had wide, staring eyes over a blue streaked beard, an intricate tattoo of a seal's snout covering half his face and he seemed to look straight through someone when talking to them. It was very unnerving after a time. He was the senior captain of the two ships Farwynd was able to crew, both of which had been sent to the North.

The others were older men of her father's generation, men like Balon who pined for the old days that they remembered so fondly. *Days that will never be again if they ever were in the first place, when Ironborn were 'rulers of the sea' attacking wherever we wished whenever we wished. Fools, deadly, dangerous fools.* Of course she kept those thoughts to herself, just like the rest of her thoughts. Asha was good at that.

The only two among them who would really listen to her were Dustan Drumm and Harren Botley, if for very different reasons. Dustan was a thoughtful, cautious sort, but also prideful, very aware of his dignity as lord of House Drumm. Botley would listen because his younger brother was enamored of Asha. He had been a decent looking youth, but Asha hadn't seen him for years, and had no wish to be tied to him. Still, Harren would at least listen to her.

After contemplating them all for another few moments, she stood up and shouted for attention. "Alright you jetsam now that you've all been properly watered," she waited for the jeers to subside before going on. "We need to start

planning the northern portion of the Rise of the Kraken!"

Most of the men grinned eagerly both at the name Balon had given the opening moves of his second rebellion, and in simple eagerness to be raiding openly once more. Personally Asha thought that an idiotic name given to a plan that might be doomed from the start. She thought it senseless to spread their numbers so thinly but everyone else thought it a grand plan.

Kraken consisted of two stages. The first consisted of several dozen ships sent out on raids here and there, like a kraken's secondary feelers, attacking targets of opportunity along Ironman's Bay and the Cape of Eagles. These ships would be kept away from the main targets of the larger tentacles, lulling the other realms into a false sense of security if they ever even heard of it. Surprise was supposedly the nature of the game for Rise of the Kraken. Those four main targets were Lannisport, the Shield Islands and the Arbor of the Reach, and either Moat Cailin or Deepwood Motte of the North.

The Shield Islands would be attacked by her uncle Victarion. He was an excellent admiral, a decent tactician, able to instill discipline and the need to work together in his followers. But he in turn was the ultimate follower. He would never be a strategist, and would never go against the king whatever he was doing, but his plan for the Shield Islands would possibly work. The islands were to be taken and held becoming new fiefdoms for the Ironborn, as well as staging grounds for further raids.

Alyn Orkwood however was a different story, and his attack on Lannisport worried Asha a lot. It was too much like the one that had worked in the last war and while Asha didn't like the Lannisters, she knew that they wouldn't be caught in the same way twice. Every ship from Orkmont and nearly all of those from Blacktyde however had been committed to that.

Over the strenuous objections of Lord Baelor Blacktyde, but he hadn't made as much noise as Asha had suspected. House Blacktyde had been hammered hard in the rebellion, and could only field ten ships total, with mostly younger, less experienced crews, where before her father's first attempt at rebellion they had twenty-five ships. Still, whatever Balon had told Baelor, a youngish man who Asha had only met twice before, had shut him up.

The Arbor attack, which was the most distant and would take the most time to set up, would be led personally by Balon. She was actually glad to see the old man taking to sea once more but she was worried, **very** worried about the overall plan. Stretching themselves so thin was dangerous in the extreme, leaving them open for defeat in detail. Still, the Redwynes were too arrogant and not nearly aggressive enough, they might be just as ready for a fall as the Shield Islands. The timing would be tricky, with Balon having to arrive before word of the attack on the Shield Islands could reach the Arbor, but Asha hoped her father would be able to pull it off.

Asha herself had won the 'honor' to lead the attack on the North. But she hadn't been able to convince her father to let her pick and choose her own captains, which was going to cause issues here. "We'll need to feel out the defenses along the Stony Shore, the Rills and further north in the Bay of Ice before committing to an attack in any one place, but I doubt that'll take overlong, and it'll be worth it in the long run, letting us find the richest prizes."

One of the older captains, the Sparr, who was lord of House Sparr from Great Wyk, smiled widely. "I wonder if Bear Island is open for an attack. The bear bitches might not be very pretty, but I do like their fire. And it's been too long since they had to face the Ironborn on their own ground! Paying the Iron Price there would be glorious!"

Shaking her head, Asha smiled thinly. "Maybe, but Bear Island's too hard a nut to crack at the best of times, it would take too many of our ships to make any measurable gains there for little return outside of new thralls. Deepwood Motte is a better option, which is why I'll be leading that scouting mission myself."

*That, and it'll let me fish for rumors about Theon. I've heard some about his friendship with Ranma Stark, and didn't that make Father howl, heh. But still, I'd like to know what my brother is up to, and if he's really become a greenlander. That would be good for me in some ways, yet oh so very bad in others.*

"We should attack up the Fever now." said another old man brusquely. Tomas Sunderly was a scarred and hirsute bear of a man, who was notorious for not taking the time to plan ahead, instead relying on brute strength. House Sunderly had always been known for that, hence why their losses in Balon's last Rebellion had been so horrendous. Indeed his house had only been able to crew two longships and retain enough men at home to keep their thralls in line, a far cry from the twenty they had in the last war. "That should be our main target."

It should, but I don't like some of the rumors we've heard from merchants who deal with the crannogs." Asha grimaced.

*Still, it isn't like my orders give me much leeway.* 'And when you've determined that the Moat is open to attack from the Fever take it.' That was the wording, as if it was a certainty the Moat was simply open that way that further scouting wasn't needed. As if the need to scout ahead was added to this attack only because she was a worrying woman. Never mind the fact that Asha had been out leading raids the past ten years and had always succeeded in taking her target ship with minimal losses to her men.

"We'll hit that last," she said after a moment. "It might take all of our ship's crews to do it after all so first we'll scout out the rest of the North and hit where we can. The Moat's a strategic point, not a rich one, we need to hit other places to get any decent plunder."

"We'll lose the element of surprise then!" said another Captain. Aedric Stonehouse angrily smashed his fist down on the table, glaring at Asha. He had never made any bones about his disdain for a woman who thought herself fit to captain a longship, much like Sunderly. He was also head of five of the ships of this attack, and was speaking for those ships here as well. Asha knew whatever she said here he would ignore when it came to it, but she had to try.

So Asha kept her cool as she replied. "We haven't heard anything about the North mobilizing yet. It could be that all of their houses are still gathering their men, including Ryswell and Glover. Would any of you like to face the North up in arms on their own ground?" She asked looking around them her eyes hard. One or two of them, including Ralf she was happy to see, actually scowled at the thought, remembering how badly the northern forces had mauled their own on the islands during the invasion. But the others, Aedric and the Sparr chief among them, glared back at her angrily.

Aedric spoke up again. "If we have the element of surprise, we can overwhelm them before they gather their defenses! If we don't, then what's the point of us coming up here anyway?"

"I'm not going to rely on luck and prayer to see us through! I refuse to launch any attacks until we are certain that the attacks will work." she spat out, now losing her temper somewhat. "We do our people no good paying the Iron Price without getting anything in return! Besides, the North can't be strong everywhere. If they've strengthened their defenses along the shores and in Deepwood Motte that might mean that the moat is not as strong as rumors make it, and my father's orders are to take it to cut them off from the Riverlands."

"Rumor!" said The Sparr, scoffing and spitting to one side. "You're showing your gender girl, listening to the gossip of salt wives! I think we should attack now! Take the Moat now then send ships up further north to take Deepwood Motte when the puling northern pussies try to scramble to retake it! From there we could range further inland, plundering where we wish!"

"And lose our primary advantage, our ships mobility?" Asha asked, staring back at him coldly. "Our mobility and our ability to take to the oceans is our greatest weapon! If we leave the rivers and shores behind, that goes away, and the terrain itself becomes an advantage for our enemies. Remember the North is **huge!** Other than Deepwood Motte and Moat Cailin there is Barrowtown up the river, and Torrhen's Square if we can go up the rivers there. We have other targets that we can hit if we're careful about it and don't let ourselves get bogged down. But I won't let any of us go deeper inland, we'll stay near the waters."

"And show them we're cowards?!" Tomas shouted, as he and a few of the others stood up angrily. Others remained sitting, watching how this would go. "The Sparr's right, you're not showing nearly enough true Iron grit!" He stood up and made his way forward, one hand reaching for his sword. "I think one of us should take..."

That was all he got out before Asha was out of her seat her hand reaching for her own blade and swiftly pulling it out before the other man could do the same. There was a "Shlick!" sound of her blade meeting his throat, and Tomas fell back gasping as blood spurted from his neck.

Asha remained standing, deliberately twisting her wrist to splatter the blood on her sword out across a few of the other captains who had stood up, her eyes challenging. "Anyone else?" There was silence and she nodded, reaching forward to grab up her ale mug again, taking a deep draught.

That would cause trouble down the road she knew, but at the moment Sunderly was too weak to make waves alone, and she needed to make certain her position was secure. It wasn't of course, but her control over the fleet would last for a bit longer now, perhaps long enough to really get them some information.

Putting down her mug, Asha went on. "Then we will follow my plan for now, understood?"

OOOOOO

Normally when he woke up Ranma came awake relatively quickly. This time however his brain wasn't quite

responding as well as normal, nor was his body responding. He opened his eyes sluggishly as he began to remember. He had used far too much ki destroying the Twins on top of what he had used in taking the castle in the first place. He had been soldiering on while dealing with the prisoners and Old Walder, but it all caught up to him quickly and he practically collapsed a bear hour later.

Not even lifting his head, Ranma looked blearily around, noticing he was in a tent. Finally Ranma's hearing came back online enough for him to notice he could hear humming somewhere just out of sight. He groggily rolled his head on the camp pillow, grunting a little with the effort. This seemed to attract the attention of whoever was humming since the humming stopped and he quickly felt a cool hand on his brow. Seconds later Daenerys leaned over him, her face concerned. "You're lucky Jon was able to tell me what was wrong with you Ranma, or I would be much angrier with you at this moment than I am. You could've figured out other ways of destroying the Twins you know."

"Water." Ranma croaked not answering Daenerys's accusation at the moment.

He watched as Myrcella got up from where she must've been sitting close by Daenerys, moving over to a small bronze pitcher set on the small folding table, a gift from Lord Karstark several years back. "This ki ability that you are able to teach us about is interesting. But I'm not quite sure I like the cost." Myrcella said, looking at her, her green eyes as concerned as Daenerys' purple ones.

Ranma waited until after he was given the glass, lifting it to his mouth with a shaky hand. Some of it ran down his shirt, but he got most of it into his mouth. He smiled however at the two girls. "Had to do it that way. You don't think that some Lannister scout is going to be able to get past whatever defenses are down by the Ruby Ford? By this time I've no doubt the Lannisters could've made a few small coracles or something to send scouts or even a single messenger forward over the Blue Fork, then they could make their way further north. They'll eventually be able to travel up to the Twins. I want them to see what happened to the Twins, the way I did it rather than the normal fire or siege damage. They'll have to wonder if we have some kind of secret weapon or something, and that kind of thing might force Tywin to change tactics."

"It might make him leery of fighting any kind of siege battle," Daenerys murmured. "It's a long shot, but one that might prove worth it I suppose. It also showed the army that your powers and abilities do have a personal cost. According to Domic and Alayaya many of the men were taking it for granted, that you could practically do anything or could simply go on all the time with those techniques of yours, even a few of your friends thought that." Edd, Smalljon and Hathan had all been astonished when Ranma collapsed, though Jon had quickly reassured them, filling them in on what had happened.

Myrcella frowned noncommittally while Daenerys continued. "It also shows that you're still human to those who might have been a little worried about it." That of course hadn't counted any of the wolfsworn among their number, but when news of the destruction of the Water Tower had spread throughout the Army there had been some mutterings that Ranma might not even be human, simply a creature conjured up by the old gods to be their champion. The knights of House Manderly in particular had become wary of that, their faith in the Seven making them concerned.

Those murmurs had since disappeared, and the men's belief in Ranma's humanity had returned fivefold. Not just because of his collapse, but because of the way he and Daenerys had dealt with the children they had 'captured' and the women and common armsmen as well. In fact morale in the army was incredibly high over the two nearly bloodless victories they had won so far.

"Where are we now?" Ranma asked. "I hope you didn't let the army stay near the Twins while I was out of it."

"No I didn't," Daenerys said her lips twisted slightly in a frown. She had to convince Rickard of that. With Jon and the other wolfsworn backing her it had been a simple enough task, just an irritating one since Lord Karstark wasn't willing to simply take her word for it. Not that Daenerys really thought she was up to the task of leading the army or anything, but everyone knew their short-term plans, and there shouldn't have been any question of moving on. "We've been making our way straight down to Seagard. The road isn't very good here, but it at least is better than moving through brush and woodland. According to Domic, we'll enter House Charlton lands soon, though what our welcome will be he doesn't know. He says they were Frey supporters, their lord might even have married a daughter of Old Walder. Hopefully they are intelligent enough to not fight a pointless battle, but I don't know."

Ranma nodded. They were heading to Seagard not just to meet up with Lord Mallister and receive any news he had, they also needed to pick up pack horses and food there. Ranma had sent much of the army's own store further south with the rest of the Army on the other side of the Green Fork. They had taken from the Twins as much as they needed to reach the city, leaving what remained to be used for the prisoners sent north and for the men they had left there to defend the barbicans on either side of the bridge.



Because of its design the Twins had never really needed to stock as many supplies as a normal castle would, considering it was almost impossible to siege since the bridge connected the two parts of the Twins across the powerful river. Any army truly besieging it would have to do so from both sides of the Green Fork, which the Twins of course would have ample warning off. Still, the supplies there would get the army to Seagard, especially with Meera and her hunters adding to the pot.

"After we reach Seagard, do you have any idea of our long-term plans?" Daenerys asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"We need to push the Lannisters out of the Riverlands and secure the border with the Westerlands. I'm not gonna try to plan anything further than that until we get some real up-to-date intelligence, which probably won't happen until we reach Fairmarket, but that's our goal for now. For a short term plan I'd like some food, how's that?" Ranma asked barely a millisecond before his stomach began to growl.

The two girls laughed and Myrcella stood up to go and get him some food from the fires, dropping a small hairbrush on the folding table. Ranma realized she must have been doing Daenerys' hair or vice versa, which would explain the humming. As the younger girl left Daenerys leaned over kissing Ranma lovingly on the lips for a moment before pulling back, one eyebrow cocked. "You worried me tremendously when you collapsed you know. Please don't make a habit of that."

"Try not to." Ranma said chuckling a little before Daenerys once more leaned forward kissing him on the lips.

OOOOOO

"Keep your shield up!" Arya said, her sword flicking out to tag Cley in the upper arm to show why. "Don't let it falter no matter how tired you are!" She dodged Cley's almost frantic return swing negligently, using her free arm to tap his inner arm, adding more momentum to it then bringing up her other arm and elbowing him in the chest with enough force to throw the slightly younger boy to the ground. "Don't over extend either, and never put so much strength into a blow you lose your balance. That's one mistake I made a lot of times at first: you don't have to put all your strength and every blow Cley, just enough to do the job." She said reaching down to help him stand up again.

Cley scowled a little, not liking how Arya was throwing him around. Didn't she know the girls were supposed to be weaker than boys? Of course he should've known better after seeing Dacey in action, but some things were harder to beat out of a boy his age than others.

He glared over at where Nymeria was lounging, her eyes seemingly laughing at him. "Your wolf's laughing at me again."

"She does that when she sees something funny." Arya said laughing as well. "More endurance lessons for you I think. Keep doing the exercises that Ranma showed for another week, then we'll try sparring again."

She shook her head as Cley went off, seeing Myrcella leave her brothers tent and joining her quickly. She and the other wolfsworn had played rock-parchment-bladeto see who would oversee Cley's training until her brother was up and about, and Arya had unfortunately lost. She wasn't a very good teacher frankly: she was much too hard on him, much too eager to go beyond overseeing his exercises to get to the actual sword fighting, which she had just seen he wasn't quite ready for.

Out of the corner of her eye Arya saw Daenerys leaving her brothers tent as well, and moved over to her quickly. "Is he awake?"

Daenerys nodded, looking over to where Nymeria was watching her little ones. Sunfyre and Rhaegon were wary of the Nymeria for some reason, but not trying to object to her presence. One of the direwolves was always around them when Daenerys was busy with something else and couldn't have them by her side for one reason or another. Fenris of course was their favorite, but he and Ghost were out with Jon and Meera scouting out the path of the army.

Turning back she addressed Arya's question in greater detail. "He's awake, though he'll probably fall asleep again after eating something. He's not going to be 100% he says for another few days."

Arya nodded taking that in stride and Daenerys asked the question she had been meaning to ever since the battle. "How are you feeling by the way?" Arya cocked her head on not understanding the question, and Daenerys elaborated. "I mean after the fight in the Twins. I don't mean to sound insulting, but you are the youngest of the wolfsworn, and you all did most of the fighting there. Yet for all of that it doesn't seem to bother you."

"It doesn't, not really." Arya said shrugging her shoulders. "What I prefer not to have to kill people, to fight like that, I suppose so. But they were threats to my family, and had proven themselves dishonorable so..." She shrugged. "It doesn't bother me much." *Or at all really.*

Daenerys frowned a little at that. She knew it had bothered Ranna after the battle, having likened it to fighting so many children, not a single man among the Freys had been able to put up a decent fight. Jon and a few of the others also had problems with it. But Arya was much more wolf-like than her older siblings and she didn't try to analyze it overmuch. They were enemies of the pack, therefore they had to die.

After a moment she spoke, choosing her words carefully. "I suppose they were. Just don't make the mistake of seeing enemies where there aren't any. Eventually we will be talking to families that have yet to choose a side or families that had no choice but to follow the Lannisters and we can't deal with them as we did the Frey. Don't be so quick to use your Fang in other words."

Arya shrugged again. "So long as I don't face them in actual battle I won't, I'll leave the decision-making of who to aim my Fang towards to others." She looked around, having spotted Meera of the corner of her eye returning with a few other hunters. She nodded farewell to Daenerys then hurried over to join her friend.

The next day the march continued. With Ranna still unable to run or ride Fennis, being in one of the few carts this portion of the northern army still had with them. He slept most of the day, waking up to eat before going back to sleep, rebuilding his ki reserves. He stayed that way for three days, even as the army moved west leaving the Green Fork behind as they followed a small dirt road toward Seagard.

This left it to Rickard and Jon to address the Charlton knight who was waiting for them a few hours travel inside that house's land. His lance was couched in his saddle holder to stand straight up with a white flag on the end of it in token of parley.

With Daenerys and the two dragons hiding at the back of the army for now Rickard and Jon made their way forward a ways from the army, though it kept moving behind them. As soon as they were close enough to hear the man bellowed his challenge, raising his visor to show a youngish face. "I am Ser Jeremy Charlton. I am here to speak for my uncle, Lord Charlton. Who are you to try to march and army over my house's land unannounced and unasked?"

"I am Jon Stark and this is Lord Karstark." Jon said motioning to the older man but beside him. "We speak for our Lord, Lord Stark, who is in command of this Army. We go south to aid the rest of the Riverlands against the invading Lannisters, doing our familial duty in helping Lord Tully, our grandfather." Well, the man wasn't **Jon's** actual grandfather, but he wasn't about to go into that kind of detail here.

"I note that you have come by way of the Twins, but I don't see any Frey banners with your men. Might I ask how this is come to be?"

"The Twins are no more." Rickard said grimly, though he was enjoying the look up the young knight's face at that news. "House Frey tried to raise its banners for the Lannisters rather than stick to their oath of fealty to their Lord Paramount. As such we, under orders from the voice of Lord Tully captured the Twins, destroyed the castle and the House. The Frey name is no more."

Of course there were Freys still out there, and they wouldn't be affected by that declaration until they were either beaten or taken captive, but without the Twins and the power of their family, there was nothing they could do about it, and what allies they had made would no longer be willing to put up with them if they acted anything like those from the Twins.

The younger man's eyes widened further, hearing the destruction of his House's patrons. The Charlton's were a minor House in all but name, and had long since given their fealty to the Freys, something that was well known in the Riverlands. To hear of their destruction stated so casually, and especially to see what looked like a rather small army having done it... "I take it the victory was not entirely one sided?" He asked, trying to fish for information.

"Actually it was almost entirely one sided, we took only a few fatalities taking the Twins." Jon replied. "The Frey was rather foolish. If you keep acting in a certain manner, people will start to assume that is the only way you will act correct?"

Jeremy nodded, wondering where the other young man was going with this.

"We used that against them. We went forward into the Twins under a flag of parley, and when Old Walder tried to take us captive despite that, we were ready for them." He was not going to say how they were ready however, or that

it'd been only the wolfsworn who had taken part in that counter-ambush. That tale would of course spread once they reach Seagard and the prisoners and the rest of the army were able to rest, but for now it wasn't necessary.

"I see." Jeremy said, wondering how his uncle was going to react to this. "Will you call upon my House for our men? I have to tell you that most of up our forces is already committed to defend the smallfolk in the Cape of Eagles from raids by the Ironborn."

"Have those begun already?" Rickard asked sharply, moving his horse closer.

Jeremy flicked his eyes over to him and nodded grimly. "Yes, my lord. There've only been a few, but with the speed of their longships they have a significant advantage against any response force we try to send. They've burned out one hamlet I know of and some farmsteads as well as four fishing communities. They've also carried off at least twenty women from the last report. They'll get bolder if they aren't challenged soon of course, and when they do we might have a better opportunity to catch them."

"Has Lord Mallister also sent men into the Cape?" Jon asked.

"Some my lord, about seven or eight hundred light cavalry I believe. They've also sent in several cartloads worth of weapons to arm the smallfolk there from the smiths of Seagard. With his need to keep a defensive force at Seagard itself and having already sent men down to help defend Fairmarket against the Lannisters, that was probably all Lord Mallister could send." Jeremy thought himself well-informed about such matters having been to Seagard several times, and having rotated back up to patrolling the Frey/Charlton border due to a bad fall he had taken several weeks ago when his horse came up lame. Still, he didn't realize that Jason had also sent four hundred heavy cavalry into the Cape as well.

Jon frowned, but Rickard laid a hand on his shoulder. "Priorities lad, we can't be strong everywhere. I know it hurts, but it would take our entire army to try and patrol the cape effectively against the Ironborn, and the Lannisters are a much more potent threat."

After nodding reluctant agreement Jon turned back to Jeremy. "We won't require you to add more men to our army. Instead inform your Lord to simply keep protecting his charges." Of course Jon knew Ranma would be unwilling to have had a former Frey ally as part of his army in the first place, but at least House Charlton was doing something the house was obligated to do, defending the smallfolk of the cape.

The young knight nodded before moving off the road, standing his horse to one side as the army marched on. For just a moment Jeremy thought he caught a glimpse of some kind of lizard on one of the few carts he saw, and a flash of silver somewhere nearby. Shaking his head at what obviously was simply a trick of the light he turned away and began the day's long trek towards his house's keep, wondering how his uncle would react to the fall of their patron.

That reaction was to follow the winner. Lord Charlton was not in fact married to a Frey woman, and he was a canny enough fellow to realize who had a winning hand. With the Freys no longer having any power to speak of, the ones connected to his family became a liability. The two squires were informed of their change in status, and the women, one married to his castellan and the other to his third son were told as well. They didn't like the fact that their own House had no power any longer, and the squires were furious that their last name had been erased from the rolls of nobility, but all four were easily contained by the rest of the House.

OOOOOO

Lord Charlton was not the only one who could see the way the wind was blowing after the two battles the northern expedition had fought already. The majordomo of House Haigh could also see it as he looked at the army camping outside the holdfast of the house that he was pledged to defend. It seemed vast to his untrained eye, not that it needed to be since his lord had only left a dozen men to defend his holdfast.

"I see, my lord." he said nodding his head to Brynden Tully. Everyone knew his personal sigil, a black trout swimming above wavy lines of red and blue, even if he had never met the man personally. "Ser Haigh only left a single babe of barely a year here, and his wife died recently in childbirth." He did not mention that the woman had had three miscarriages before giving birth to the young boy, who was sickly and pale, unlikely to live for many years. Or that Ser Haigh had kept her pregnant as much as possible following Old Walder's example. "If he and his brothers and their men are indeed gone, there is no reason for myself and the other servants to put up any kind of resistance."

"That's good. You show much more intelligence than your previous Lord." Brynden said nodding. "We won't harm the boy, though he will be known as a Rivers from now on rather than Haigh. House Haigh is no more, and that banner up there should be taken down and burned."

Looking past Brynden at that large violent looking giant on an even larger warhorse the man gulped a little and nodded. "I'll just go see to that right now my Lord."

The moment the other the man left Greatjon laughed. "Was there something on my face?"

"Yes your great bushy beard and those bushy eyebrows. How do you see out of that shaggy carpet you call a face anyway?" Brynden said scoffing at the other man. "And don't tell me you haven't gone out of your way to cultivate that image of a Northern barbarian."

"It does help at times." Greatjon laughed. "When merchants come to deal with my family I always make a point to let them wait, then my servants spread rumors about how I tend to pull arms out of sockets and beat merchants to death with them if they become too argumentative."

Brynden laughed as well, shaking his head. House Erenford had fallen much the same way. With their head of house dead along with all of his men, there was no one at home who was willing to lay down their life for a knightly house with no members left. That man hadn't even been married, and his castellan had been almost desperate to not fight the victorious 'northern horde'.

After a moment Greatjon went on much more seriously. "How much longer before we're on to the lands of one of the major Riverlands houses we're supposed to treat with?"

"At the rate our army moves, two days to get off House Haigh's lands then we'll be on House Wayn's. It won't be long before old man Wayn knows we're there, but he won't be in any hurry to come out and meet us. Another four days, and two hamlets before we're near his keep if we keep following the Kingsroad."

"And what do you think his and the other's reactions will be?"

"I honestly don't know." Brynden shook his head, lips twisted in a rueful smirk. "I realize I'm supposed to handle the diplomatic talks here, but we just don't know how these houses see the Lannisters, or the rumors about what happened in King's Landing. I can make guesses based on the fact that some of their heirs were friends with my nephew, but how much of that will influence their father's reactions I don't know." He did have some idea, but wasn't about to get his hopes up.

Greatjon nodded, smirking a little as he saw that the banner over the former Haigh holdfast was already being pulled down. "That's fine I suppose, we'll just have to be ready for anything. I wonder how the rest of the army is doing though."

The next day as the majority of the northern army prepared to march they received a messenger who informed them of the successful attack on the twins, and further reiterating Ranma's orders. What neither man realized was that Ranma had sent them south knowing that they probably wouldn't be able to talk the houses there into joining them. Not until he and Daenerys joined them at any rate. No, what they were was a visible sign of the North's march, which he hoped would take the attention of any Tywin's spies.

OOOOOO

The Ironborn's scouting of the shorelines did not produce very good results, which won Asha some points with some of the more thoughtful captains, though it enraged others. The shore around the Rills and in particular the river mouths were patrolled heavily by light cavalry. Instead of rushing to battle those patrols retreated, no doubt to whistle up heavier forces through use of a series of watch fires that could be seen following the path of the rivers deeper inland. Instead of waiting there for those forces to arrive, the Ironborn pulled back moving further up the coast. Even the most iron-headed captain wasn't going to fight a battle like that with no plunder to gain from it.

They found that the Stony Shore was as much a disappointment but in a very different way, as was Sea Dragon Point. There several ships anchored, angered at not the results of scouting out the Rills. They landed their full complements near a tiny fishing village they saw perched on the rocky, almost barren ground of the shore. To their dismay however that hamlet was empty. Further scouting produced no people, and few goods for them to carry off.

That had angered Lord Stonehouse so much he and his family's ships remained there and marched inland with the intention of heading as they could in search of something to raid. Asha didn't learn about that until after it had occurred, having taken *Black Wind* to Deepwood Motte for a trading expedition. That was normal enough she hadn't aroused any suspicion: ships of course always needed fresh food and most particularly meats and potable water.

She traded silks and linens taken in her last raid before coming back to her ship, frowning heavily at how well

defended the town was. It hadn't been reinforced, the wall around the town was still wooden and the keep in its center was still run down, but there was no lessening in the defender's numbers. So whatever muster had occurred in the North hadn't included House Glover.

Asha had also taken the time to ask very obliquely about the wolfsworn and Theon. The wolfsworn sounded fascinating, the idea of a fighting force that good was interesting, if true. Theon's place, as one of the wolfsworn but sort of to the side in some ways, was also interesting, as was the news he was acting as admiral of a fleet in the Bite and further north along that side of the North. The newest rumors were even more interesting, saying that Theon was leading a naval assault on the Three Sisters. She wanted some time to think about those, and what it might mean that Theon apparently was so trusted, and what that could mean in the long term for her as well.

When all the ships once more gathered off Sea Dragon Point, Ralf Kenning told her what had occurred. She ordered the fleet to head down to the Stonehouse's landing spot immediately, coming within sight of the place they had made landing the next day. Instead of finding their ships left there under guard, Asha and the others saw five burned-out husks, along with several heads stuck on the ends of spears sticking out of the rocky shore.

"The Northerners somehow realized that we were going to try to take advantage of the current unrest." Asha said shaking her head and staring at the sight, while a few other captains had joined her, pulling their ships alongside and coming across to stand with her.

"How'd they do that then?" Ralf muttered, scratching at his beard as he looked at Dustan and Harren, wondering if they knew, ignoring Asha almost automatically.

Both men grimaced, though it was Dustan Drumm who replied, rubbing at his craggy face, his eyes bloodshot with drink but still thoughtful. "Small attacks over time on our men as they marched deeper in land, no food to be found maybe. They pulled their smallfolk back all along their shores, fucking Northern pussies!"

Despite his words, his tone was actually respectful. "I hadn't expected it, but that kind of defense in depth is one we can't deal with. None of us're used to fightin' in forests which make up most of the North and we don't have enough stores to march overland, plus no experience livin' off it. And the fucking cold up here's another damn enemy we need to deal with!"

Protected as they were by the Flint Cliffs of Flint's Finger and the rest of the North, the Iron Islands had mostly mild weather year-round. Oh for certain they had their share of storms and more, but it was much colder up here than most were used to. They'd prepared for it, but not so well as to be able to march overland to take targets weeks inland, nor did they have any skills in living off the land.

"Are we just going to let this slide!" said the Sparr. He pointed angrily at the five burned-out ships. "Five good crews dead with nothing to show for it!? We need to march inland, find the people who did this and gut them for fish bait!"

Asha wanted to say that those crews had paid the ultimate Iron Price for a poor return, but she refrained. Instead she shook her head. "No, we won't win any battles trying to fight our enemy on their terms. Besides, all of this was a sideshow. And as I said, they can't be strong everywhere. If they've reinforced Deepwood Motte, and have men enough to wipe out five ships crews near here, it might mean our main objective is still doable."

That ended the grumbling for now, and the ships slowly began to turn away from the shore.

OOOOOO

In one of the houses of the small fishing village Lord Hornwood looked out a window cautiously, staring out to sea at the ships there, not even using the spyglass Eddard had given him for fear the sun would reflect on it and give away his position. Around him four armsmen waited nervously, not liking the fact that their Lord had come forward off their main army like this. Their horses also stamped their feet, uncomfortable in the small enclosed area but they had been tied down securely, and the sound of their stamping feet wouldn't carry to the ships out there.

Asha was incorrect in assuming that the crews of the five Stonehouse ships had already been wiped out. The heads out there weren't of anyone special, simply taken from the dead after a nighttime raid in order to make this little show for the rest of the Ironborn that much more potent. Those crews were still trying to make their way through Sea Dragon Point towards something, anything that they could target. They weren't having much luck of course, since Eddard Stark had decided to adopt a defense in depth against any Ironborn incursion, and ordered his people in the Stony Shore and Sea Dragon Point deeper inland.

When Lord Glover or Lord Hornwood came in person as his representatives along with men to enforce that rule, even

the most recalcitrant smallfolk family had obeyed. The population of Torrhen's Square, Deepwood Motte, and the winter town around Winterfell had doubled because of this, but those people were at least safe for now. Then Eddard had placed Lord Hornwood in command of the defense of Sea Dragon Point, and asked Lord Cerwyn to place his remaining cavalry and archers, about seven hundred men, under Lord Ryswell's command to help defend the rivers in and out of the Rills. Hornwood had near to a thousand men from House Stark and his own, plus a hundred men from the mountain clans, and days' worth of scrubland, hills and forests to play with.

Every night the mountain clansmen under his command came out, and once or twice Eddard and his men had also joined in, either in daytime or nighttime raids on their camps or their line of advance. It couldn't be called a march after all, not nearly organized enough. The Ironborn had started their march in land with around seven hundred and fifty men all told. That number was down to a bare four hundred at this point, but their captains were still around and still determined to find **something** to attack. They wouldn't be able to. Even if they got past Halys, forces from Ryswell and Cerwyn were already prepared down where the Point met the mainland. The moment they came out of the rough terrain of Sea Dragon Point, the Ironborn invaders would be slaughtered in the open.

For now however Halys concentrated on watching the ships out there, wondering what the Ironborn commander would do about the loss of five ships. His musing were interrupted by a young but determined voice speaking up behind him. "My Lord, with respect I have to say again this was ill-advised. We should pull back immediately"

"And let them see us?" Halys said, amused as he turned to one of his guards, a young man named Lester. Lester was an inexperienced youngster from House Bole, one of the minor Houses that looked to Glover. He was eager to prove himself and had jumped at the chance to join Halys' forces, only belatedly realizing that far from being a mere honor, this might place him in a very dangerous position with no chance to shine in front of girls. As he had manifestly hoped for when informed they were not going to be staying in Deepwood Motte. "No we'll keep watch until they are out of sight before moving on."

Halys was still watching an hour later after the ships pulled up anchor and moved away from the shoreline. "A cautious commander among the Ironborn." he murmured. "Interesting. Does that mean that they are done trying to attack the North, or are they going for some other target?" He turned away, moving towards the horses. "Come, I want to send messages to House Glover and House Ryswell, oh and Reed as well, just in case. Then I think our current crop of... guests should be dealt with."

OOOOOO

The grumbling among the captains started up once more when she ordered the rest of the ships to wait at the mouth of the Fever river as she and Black Wind made their way upriver towards Moat Cailin. What she saw there made Asha shake her head in dismay. Around her, her crew was also muttering as they poled the longship forward in the dark, not even a single lamp visible as they nosed through the river towards their target. Even without light of their own they could make the tower that defended the moat from this direction.

That tower wasn't supposed to be there! It was supposed to be a ruin, not lit up so bright with what looked like at least 20 men on patrol up top, and what looked like a catapult of some kind up there as well. And there certainly wasn't supposed to be a wall defending the area around it, nor what looked like a dozen more men on those walls. Not according to her father, who never thought the North would repair the Moat, but it did match what the Sparr had called salt wives tales.

"The rumors were correct." she said, her voice like lead. "The moat's been repaired to defend it from this flank. Attacking that would be suicide."

"Are you sure about that captain?" said Qarl. Despite his name of The Maid, given to him because he couldn't grow even a hint of a beard, he was known as one of the fiercest warriors among the Ironborn. Yet even he quailed at the idea of attacking the prepared defense they saw further down the Fever. Still he had other things to worry about. "I'm not disagreeing with you, I'm just wondering how the other captains will react."

"I want every man among you to take a turn up top to look at that." She ordered looking around at the men around her, which was most of her crew. She had been prepared to order an attack immediately with only her own crew if she by saw an opening to do it, but this was beyond her worse nightmares. "That way every one of you can be a witness to why we won't be attacking this place. I'd rather have you all alive to be of use elsewhere rather than throw your lives way here for no gain." she said. *Paying the Iron Price only matters if we actually get something for our iron.*

Back with the rest of the fleet that news and her opinion of what it meant did indeed cause trouble. "We should still attack!" said the Sparr, slamming his hand on the tabletop. He made no move to rise or challenge Asha however, not yet, there was no need right now. If Asha kept on telling the others they shouldn't attack, then there would be no need

to directly challenge her, and possibly anger her family. "We're reavers damn it, not puling landsmen who retreat when the going gets tough!"

"And faced with that defense, what would we do? No, I realize my father wanted us to attack the moat so that we can hold that against the North so we could attack the Riverlands without fear of the North coming to their aid, but the rumors should've suggested to him that that was a fool's errand. Now that we know the rumors were true, I'm not going to throw away anyone's lives there."

There were some sneers at that, her show of compassion for her men not being in keeping with the normal Ironborn way of command, but she went on quickly before anyone else spoke up. "No, we'll head further south instead, to a much richer prize."

"Seagard!" said one the captains eagerly.

Two others however shook their heads reflexively remembering the disaster of the battle there during the first rebellion before. "If the North was ready for us there's no doubt House Mallister is as well, we'd receive hard knocks and little treasure for our steel. And other captains have already been sent to the Cape of Eagles and Ironman's Bay. The pickings are slim enough there, we'll end up fighting one another to get anything good." Dunstan said, shaking his head. But his eyes were hard as he stared at Asha, wondering if she really was unworthy of this command if she was willing to ignore her father's orders to attack the North, and seeing an opportunity.

"There are other, better targets further south than Seagard anyway." Asha tapped her map, her finger on a castle on an island off the Westerlands coast that many of the older captains recognized. "Here. If the attack on Lannisport has gone in, they no doubt either be screaming for the ships assigned to Faircastle to retake it, or screaming for aid to stop Lord Orkwood's attack. That means Faircastle itself might be open to attack."

Some of the captains murmured excitement at that idea. After all, the Westerlands were a much richer land than the North, and there was a certain symbolism to raiding Faircastle. After all, it had been the sight of the battle that broke the Iron Fleet during Balon's first attempt at rebellion.

"I know that my opinion on the idiocy of attacking the North isn't popular, and I know that it flies in the face of my **father's** orders." Asha emphasized the word 'father', forcing the captains around her to remember that she wasn't just a woman she was the only child of the King of the Iron Islands that apparently was still loyal. "So instead of simply trying to order you all around like you were landlubbers, we should settle this the Ironborn way!"

Asha stood up, throwing back her stein of mead before turning the stein over in midair to slam it down top first on the table to show there wasn't a drop left. Then she reached down, pulling out a small throwing ax from beside the table before twirling it in her hand.

That caused the watchers to shout in delight. Even the captains laughed, wondering where she was going with this, even the Sparr and those like him were silent for now. She smiled grimly internally, though on the surface she allowed a devil-may-care grin appear on her face as she began to throw the small ax up in the air, catching it on the down turn. "Who else here has ideas of where we should strike?"

"Me!" said the Sparr slamming his hand down on the table. In response to Asha's challenge he too drained his mug, turning it around in midair before slamming it down as well. "Bear Island! Their women haven't felt the iron shafts of the islands for far too long! And they can't get reinforcements to it without passing through the ocean, **our** ocean! I'd take a single Ironborn ship against an entire fleet o' northern wolf-fuckers!" That won him a roar of approval, and six or seven other captains all shouted their agreement.

"I." said Ralf, though he didn't bother draining his stein of mead, having already done so. He pointed down at the map on the table instead, tapping the inland Lake. "There's a town here, Torrhen's Square. We take it, strip the town to the ground and then leave by the river. Strike fast, strike hard, then leave before they can mobilize against us before hitting somewhere else."

That too one some murmurs of approval, though not the roars that the Sparr's more 'eloquent' speech did. Still some of the more thoughtful captains, Dunstan Drumm among them, nodded agreement. The plunder would be better from a town than from Bear Island after all, if they could get past the watch fires at the mouth of the Rys.

Asha was startled to see that the other two captains from House Kenning however didn't. Those two had voiced approval of her plan. Now, while inter-house disagreements weren't exactly unusual among the Ironborn, in point of fact they **were** the norm, but House Kenning normally moved in lockstep. House Harlaw also moved like that, so it hadn't surprised her that the five ships that they had sent north with Asha were willing to follow her.

She had **excellent** relations with the Harlaws, and most particularly their Lord, Rodrick. Asha really liked that old man, even if he wasn't really seen as a true follower of the Old Way thanks to how much reading he did and the fact he had brought in a maester to take care of his collection after septons were no longer allowed in the Iron Islands. Rodrick, Asha remembered now, had spoken out against the resumption of war with Westeros. He had in fact said they should have looked to the Stepstones or even the Summer Islands instead, but Balon had overruled him, and Rodrick would follow House Greyjoy whatever happened. *I know he sent most of his house's strength with Victarion, but he stayed behind with a decent portion of it. I might wish to stop in to talk to him before moving further south.*

"Me." said it a third voice, also reaching for to tap the map, jarring Asha out of her thoughts. Hector Sunderly had taken over command of the Sunderly ships since his cousin's untimely death, and he glared hard at Asha. Not, as most mainland lords would expect, because she had killed his cousin. No, House loyalty mattered very little among most of the Ironborn. He glared at her because Asha was a woman, that was all. "Deepwood Motte might be well defended, but it's a smaller House than most Northern ones and it's a richer prize than the Square town. You said der defenses were still there, but if'n we 'it someat nearby, they'll send der armnsmen out ta deal with 'at. Then we can hop in our ships, and get back ta Deepwood Motte afore der defenders ken backtrack."

That was actually a much more intelligent suggestion from him than Asha was expecting, but that was alright. The main objective of this little discussion after all was to make certain that her fleet didn't fall into infighting. Anything else was secondary.

"All right," Asha said aloud, catching her axe by the shaft at the highest point of its flight. "That means we've got four people here who think they know what our fleet should do, so here's what I propose. We'll face one another in the finger dance, the first to lose a finger loses their right to say what the fleet should do! The last one standing gets **her** plans adopted!"

That won a roar of approval from everyone, as well as some good natured jeering at her assumption of victory. All Ironborn liked the finger dance, the bloodier the better, so long as it wasn't your blood. One captain however bellowed, "Not enough! Give 'em a twirl!"

Asha found herself grabbed from behind then quickly spun around in place as the Sparr and the others were forced to endure the same. Then they were pushed away from the table into a quickly opening area of the deck, as her crew bellowed encouragement. The noise of the commotion reaching them over the distance between them, a few other longships began to make their way over, and one or two of Asha's crew turned to shout out what was going on.

Finally released from the hands who had grabbed her, Asha stood in one place, feeling a little dizzy as she stopped spinning. She was still able to grip the mug of mead that was pushed into one hand, throwing it back easily. She lowered it, and exchanged a subtle wink with Qarl, you hadn't been the one to pass her the mug, but he did pass the mug to the person who in turn passed it to her. Un-Ironborn it might be, but Asha meant to win this, not lose her fingers.

Two other men, both Harlaw men from her crew, were seeing to the other participants giving them mugs as well, but those were not watered down. They weren't added to very much, just enough to give it a little more kick but not enough for anyone to notice the taste. *If you're not cheating you're not trying*, Asha thought to herself, having heard that line from some merchant or other. It was true in business it was true in life, and that was precisely what she wanted to do, keep on living.

She wobbled forward, her ax held loosely in one hand. "Alright you flotsam of the main!" She said tossing the ax into the air and catching it easily. "Who's ready to dance!?" A few of her crewmen pulled out instruments and began to play a very fast jig as the Sparr moved forward to take her his place across from her.

Their axes flashed as one through the air between them, and Asha caught the one tossed her easily, twirling in place and doing a little dance. The Sparr caught his, and tried to dance but he had never been really that good at dancing in the first place and the ale he had drunk since coming aboard ship hadn't helped matters. Particularly since he hadn't drunk them on a full stomach, he put some ale in it first.

Again and again the two of them exchanges their axes and again and again they danced. The song got faster and faster the throws faster and faster, and after every fourth throw they would have to stop to be twirled around by the crowd and forced to drink some more ale. Eventually of course this proved too much, and the Sparr missed his attempt to catch the axe thrown to him, losing the tip of one finger from the whirling ax head as it passed by. There was a roar of delight from most of the crowd but a few of his own crewmen, who had clambered aboard ship during this engagement, booed and hissed, as they began to help him away.

Asha raised her hand and victory, grinning happily. *One down*. She took her place in the crowd, watching as Ralf and



Hector had their own dance, and it was Ralf who won this round.

By then several other dances were going on throughout the fleet on other ships and even one at the other end of the ship. The sight of blood, song and free-flowing ale had done its work, but Asha still had one person she had to beat. She shook herself, now feeling the effect of even the water-downed ale, and made to move forward.

But Ralf shook his head. "It's done!" he shouted aloud, holding his ax up in the air with one hand and a mug of ale and the other. "Asha's plan to hit Faircastle is good! But we came to the North to raid it, and I'm not going back south without some booty! You all now have two choices to choose from, go south to raid Faircastle with Asha, or stay here and raid Torrhen's Square with me! Think of it, and tomorrow this fleet will split, those with Asha will go with her, and those who want to stay here in the north and teach these northern pussies what the Iron Born can do will stay with me!"

Asha frowned at the way he had so easily taken control of the fleet, making it appear as if he was the leader. But she noticed how Dunstan Drumm was whispering in his ear, and realized that she hadn't been the only one to be planning ahead here. *Still*, she thought to herself as the crowd roared their approval, *at least this way we won't be fighting one another.*

So instead of pointlessly protesting Asha nodded her head and raised her own voice. "That's fine, if even half of this fleet can't get some plunder from some damn townies, then we're not real Ironborn. Make them pay the Iron Price here, and I'll go to Faircastle and we'll join the rest of our men there in showing the Westerlands pussies that it's the Ironborn who rule the sea!" That won some cheers of course, and the impromptu party went on from there.

The next day the fleet split. Of the twenty remaining ships, it astonished Asha that twelve ships agreed to go with her. It was a decent enough force, more than enough to take Faircastle if used correctly. The other eight ships, led by Ralf and including both Dunstan and the Sparr, removing all of the more dangerous remaining captains, decided to stay here in the North. That was well beyond what Asha had hoped for, and she led her now much reduced fleet back down south happily.

OOOOOO

The eight ships under Ralf made their way down towards Blazewater Bay, then from there up the Rys towards Torrhen's Square, moving at night at first to pass the mouth of the river, which was patrolled by the Northerners. This didn't let them slip by unnoticed and the warning fires flared in the night behind them. But they were going too fast all hands to oars forging upriver in a single line for that to really matter.

Ralf's longship was in the lead, with the Sparr's directly after, with the *Thunderer* third in line. It would be barely a day before they broke out of the River into the lake and from there a bare hour to make their way across the Lake to the town that was their target.

Despite what he himself thought, Ralf hadn't been the one to organize this attack. Yes, he had been the one to choose the target, but Ralf Kenning wasn't intelligent enough to have come up with the plan they were following, traversing the mouth of the Rys at night and going hell for leather up river. Dunstan knew he wasn't as well liked as Ralf, nor did he have as good a combat reputation, but he was intelligent, and more than willing to use Ralf as his front man. But Ralf alas didn't have enough charisma to really have rallied the support Dunstan had hoped for this, which is why they were only eight ships, not the fourteen that Dunstan had thought could be swayed away from the Greyjoy cunt's leadership.

Dunstan had lost a son and a brother to the Northerners when they invaded the Iron Islands, and had lost his rock wife to one of them as well. She hadn't died, she had been seduced away from him, and she left the islands with the man who had done it, a man who wore the banner of a moose on his tabard, Dunstan would never forget that. It was one thing to lose a battle, or even a war, it was another to have his own rock wife, the wife born from the Ironborn culture, to choose another man over him and break their vows.

Ever since then Dunstan had hoped and prayed to the Drowned God for a chance to avenge himself on the north. He didn't care if it was that man, in fact he didn't particularly see any way it could be, but he wanted the North as a whole to pay. He wanted to take a dozen salt wives from among their women and show them that the Ironborn were the true masters and not the Northern men. He had hidden that well under his thoughtful exterior however, but when the opportunity came, he took it.

Dunstan stood now on the prow of his longship, one hand caressing the hilt of his family's Valyrian blade, Red Rain. He was eager, almost willing the ships in front of him on so that he could take his vengeance, but that hadn't stopped him from looking around. The area around the Rys' course was a mix of slight hills and rocky terrain, with a few trees

here and there. It allowed him to see a long ways on either side of the river, and that was why he saw the first threat first.

Well out of bow range but close enough for him to see was a force of heavy cavalry, simply sitting on their horses, their lances up. The watchers in the crows nests of all the ships spotted them, and Dunstan was about to shout to ask the Sparr what he thought the Northern shits were doing. After all if they were here then they wouldn't be in place to help the defenders at the town itself.

However before he could Ralf's voice echoed back to him from his longship in the lead. "There's a barge of some kind a little ways in from the mouth of the river into the lake! I'll split off and take that, while the rest of you go on to...."

That was as far as Ralf got before there was a resounding earsplitting crash, and his ship shuddered from bow to stern, slowing down dramatically, so much that the Sparr's ship rammed his in the back, followed by the others ramming into his, none of them able to stop their forward momentum enough to halt. Ralf nearly lost his footing at the first sudden change of speed, grabbing at the tiller and cursing luridly as his ship was rammed from behind. "By the Drowned God, what happened!"

"We hit something in the water!" Said the lookout forward, staring down into the water.

"We're taking on water!" Said a voice shouting from below and then suddenly fire arrows began to fall onto the first two ships in line.

OOOOOO

Rodrick, Lord of House Ryswell smiled thinly as he shifted his lance slightly. He and Eddard had exchanged several ravens over the past few weeks, debating the best way to defend the rivers that were the true weakness of the Rills, the section of the North that looked to his house as its defender. Eddard's boy Bran had come up with an extremely excellent idea that Rodrick had grasped with both hands. It was based on the fact that the Starks now had iron and steel running out of their ears, and that wooden ships were patently unable to stop a blow from a scorpion bolt slamming into them. So what would happen, Bran thought, if a ship moving as fast as it could up a river suddenly slammed bow on to a scorpion bolt hidden underneath the water?

Of course it wasn't really a scorpion bolt, it was simply a massive battering ram of iron, sharpened at one end. Sinking and placing it had been arduous work and they couldn't do anything to hide the thing, but it looked as if the Ironborn hadn't even seen it underneath the water. That massive spear had smashed directly into the hull the first ship, not only holing it, but halting the longship's forward momentum enough to have the other ship behind it crash into it, creating a logjam of sitting ducks. Where before each Ironborn ship had been moving forward slightly separate, now they were all tangled up together, unable to go forward, and snarled together too much to move back easily.

And it was about to get worse for them. Rodrick nodded at his signalman, who raised a large red banner into the air waving it in both hands in the air.

The barge that was drifting slightly on the current of the Lake about five hundred yards away from the entrance to the lake was a very crude affair. It had very heavy gunwales barely sanded down flooring, and a heavy but very shallow keel. But for all its crude nature it was an excellent firing platform for the four-hundred House Locke archers. They were the second half of House Locke's contribution to the northern war-making effort, just as the archers they had sent down to join Ranma was the first.

The northern longbow was so large that it could not be fired from horseback, or even by a running man for the most part, though a strong enough man could do that. However, it had a range and a power that was well beyond even the bows of the Riverlands, and certainly the smaller bows the Ironborn used. The barge was well out of the Ironborn's range, but the Ironborn were not out of their range. Worse, the first ship, nor even the second, could bring their single scorpions to bare on the barge.

And the archers were not firing normal arrows. No, as soon as that flag was waved, the top was removed from over a brazier, and the men aboard the barge lit their fire arrows from the coals inside it. As one they turned, and at their troop leaders command fired. Hundreds of fire arrows soared into the air forming a small comet storm that might have been beautiful seen from afar before they landed among the first few Ironborn ships.

Those ships had the command structure and the organization to combat fires aboard their ships, but they were snarled together. Each Ironborn ship was unable to back oars because of the one behind it and unable to go forward because Ralf's ship was in their way, unable to move. His ship was now sinking, rapidly blocking the entrance into the lake, blocking even the river's current from aiding their attempts to pull away.

Again and again arrows flew, slamming into ships hulls, sails, and everything else. The sheer amount of arrows and the flammable nature of everything aboard a ship fought against the organization of the Ironborn, which was disintegrating as every captain tried to save his ship alone, not working with any other fellows despite Dustan's best efforts. His voice couldn't carry over the shouts of his fellow Ironborn or the sound of the ships continuing to scrap together, plus the growing sound of fires burning away.

Moments into the battle the Sparr died, a fire arrow catching him in the shoulder where he had been in the rigging trying to help put out a fire on the sail. Screaming he let go of his grip, trying to pull out the burning arrow automatically, only to fall away from the rigging. He landed awkwardly on his neck on the deck below. Without him there, his men began to leap overboard, landing lightly in the water below at and then making their way to the riverbank.

With fires moving back from the first few to the others, leaping now with the aid of wind from sail to sail, Dunstan realized the longships were a lost cause and ordered his crew to leap overboard. Then he shouted to the ships behind him to do the same, gathering the men together.

Rodrick smiled grimly as he waved his shield arm in the air. The five hundred heavy cavalry around him trotting forward, moving at a sedate pace towards the Ironborn who were desperately trying to organize themselves on the side of the river. On the other side another force of archers, this group from House Stark along with another force of light cavalry began slashing attacks at the groups over there.

The troops on this side of the river were apparently led by a man who was wielding a red tinted blade bellowing orders and trying to organize the Ironborn who had made it onto the river bank. But they weren't organized enough, and not one of them had any kind of polearm. Ironborn didn't use those, not even spears save short stabbing spears. They used axes, maces, broadswords and longswords, weapons that could be used to deadly effect in the close combat of boarding actions. When facing cavalry on land they tended to rely heavily on the depth of their formations to slow the cavalry charge, then pinning the horsemen in place by using their own bodies. Here they didn't have nearly enough men, nor did they have the depth that was necessary.

Three hundred yards away from the rallying Ironborn, Rodrick held up a horn to his lips blowing twice before letting it fall. A second later his lance came down and he slammed his helmet's visor down. The horses all around them began to pick up speed, their own lances lowering as the men spread out into a line, a true, organized cavalry charge going against the type of target it was deadliest against.

Not an hour later, it was all over. With their backs against the river, shocked, disorganized and demoralized from their losses and their ships being on fire behind them, still dealing with the rain of arrows from the barge and not having the training to form any kind of shield wall, Rodrick's heavy cavalry had demolished them. He had lost a bare ten men, and every Ironborn aboard those ships had died in this action.

It would take weeks to remove the burned-out wreckage of the Ironborn ships from the Rys so it could be used for transferring goods again, and longer to remove the giant spear from the river, if it was still in position. This was doubtful given the impetus with which it was hit by that first ship, but the trap had worked, and so Lord Ryswell was very satisfied, despite the amount he had to pay the Starks to create and emplace the blasted thing.

Rodrick caught a glimpse of something on the ground, and quickly dismounted, moving through the rows of bodies that his cavalry had caused. He knelt down, pushing one body to the side to pull out the blade that he had seen from his horse. Lifting it up to the light, he smiled grimly. "A Valyrian blade!" he exclaimed waving in the air. "Well lads, if the Ironborn it can take plunder when they win, I think we can do the same to them that don't you?"

He was answered by a roar of approval, and he turned back cleaning the slightly red tinted blade thoughtfully on a piece of cloth from a corpse. He looked over at a few messengers who had rejoined him after the battle, youngsters from Torrhen's Square. "I'll have messengers for you boys to carry to House Stark, as well as back to the town. I think this bit of excitement is over. After that..."he said holding up the sword thoughtfully, remembering some things Ranma and Daenerys had said about their adventures. "I might need some men to carry this down to my son."

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The portion of the northern army under Ranma's command came within sight of Seagard nearly a week after the discussion with the Charlton knight. The city was a sight to see even from here. Tall, well maintained walls surrounded it on three sides, while from here you could see several tall towers built out of the rock to defend the city from the ocean, and a large castle built on an outcropping jutting into the ocean, with a low wall connecting it to the city. With the port on both sides of the outcrop, the castle would act like Seal Rock did for White Harbor.

By this point Ranma was up and about, and had once again taken his place at the front of the army so he was there when a small delegation riding out from the city under Lord Mallister's banner came out to meet them, the horns on the walls sounding out a joyful tune. Jason reached slightly down to clasp hands with the young man running next to his direwolf, smiling. "Seven hells but it's good to see you lad, though I'm surprised to see you at all from this direction! How did you pass the Twins? Haven't the Freys sided with the Lannisters?"

"By flattening them my Lord." Ranma said gripping the other man's forearm firmly. "Lord Frey went to the trickery and deceit card once too often, we were prepared and took advantage of that."

At Jason's shocked look Ranma went into detail, after which the older man nodded grimly. "I see, yes that makes sense I suppose, and your punishments all were well thought out and just. I have a page from House Frey in my household, but I can place him with the others you sent to the sept. He is a religious boy who's confided in the septon of my keep several times that he has issues with the way the rest of his family go about their business. My maester and the septons of Seagard will be happy to aid the children, and I have an empty barracks that I can use to house your workers. Though what you wish to put them to working on, I don't know."

"Thank you, Jason." Ranma said sincerely, struggling a little to call the older man by his first name. "That's a weight off my chest." The ex-Frey boys had tried, but most were simply too young to take as pages or servants. The boy who had attacked him, Luke, had found a patron however. Hathan had decided to take him as a squire. One other boy had been taken by a knight from House Manderly as his servant for now with the possible elevation to a page later on, but that was all.

"Do you have news from further south?" Ranma asked.

"Some, and none of it good." Jason said grimly. "The Lannisters have yet to make any further move deeper into the Riverlands, but I have no doubt they are consolidating their position on their side of the Red Fork. Refugees are still making their way out. Lord Tywin doesn't seem to be in any rush to ingratiate his forces with the local populace outside those on the lands of those Houses that have bent the knee. Do you know anything about the battle that happened down at the ford of the Kneeling Man?"

"I know the Lannisters won but lost enough men that they were forced to halt their northern march." Ranma said with a shrug. "Do you have any details to share?"

Jason laughed bitterly. "You might say that. My son's report about that was rather thorough, since he was able to speak to a few survivors. The news made for grim reading. Vyren went over to the Lannisters during the battle, opening the way across the ford for them. House Dedding's been wiped out, along with all of its men. House Vance of Atranta lost the force they had sent out to war, possibly more than two thirds of their manpower, along with three of Lord Vance's four sons. The fourth remained back in their castle with his father, a man of Hoster's age. With his house's strength smashed, I have no doubt Vance will be forced to bend the knee." After that brief summary Jason went on, going into detail as he turned his horse, moving with Ranma at the head of the army.

Ranma frowned throughout the telling, while around them the wolfsworn, Domic and Rickard came up to join the discussion. Daenerys too came up, her hair covered with a hood for the moment though she continued to share a horse with Myrcella. As Jason started to wind down Jon pulled out a map, holding it out to Ranma without a word. He looked at it and his frown deepened. "House Vyren's land is down here westward of the battlefield correct?"

"Yes, their forces and a few thousand or so of the Lannister's own control that area now. House Lolliston has pulled back to its keep. They refuse to bend the knee, but they're not an offensive force at this point. House Shawney might become such in the future, but not right now."

"And Blanetree joined the defenders at the Ruby Ford?" Jason nodded in response and Ranma went on. "Interesting, and the Lannisters haven't moved since? Do you know anything specific about what's going on over the Red Fork? And what about the Knightly Houses?"

"House Nayland declared for Renly for some reason." Jason said with a shrug indicating with that slight movement that he didn't understand what the young idiot was thinking. "House Grell and House Paige moved against them, but apparently there was quite a bit of 'internal dispute' in House Paige that had to be settled first." He detailed what happened there in even greater detail than the battle Patrek having talked to many of the house's survivors after his arrival in Fairmarket.

Ranma and the others all looked aghast at the idea of family killing family like that. Daenerys was also aghast at it, and spoke up for the first time in this discussion. "The Freys truly were a disease in the Riverlands. They should have been dealt with after they refused their Lord's call to war during the War of the Usurper."

Jason looked at the woman, with that figure she could only be a woman, holding the Princess who he recognized. He cocked an eyebrow having noticed the slight Essossi accent to her words. "Indeed miss, but by that point Lord Hoster was sick of war and he had the houses which actually sided with House Targaryen to reduce. It would have taken years to bring the Twins to heel conventionally and many lives, a price which Hoster was unwilling to pay. And how are you, your grace?" he asked looking at the princess. Ranma had informed him of how to treat the Princess and Jason was willing to go along with it. He honestly suspected she too would be a bastard, but was willing to treat her as the princess she'd been raised as until then.

"I am well my lord," Myrcella replied, bobbing her head to where she sat on the horse. "Though, a lot has changed since we saw one another during the Tourney of the Hand, the vast majority of it bad."

"That's good to hear and so very true." Jason sighed, before turning his attention back to the woman holding Myrcella in the saddle, her face hidden by a hood. "And may I ask are you who you are, miss?" He asked.

From where he was now walking once more, Ranma grimaced. This wasn't going to be pretty. But Ranma and Daenerys had talked about it and hiding her heritage for longer than they needed to wouldn't look good, especially not in this case. Daenerys slowly raised her to her hand to her hood, pulling it back revealing her face, violet eyes and silver hair as Ranma did the introductions. "Lord Jason Mallister, be known to Daenerys Targaryen, my wife and queen."

For a moment Jason's face showed open shock, before hardening as he turned burning eyes to Ranma. "What are you playing at boy?" he growled angrily reaching down to grasp Ranma by the front of his armor. Behind him the men from Seagard all shifted uneasily, the wolves moving towards them and around their horses, who shied away. "You know what her father did, you know what that cost my family! My brother Jeffory burnt to death with your grandfather and uncle! And now you bring her **here**?"

"I am in no way afflicted with my family's madness." Daenerys said calmly, moving her horse forward with Myrcella sliding off to one side so as to not be a part of this confrontation. "I am not my father, nor am I any of the other madmen my family has so often produced. Incest will do that to the best of families, or the worst."

Jason growled. It was only the fact that Daenerys was a woman that was keeping him from attacking her already, and then his eyes narrowed as he saw Sunfyre and Rhaegon following a third direwolf, coming up to join the others. "Yet you bring back dragons and none of your family has ever been slow in using them and their fire on anyone who opposed you! I can understand the force that they represent, I can even applaud the idea of allying with such a force intellectually. But I will not welcome you back, your father cost me my brother, that war cost my House many lives, and I can remember the stark horror of hearing how Jeffory died all too well!"

Inwardly Daenerys frowned a little, never having understood why the idea of dragonfire was so anathema to warriors who would use wildfire equipped catapults to kill their enemies or fire arrows on ships or tents or castles. The death meted out was still the same, possibly less agonizing from dragonfire which burned hotter and killed much more quickly because of it. She didn't say that aloud of course, instead bowing her head and moving her horse forward, closer to Jason's. "My family has much to pay for, for my father's reign and beyond. But at least I acknowledge the debt, and I'll go farther."

She moved even closer now, close enough for him to attack. "After hearing that your son had been sent to Fairmarket my husband and I had thought to have you remain here to defend Seagard against any Ironborn assault. But if you are so concerned about me and whether or not I am infected with the madness that gripped my father, become my advisor."

"What?" Jason said rearing back slightly but his eyes were now much more focused, the anger dissipating into surprise.

"Become my advisor." Daenerys said ignoring for the moment Ranma's look of amusement or Rickard's look of incredulity. "None of us have a very good handle on the houses or the power structure of the Riverlands, the intermarriages and alliances, well other than the most obvious and some of the weaknesses. The Blackwoods and Bracken's for example: their feud is well-known. But how does House Vyren's betrayal impact the other houses, will that make the houses on the other side of the Green Fork more or less likely to attack us, and how will my return be seen by the houses in the Riverlands, or even the smallfolk? You can give us this information, and you can watch me for signs of fire madness at the same time."

"I'll even go further. If you see even the first hint of such, I will not fight you or try to flee, and you may cut me down where you wish." Daenerys smiled, but there was no humor in it as her violet eyes met Jason's hawk-like gaze.

"Honestly I doubt you'll ever see such. My older brother seems to have got both our portions of that particular trait of

our line. Is that all right Ranma?" She asked now making a point of asking her husband's opinion. Well after the fact, but it was the thought that counted.

Ranma nodded watching Jason closely though there was still a small, amused smile on his face. He knew that Daenerys would win the older man over in time, and she had just trapped him into service to the two of them for a while.

Jason raised one hand head kneading his face for moment. To put it mildly he was unhappy about the return of the dragons and the Targaryens, since from her talk it seemed Viserys would make an appearance somewhere down the line too, though not with the northerners. But now that he had calmed down, the woman didn't seem to be bossing around Ranma or the other northerners, and Ranma had impressed him not only with his physical abilities but his mind when they had met in King's Landing. If he was willing to go along with it then Eddard was as well. And if the man who had gone to war because of his own father and brother's deaths at Aerys' command was willing to move past that, then he would do the same.

Like Eddard, Jason had never allowed his hatred of the individuals to spread to the family they were a part of, but he had taken a hard look at the history of the Targaryens. He had decided that madness ran it, that the people who hadn't fallen to it in some form were simply aberrations rather than the norm. *Still, if she is willing to let me get close to her, to let me watch her for that and I have no reason to refuse.*

After rubbing at his face for a moment he nodded slowly, looking at the regal young woman perched in her saddle as if it was a throne, staring at him with those powerful, violet eyes. "I'll agree to that. The Ironborn haven't shown any inclination to attack Seagard itself, and my defenses are ready for such in any event." Those defenses consisted of towers armed with ship-sinking scorpions or other ballistae, several galleys on constant patrol, a city watch that could be bolstered up to two thousand from the townfolk of Seagard, as well as a thousand trained infantrymen from his house. The rest of his force he had sent into the Cape of Eagles.

"But I will be watching you your grace." Jason almost bit his lip as he said the last two words. They had simply slipped out, he hadn't meant to say them, but something about this girl, something about the way she sat there so poised and controlled, it was almost as if she was already crowned. He turned away deliberately looking at Ranma. "I would however first like to hear what exactly happened in King's Landing."

Ranma nodded, and filled him in on what had occurred to spark the battle of two truths. Here Myrcella made her presence known again, slipping into the saddle in front of Daenerys with the ease of weeks of practice. The news that her brother had admitted to having Tommen killed sparked outrage in Jason and his men, as it had every time she shared it.

The march continued as Jason joined the rest of the wolfsworn and Rickard at the front, discussing what their long-term goals and plans were. The minimum they wanted was the Lannisters pushed back, and at least Wayfarer's Rest built up to match the Golden Tooth, something that would take years. They wanted the Lannisters removed from power in King's Landing, how that could be accomplished was up in the air, but any way was good, and if they could, they wanted the Lannisters removed from power as Lord Paramount of the Westerlands. But if the war dragged on until the start of winter, Ranma and Daenerys would have to shift priorities.

"Will you ally with either of the Baratheon brothers?" Jason asked cocking his head.

He noticed with relief that Ranma didn't even glance at Daenerys as he shook his head. "No. Renly hasn't proven himself worth any kind of crown, and when this all began the coward and his friend Loras left my father to die in King's Landing." Jon and Arya both growled at that, a sound echoed by their direwolves even Ghost getting a taste of the anger that all three siblings felt.

"It was only luck and Ser Jory Cassel's sacrifice that allowed my father to survive. If Loras and Renly had stayed and fought with the fifty men, with Loras and Renly's friendships and some of the neutral houses we might've won the day and there wouldn't have been need for a war in the first place." *Well, not with the Lannisters anyway.* "As for Stannis, he seems to have made allies of a magical disposition that are not very honorable himself." Daenerys said from Ranma's other side.

Jason steeled himself and looked across at her, once again feeling a small flash of anger at her Targaryen features but her eyes were calm as she faced him. He made a small interrogative sound in his throat, and she took that as a cue to continue. She explained about the Shadow Warriors, and he looked askance at that before Ranma and Myrcella both spoke up in defense of her description, before going into how Stannis had wanted her captured well before any news of her being on that ship could've reached him through normal means.

Particularly damning was Ranma and Domic both telling how Stannis had been acting as king not even a day after his brother died. That of course indicated he had news of that event well before he could've received it through normal means, and showed a remarkable level of coldness to his brother's passing. Despite Jason knowing the relationship between the two had never been cordial, he couldn't overlook that.

After taking it all in Jason looked at Ranma again, his eyes sharp. "So you're going for the Iron Throne yourself My Lord?"

Ranma shook his head. "The Iron Throne is dead. It was a symbol of power and cruelty, sort of the Targaryens way of saying 'Neener, neener, look what we could do to you'." He said smirking at Daenerys who flushed but laughed lightly before smacking his shoulder. "No, there needs to be a new symbol, one of unity of purpose rather than brute force. What that is I don't know yet. I don't particularly want to rule the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, but I certainly don't want any of the current batch of 'kings' ruling it either."

"And don't forget my brother." Daenerys said shaking her head. "I have no idea what his long-term plans were after we left, but he's still out there. *And with his own dragon*, she thought, once again feeling that pang of grief at having left the black colored egg behind. *If only I had confided in Ranma right then! I know it would have made our escape from the city much tougher, but...*

At the time fleeing had been the obvious thing to do, but in hindsight it was her lack of trust in Ranma and his own lack of information that allowed Viserys to continue to breath and with a dragon at his side. Yes, getting out of the city would have become far, far tougher if the magisters found out Ranma was there and could close the port against their escape, but it was a decision Daenerys would regret for the rest of her life.

"Oh, this just keeps getting better and better." Jason growled.

The army arrived at Seagard several hours later, and were quickly dispersed to the garrisons and as well as being put up in the keep. The previous Frey men who had now become workers would be housed at Seagard for now while they started on the project Ranma had envisioned the moment he heard about Bran's work on the White Knife.

Later that evening while waiting for Domic and Alayaya to return from canvassing the town for information, Ranma filled Jason in on that, which caused the older man to look at him in shock. "A canal, a canal connecting the Green Fork to the ocean here." Ranma said, tapping the map Jason kept in his office right next to where Seagard was marked. "It'll be tough, and my master engineer will certainly need more men than we captured at the Twins, but they can make a start on it."

As the name suggested, much of the commerce and trade of the Riverlands revolved around use of its rivers, and Jason was no stranger to thinking in those terms. Looking at the map and thinking about what the canal represented, he knew that this plus the supply depot that Ranma had already described would enrich his family tremendously. The money that the Twins brought in for the former House Frey would possibly be doubled, adding to the money he already received from controlling a seaport.

Ranma went on to describe some of the works already accomplished up in the North and a few planned in the future. Most notable was the work on the Last River, which would allow House Umber to ship the coal that they could produce elsewhere in the North. Until the River froze at any rate, but Ranma knew Bran was already looking into solutions for that.

"We'll build a fort and stopping point where the canal intersects the river, and that will be crown lands, held by the Royal House. That will allow us to tax the trade directly from that point, though it won't be much, a few copper stars with each load. The trade itself will be so much that it doesn't have to be large."

"An amazing idea, if you can actually build it. Merely clearing a road to the Green Fork plus building a few barges there will allow me to send supplies further down few if need be."

"True, and I have some items I'd like to purchase here in Seagard that you'd have to send up to us. In bulk, to say the least. About a dozen well-crafted crossbows, and, the other's a bit more... esoteric. It's a kind of spear, with a soft iron head. I understand your house controls a small iron mine..."

The two men were interrupted by a knock on the door. Daenerys smiled there with Myrcella and young Vanessa, the painter with them. The young ex-Frey girl was looking a little bashful poking her toe at the stone of the floor beneath her while Myrcella and Daenerys were both smiling happily. "I thought you would like to see this." Daenerys said holding out a small bit of parchment to Ranma.

Jason and Ranma both looked at it and saw what looked like a charcoal sketch of Arya and Cley training together. It was amazingly good for what looked like a rapid job, and Ranma turned to Vanessa praising her for it and rubbing the top of her head affectionately. Jason took the image from him, looking on with amusement while Ranma sent Vanessa off to bed. "This is indeed amazingly good, and you she had other finished paintings?"

"Only one finished one, it was an image of a tree with forest folk faces here and there in the branches, a really remarkable work. I'll be leaving enough money here to pay for her tuition in the arts, I think Vanessa has a bright future ahead of her."

"Oh, you don't have to do that, I'm more than willing to take up the task of being her patron." Jason said hurriedly, thinking of how his wife would like a portrait, or that they needed a few tapestries on the walls in portions of the castle if Vanessa was as good at that as painting.

"It's not a bother." Ranma said shrugging his shoulders. "It's not as if that's a large chunk of the money we were able to take from the Twins, not even a large portion of the money that I took as commander." That was only 5% of the total, a shocking departure from what was the norm but it was still a large amount. The rest had been split among the men (with a portion set aside for the rest of the army) or sent back further north to be used to fund projects there.

"I insist." Jason said looking down at the sketch once more.

Daenerys laughed. "If the two of you can't agree to it, why not split the difference? That way you'll both profit later on by having been Vanessa's patron."

Ranma and Jason thought about it, then nodded seeing it made sense. Moments after that, Domic and Alayaya returned from the city. After Ranma explained what the two had been up to Jason passed over small glasses of wine, then asked them what they had discovered.

"Well for one thing, the merchants here are much more worried about the Ironborn than about the lordlings fighting one another for that blasted torture device they call a Throne." Domic laughed darkly, shaking his head. "I found a tavern where the merchants and ship captains congregate, and they are all worried about what the Ironborn could do. They're scared of putting out to sea now, but some are close to the point where they are running out of money, or their cargo is reaching the point where they need to set sail or risk it becoming ruined in the hold."

He looked at Jason and Ranma seriously. "I would recommend that you either purchase as much of those goods as you can, the foodstuffs at least, or pay for them to head up to Deepwood Motte soon. If you can be seen as favoring the common merchants, that might come in handy later on, particularly when we need to rely on their ships to bring in supplies, as we will at some point, I have no doubt. The rest is material we might be able to use as well, though I'll leave that to your discretion."

"How about a convoy system?" Ranma asked. At their looks, Ranma chuckled internally, remembering reading how the Americans had been forced to deal with German subs during WW2 in the only class he had much time for at Furinkan. "The merchants decide where they are going now, some port or other though with the Westerlands and the Ironborn at war with the Riverlands, I have no idea where that would be. Then they pay you to send some of your war galleys out with the group, then come back here after."

"The Reach and Dorne are within range of the ships here," Jason replied, nodding his head. "We can take some of their goods as payment here in fact, and given how some of it is foodstuffs that will spoil soon, we can get an excellent price for it, and then take a further percentage of their profit when they reach their destination. I'll summon them all up here tomorrow morning, that is an excellent idea Ser bard. Anything else?"

"Not much. The sailors and other people in the taverns I played in were thankful the army arrived, and seem to have taken the information about Joffrey's bastard origin as truth, though not Stannis' outlandish accusations, which I will share later on once I run them down myself." Domic looked over at Myrcella, who looked at him her head on one side in query, but he did not mention what he had already heard about those accusations. The girl had been through enough without hearing that one of her possible uncles had accused her mother of incest, one of the highest crimes in the Faith of the Seven.

"Hatred for the Lannisters seems to be the watchword my lords." Alayaya cut in, also mindful of not relaying the rumors of Stannis' propaganda to Merry. "Everyone is enraged at Edmure's imprisonment, it seems he was rather well-liked by most of the smallfolk, outside of bards anyway. And the Lannisters are seen as the most dangerous house to the smallfolk, which given their history is understandable. They only have a few factors here, not actual agents but merchants that look to the Lannisters and pass on information."



At Jason's shock, she smiled impishly. "Men tend to forget that whores have ears my lord, it's one of the reasons why the Spider is so good at his job. I can speak to them all as an equal and get even more information out of them than he." She frowned. "Well, the adults anyway, I have never been able to talk to the child whores." She smiled then, standing from her chair to curtsy toward Jason. "A variety I was happy to see you don't allow in your city my lord."

"Hmhf, no need to thank me for that, lass." Jason scoffed, looking away for a moment somewhat embarrassed. "Just made good sense to me, and I doubt the Mother of the Father look upon such as that favorably. I take it you have dealt with them?"

"I took the liberty of passing their names on to your castellan my lord, yes. Other than that, there were a few known agents of the Spider, who I talked to, and convinced them not to share any further information." Alayaya smiled grimly. "Whores are loyal to themselves, one another and the mighty coin. I am a former sister of the trade, and was able to convince them that silence could earn them more coin much more safely than continued service to the Spider."

She looked at Ranma who smirked, nodding at her. He had given her some of his portion of the money taken from the Twins to do just that. He doubted that it would silence every way Varys could hear of their march, but he hoped to at least reach Fairmarket before that news could reach King's Landing, if not Tywin. "Is that all you two have to report?"

Both spy masters nodded, and after being thanked for their efforts, excused themselves. Soon after that everyone called it a night, and Ranma and Daenerys went off to their bed.

Myrcella had purposefully contrived to place her and Alayaya in the bedroom next-door, and it was with a sigh of relief that she learned that the noise's the two made could indeed come through stone. Once again she her hands traveled down her body, tingling with anticipation...

The army spent two days there, resting and recuperating and letting the men blow off some steam. The warehouses of the town were quite busy, but there was no outbreak of violence or examples of the men acting out badly in public. The sergeants had their orders from Ranma and the other Lords, and all of them were afraid to be the first that Ranma would make an example of.

On the third day the army marched out, towards the Green Fork in a straight line out from Seagard to follow it down south before turning to make their way over lands to Fairmarket. Days later the workers made that own trek, laying out lines for the later construction to come, as the chief engineer went over the land, deciding how best to create the first Royal Canal.

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Ranma's attempt to sucker all of Tywin's scouts and spies into following the main army on the other side of the Twins didn't work as he had expected, primarily because one of them wasn't a scout but a messenger sent secretly over the rivers towards the Twins. That messenger had been sent out at the same time as the raven to Old Walder ordering him to hold the North, but of course took far longer. First he had to get over the Blue Fork using a small coracle taken from House Vypren, then the Green Fork, which was **not** an easy trek.

Coming back down was much easier, but still it had been a long, nervous trek, the messenger not wishing any of the locals to see him either way until he was on Vypren land. By the time the messenger returned to the Kneeling Man's ford, nearly a month and a half had passed, and a lot had changed.

Where before the army's camp had taken up a bare two acres now it sprawled for more than ten, reflecting the size of the army here. Many of the tents previously used had been replaced by long wooden houses, there looked to be larger canvas tents here and there, a massive paddock holding meat animals next to another holding the horses, and, a must in any camp, organized areas for latrines well away from the cooking area or the water of the Red Fork.

Though that was nothing compared to the work done on the defenses on the ford itself. Two rows of ditches filled with stakes backed by a large rampart made of logs and rocks made up those defenses. Work was going on creating several catapults, and a large wooden tower sat well back from the defensive line. It would allow people standing on top of it to view any action at the ford itself while remaining well back out of danger.

The second muster of the Westerlands had indeed arrived, giving Tywin close to thirty-one thousand men excluding the forces surrounding Raventree Hall. Eighteen thousand men were stationed here alone, ready to become an offensive force once more, regardless of the defenses they had thrown up under Lord Selmon Stackspear. He had shown a remarkable ability in creating fieldworks and organizing the army's camp, and had been placed in charge of

those areas by Tywin, who was already planning to reward the man for this. His work had kept the normal army issues with diseases down to a minimum.

Another seven thousand men were stationed in Stone Hedge as a reserve force. They would follow the first force when they went on the attack, leaving four thousand men to hold the lines here. Not enough to fully man them, but enough to hold until more men could be brought up from the rest of the army. That portion had been split into smaller packets of troops under various lords to invest Harrenhal, Darry and Harroway's Town. Enough men to hold each in turn against any army for long enough for aid to arrive.

The messenger gaped around him at the camp after giving the guards his password, but didn't have much time to take in the sights before he was ushered into his lord's presence. Tywin received the man back in his command tent, along with Daven and a few of his other lords.

All of them stared at the common born messenger after he finished speaking, but it was Tywin who spoke. "You say the Twins is 'just gone'? What do you mean by that? Where are the Freys?"

"As ter the Freys I don't know, but I spects they all be dead milord, they'd sorta have to be what with their castle bein' a ruin now. I don't know how, it didn't look nothin' like if it'd been done by fire or anything like that, 'twas almost, well some of the larger bits I saw from where I were hiding, they looked as if they'd been cut by something real sharp. **Both** sides of the Twins are gone, all save da guardhouses on either side of the bridge. The northern men t'were there on both sides housed in da guardhouses, so's I couldn't get close, sorry milord. I think they must've been left there to protect ta place. Then I's came back, being real careful not to be seen by anyone no how."

"I wonder how you did that, Young Wolf?" Tywin murmured to himself turning away already forgetting the man's presence as he peered into the distance, thinking hard.

His nephew jerked his head towards the doorway and the messenger/scout hurried out while Daven looked back at his uncle. "You seem to be taking this well, I have to say, uncle."

"The Freys could've become a problem in the future. Old Walder was never a man to let anyone else's family matter to his own. Even if one of his sons is married to Genna, I was never very happy with how avaricious the family was as a whole. Often you have to crush the snake before it can strike, and the Freys swiftly were becoming such."

"So your offer to make him Lord Paramount was just a feint of some kind?"

"It was to motivate him to actually do something for a change rather than sit on the fence until it became time to divvy up the spoils." Tywin said coldly. "It seems to have worked, though he certainly hasn't bought us as much time as I had hoped."

*And that is without the sheer speed of the Northerners to already be where my other spies are reporting them! I had thought we would have at least another month before they even arrived at the Twins, to hear that they are already past the Twins and in House Wayn's lands, is astonishing. Worse, it forces me to remain here in the Riverlands, regardless of what my agents in Duskendale have told me of Stannis' arrival. I will have to hope that the two stags will gore one another, damn it. Still, Serret will hold the capital if it can be held at all.*

He turned to his nephew looking at him thoughtfully. "We have several scouts already over the river looking at the force coming down on the eastern side of the green fork, correct?" The younger man nodded and he went on. "We'll wait here then for them to return, I want to know the composition of that force, that may let us guess how they will act. Though I doubt the Young Wolf is with them, I have no doubt he is elsewhere by now."

"And where would that be uncle?"

"Seagard." Tywin said definitively. "That family is both powerful and loyal to the Tullys, Lord Mallister can no doubt give Ranma some up-to-date information. What force he has I have no idea, but that too we may learn by looking at the force he sent down the Kingsroad. Now..." he murmured, looking down at his map, which had been updated and improved since this campaign began. "If I was the Young Wolf, where would I try to assault me? Regardless, push a thousand more men across the ford to Vypren, I want that castle held so strongly, and so obviously, no one will wish to siege it." *And if the Young Wolf uses whatever new siege weapon he used on the Twins there, I will at least have witnesses to question after regardless of its efficiency.*

"Kinsman, I think you might be overestimating the Stark whelp." Stafford Lannister said. He had led the second muster here, and ostensibly was in charge of the House Lannister infantry, but in reality he simply relayed Tywin's orders. "The Twins must have fallen to infighting, that's the only explanation for their fall, the Northerners just got

lucky, and the pup's youth will get the better of him soon enough."

"That's true milord," Lord Plumm said, watching his liege carefully. A decent tactician and lord, he wasn't a good strategist and knew it, leaving the long term plans to other people. "As good a warrior as he undoubtedly is, he's untried as a general, and as Ser Stafford said, young to boot. He won't think like you. The young think in grand charges and heroism, not **real** terms. Our army here will be a temptation he can't deny."

"You are underestimating him badly." Tywin said glancing at both men with a cold glare that shut them both up, inwardly scoffing at Stafford's attempt to seem closer to him than Stafford really was. It was obvious the man had seen how Tywin favored Damon, and was wishful to ride his cloak in order to get closer to Tywin. But that only worked one a foolish lord, and Tywin was anything but foolish.

With that taken care of Tywin went back to his musings. *Where would I attack? For certain I wouldn't attack a prepared position like this, regardless of whatever siege weapon I used in the Twins. I might look to use it again elsewhere, but I wouldn't fight where my enemy was strongest. But what would my long term goals be? That I cannot guess at, but he is a Stark. For certain he will try to relieve Raventree Hall. Or could he try to lead a smaller force directly around my army and down south, trying to pull me after him? Regardless, he'll have to cross the Red Fork somewhere, and I might still be able to force him to come to me, but I can also attempt to retake the initiative before that.*

After a moment he spoke aloud. "I want scouts out all along the Red Fork, in particular I want at least two dozen of our best men placed near Riverrun to watch for anything unusual. Other than that, Lord Marbrand, tell your son his plan is approved. Then get the army ready to march at a moment's notice..."

OOOOOO

Victarion Greyjoy was a large man with a broad chest, heavy shoulders and lanky hair down to his shoulders which was flecked with gray. He wore plate armor in combat something unusual even among the Ironborn as well as a helm in the shape of an octopus, showing his faith in the Drowned God. As Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet he was an experienced and deadly naval tactician, though not a strategist by any means, nor one for deep thinking of any type.

And at the moment, his flagship the *Iron Victory* was the only longship from the Iron Fleet among his armada. To his mind the hundred and twenty ships that crowded around his flagship were a poor substitute. The Iron Fleet consisted of longships made larger by at least half again the length of a normal longship. This made them somewhat slower, but much more seaworthy, heavier and thus harder to sink with a larger crew and much more dangerous in a fight. Worse, it was a very rare longship outside the Iron Fleet that mounted any kind of scorpion, which every Iron Fleet ship had. Without those weapons they would have a hard time standing up against a Westeros galley.

Still, they were the tools he had been given for this assault. His king and brother had given command of this attack to him personally, and Victarion would carry it out. That was his purpose in life, to obey his king, that was all there was to it. His part of Rise of the Kraken was to take out the Shield Islands that had stood for so long protecting the rich and soft underbelly of the Reach.

It was a task worthy of Victarion's skills. The Shield Islands were a formidable naval power, normally around forty to fifty ships, all of them galleys. These were backed up by fortifications on the Islands themselves, but those can be circumvented so long as you weren't stupid enough to try to sail directly into their fire.

"Sir, the ten decoy ships are moving off."

Victarion turned to the man who spoke, his first mate, nodding grimly. "Good." In his mind he pictured what would be happening. The decoy group was made of ten longships, which had made a wide arc around the Shield Islands yet unlike the rest of Victarion's fleet close enough to still in sight from the nearest towers. Their course would take them towards the river Mander's mouth, which the Shield Islands were supposed to protect.

Those ten ships would draw out the Shield Islanders to defend the Mander. *Where my ships will pounce on them, with the wind and wave against them*, Victarion thought grimly. *Encircle them on the open sea and wipe them out.* The rest of his fleet had taken a much longer curve around the Islands to position themselves southwest of the islands. They would catch the ships from behind as they chased the decoys.

The sun was high in the sky when Victarion's ships began their own turning toward land, heading towards where the Mander began. If the decoy ships had been able to stay away from their pursuers that was where he would pin them in place.

Something that most landlubbers didn't realize was how long ship maneuvers take, and how tough it was to truly move ships through large bodies of water in a controlled manner. But Victarion was a past master at it, and he smiled grimly as the *Iron Victory* hove into sight of at the twenty war galleys in the distance. Already a few of those galleys had spotted his own ship, and a few of them were turning away from their course, moving back towards him. After a moment they must've spotted the rest of his fleet coming on behind, and began to try to evade rather than seek battle.

It was too late however, his own was fleet had spread out too much for them to evade, and both the wind and wave were against their attempts to move away from the land. They were caught, trapped, with no chance of opening the range once his ships closed. Another turn of the glass later they were within range of the scorpions, and both sides began to fire.

The fire was even for now despite the galleys each carrying four scorpions apiece, against his fleet, wherein all of twelve ships carried scorpions, one each save for *Iron Victory*, which carried two at the prow. But whereas his own ships had been training extensively since he had taken command of them, the galley's scorpion crews seemed to entirely green crews. Most of their shots missed because of this but their scorpion bolts were heavier than those of his ships' and one shot was actually able to hole a longship at the far right of his formation.

The bolt slammed into the longship right at the waterline, and it went under quickly after that, the crew going to join the Drowned god as all Ironborn who died in battle on the sea did. As Victarion watched the longships on either side of the unlucky ship swarmed forward, coming alongside raking the war galley with arrows, as another ship closed, ramming into it near the bow.

Soon the rest of the Shield island ships began to turn in a battle force rather than one or two ships alone, and he nodded grim approval. Someone over there had obviously taken command somehow. Could the Reach navy have come up with signal flags like his people had? It didn't matter Victarion decided. They were too outnumbered in any event, and couldn't keep the range open to take advantage of their galley's greater long range weapons.

Turning Victarion bellowed commands to his first mate, ordering him to let up on the sail for a moment. The man did so with alacrity, knowing this did not imply any lack of courage in his captain, rather he wanted a little more time to pick out their target.

Victarion turned back and studied the battle as it continued, the other, much smaller longships speeding ahead of *Iron Victory* towards the galleys who were now moving as a unit, trying to keep the range open, but as he had predicted the wind and the tides were against them, and they didn't have the banks of rowmen who could have fought against nature's pull.

It took him a few moments, but eventually Victarion was able to pick out the one ship that seemed to be at the center of their formation. It flew a banner showing a shield of blue and white flowing lines around a center shield of tan dotted with black dots. He recognized it as belonging to House Hewett, and thought maybe it might even be commanded by that House's lord. "That one." he decided aloud, pointing at it with his heavy battle axe. "Aim us for that one, and take us in."

His crew responded with a roar, and they once again went to full sail with two dozen rowers helping the ship along, in fits and starts, throwing off the aim of their opponents, their bolts landing before and to either side of the *Iron Victory*, sinking into the water. At the forefront the men manning the scorpions waited calmly, waited until the one on the starboard side was within killing range then fired, not at the target ship but at the nearest ship to its starboard side. Several bolts more came back at them from other war galleys along the Shield Islander's makeshift line, but none struck home. Unlike their own blow which took their target right at the water line as the unfortunate long ship had been at the outset of the battle.

That ship immediately began to list sinking at the bow, and *Iron Victory* came alongside. Ropes immediately went across, yanking the two ships together with a crunch of tortured wood while archers peppered the other ship's deck, breaking the small shield line they had set up to repel boarders between the heavy scorpions that lined its deck on either side.

Victarion roared, leaping over the gunwales up onto the slightly taller war galley, his axe, a heavy single bladed weapon in one hand and a large shield in his other. "We do not sow! Feed them to the Drowned God!"

His crew responded with another roar as they raced across after him, but he had already cut down two Reach armsmen, slamming into another with his shield so hard that the man actually left his feet for a moment. Unable to regain his footing on the heaving deck Victarion finished him with a downward stroke his axe. Two more men came at him, but by that point his own were across and the battle had become a melee across the entire length of the large

warship.

With the command ship out of the action, the rest of the Shield Islands fleet wasn't fighting as a coordinated unit any longer but then again neither were the Ironborn. Unlike the Iron Fleet, which Victarion had trained extensively to act and respond as a unit, these ships had been pulled from every House and clan from both Wyks, some from Pyke and even a dozen from House Harlaw. But the outcome of the battle wasn't truly in doubt.

Lord Hewett stared around him, standing in the back of the ship staring out over the destruction of his House's naval strength as well as that of many ships of his allies among the Shield Islands. This wasn't all of the Shield Island's strength, but it was at least half, and judging by the number of ships now circling his own like so many sharks around whales, this was a full attack, not a raid as he had first thought.

Those were the last thoughts he had had time for as the melee finally reached him. He turned, raising his blade as a giant of a man wielding an axe with a horrifying sea creature helmet pushed towards him at the head of a dozen other reavers.

OOOOOO

The advantages of maneuverability numbers and the position of their fleet had proven decisive to secure an Ironborn victory. Of the twenty ships said Lord Hewett had led out against what he thought was a mere ten longship reading force sixteen had been sunk and fired outright, with four captured and their crews put to death, not one of them being worth ransoming.

Of the hundred plus ships under Victarion's command he had lost an even eighteen to his enemy's scorpions before his longships could close. The decoy vessels had also lost five ships, but all of them had been undermanned so their loss mattered less than the others. A further three ships from his main fleet had been damaged, and two of them had to be scuppered entirely due to fire damage and the loss of nearly their full crews. A group of four galleys had tied themselves together when those two ships crews had boarded one other numbers, wiping them out before more longships could come to their fellow's aid.

The fact that it had taken so long to do so was because those two ships belonged to House Goodbrother of Corpse Lake and the nearest ships all belonged to House Myre. The two houses had a long term, low-key feud, not unusual in the Iron Islands, but this one had been exacerbated a few years ago when the Goodbrother's raided a House Myre port, stealing away a dozen trained shipwrights and a lot of shipbuilding materials. Pinchface Myre and his Lord uncle had decided to let the chaos of battle take their vengeance for them.

This infuriated Victarion. Such petty rivalries had no place in wartime. Therefore he had personally executed the first mate of each of those ships, and flogged every captain save Lord Myre. They had all protested of course and tried to rally support from the other families from Harlaw, but when the Harlaws themselves wouldn't back them, that fell through. Then when Victarion offered to match any champion they choose from among their House's men, but if he won he would execute the captains instead, they had backed off, taking their punishment with ill grace but with no further issues.

Soon after that, his fleet was underway again turning back towards the ocean and away from the shore of the Reach, making for the Shield Islands themselves. His mission was to take those islands, not raid the coastline of the Reach, and Victarion would do so.

A day later his fleet came within sight of the Shield Islands at high noon. Victarion wanted it that way, he wanted the defenders of those islands to see his fleet coming, and know that their ships had lost. That would demoralize them, and make their conquest easier. Plus the watch fires warning the Reach of their presence were useless at this point, the Reach wasn't his objective, those Islands were.

What he got instead however was twenty more galleys coming out from within a port on the southernmost island of the Shield Islands, Southshield he thought it was called. He cursed angrily, having thought that the ships he had destroyed already had been the totality of the Shield Islands strength. After a moment spent counting however he nodded grimly. "They played it safer than I expected them to, but they still don't have enough ships over there to stop us."

"It'll just make the plunder all the sweeter my Lord." said his first mate. "We'll be taking many a salt wife and treasure after this!"

"Signal the fleet to spread out, I want Hurras Harlaw and his command to take the point nearest South Shield as we sail ahead." Hurras was an aggressive commander, and an excellent swordsman. Victarion had no doubt that he

would take every advantage he could to try and get past the war galleys to start attacking the port. That might well split the defenders' attentions, or simply soften them up for the rest of the fleet after the defending war galleys were sent to the bottom of the Sunset Sea.

With *Iron Victory* in the lead his fleet sailed towards the galleys, and Victarion gritted his teeth angrily as they entered scorpion range. Those galleys began to riddle his ships with fire, not being as surprised, or inexperienced as the flotilla the Ironborn had already wiped out, and with open waters and the wind aiding them they were able to keep that range open for far longer. They even moved away from their home ports, to do so, drawing his fleet away in turn. This was not only because Victarion didn't want to let them try and circle his fleet and pin it between the islands and their fire, but because his captains were too aggressive to let them 'escape'.

Victarion lost at least three dozen ships to their fire before any of his ships could close, and they kept on backing away in groups! Every group of four ships worked together moving as one with a degree of coordination that was astonishing to watch, beyond anything even the Iron Fleet could do.

The fleet he was leading now was not the Iron Fleet. Ships got in one another's way, dozens of ships tried to attack the same group of war galleys, allowing others to fire at them with impunity. Worse, once the battle became more general the ships of each house looked to their own devices rather than to aid one another despite the example he had set after the last clash.

The fourteen ships around *Iron Victory* however stayed with him, and he nodded grimly as his ship made for a group of four galleys at the center of the galley armada. It was common practice to put the commander in the center after all. As they closed his scorpion gunners exchanged fire with the war galleys, but it was clear that he did not have an edge there in this battle.

He lost seven ships as he closed, but finally they were close enough, and he ordered all hands to oars. The ship he was targeting tried to evade, but with its fellows all around them, was unable to. The heavy iron ram of his flagship took it just abaft the prow of the ship.

Almost immediately forty or so men charged across throwing over their own boarding ramp, trying to keep the Ironborn on their own ship. Victarion cut down three of them as he led his crew to smash into them, throwing them back, then trying to break a small shield line that had formed.

He ducked down underneath one sword blow to hack at the man's leg right underneath the shield he was carrying. That man screamed as he collapsed while Victarion jumped over his body, hacking away to either side with his axe to enlarge the gap. His helmet rang as a sword blow landed, cutting off two of the kraken's tentacles with a "Whang!" sound.

The blow didn't stagger Victarion however, and he turned quickly bringing over his axe to hack at the man who had struck him. The man was young, wearing only boiled leather armor as most sailors of other realms did fearing the water that was their domain, a fact that always made him smirk in contempt. But he wielded his sword with proficiency, holding Victarion off for a few moments before he stumbled on the blood of the deck. This opened his body up for a blow from Victarion's axe which nearly carved him in two.

Elsewhere in the naval battle a group of four galleys had been able to keep their distance while the rest were now snarled up by the longships, several of them having three or more longships grappling with them at close range. Those four however were taking a deadly toll, sinking ship after ship as they ranged around the battle, taking a single ship under fire from all of their scorpions along one side or another. That ended when Harras, instead of moving around the contested area of the ocean to attack the port of Southshield had circled around behind those ships. They couldn't turn fast enough and the fifteen House Harlaw ships under his command closed to close range too quickly, raking them with arrows before throwing their lines across boarding to slaughter the remaining crew.

Victarion grimaced as a spear found his side, skittering across the plate armor there leaving a dent and a bruise he would be feeling for weeks. He took that spearman's life however with a broad stroke of his axe but had to quickly turn again to bring up his shield to block another sword thrust which almost cut into his shoulder.

He backed away, exchanging blows with a man who was wearing slightly better armor than the rest, his eyes hard over a blood streaked face. His nose was broken, possibly from a punch, his helmet missing and his graybeard flecked with blood.

Ser Talbert was the heir of House Serry of Southshield, and he had been the one to lead this fleet out to battle the Ironborn, having feared the worst had occurred to the other half of the Shield Island fleet when it hadn't returned quickly. That fear had been amply proven when the longships came within sight of Southshield, and he had led the

fleet out determined to wreak a bloody vengeance on them. Talbert had underestimated the Ironborn numbers however, or how determined they would be to close the distance with his better armed war galleys. Now he knew that the battle might well be lost, but if he could slay their commander he might be able to rally the rest of his forces.

That wouldn't have actually worked. The Ironborn didn't have that much organization in the first place, and while Victarion was important as their Lord Captain and as a Greyjoy, none of the ship captains would have felt demoralized by his death save those closest allied to his family like Harlaw and those from Pyke itself.

The two men exchanged blow after blow, their shields slowly becoming useless, their armor dented, cuts and rips here and there leaking blood out on the deck below them. They kept on trying to hack at one another's bodies, trying to get in a killing blow but always their opponent moved just enough to avoid them. It was a classic example of strength and endurance against speed and skill.

Suddenly Talbert saw an opening, a pattern in how his enemy blocked. Immediately Talbert feinted, a slash-up towards his opponent's upper body and Victarion raised his axe to block, but Talbert's blade instead flashed down chopping into Victarion's left leg, nearly crippling him with that blow.

Before Talbert could pull his blade back, Victarion's hand came down grasping his own like a vice. His superior strength held the Serry heir there. Talbert looked up at his opponent, his eyes flashing with fury even as the realization of his death filled him.

Victarion took a brief moment and nodded his head at the other man in respect for his courage and skill. Then his axe came down, the blade of it burying in the other man's head with a sound like a melon being split. With a wrench he pulled his axe out again, looking around but the fight seemed to have gone out of the crew of the war galley. Dozens of men were now retreating onto the deck of another galley that had pulled up alongside this one to send its own men across to help against the borders.

His own men however took heart at his victory, and began to press them back even harder. "Feed them to the Drowned God!"

OOOOOO

In the end that battle cost Victarion's fleet nearly two-thirds of its remaining ships. He was down to a bare forty ships total but all of them were packed to the brim with Ironborn taken from other ships, and the way to the Shield Islands was open. As one of his crew tried to stitch his leg wound closed Victarion gave command of the assault on South Shields to captain Harras, whose daring action might well have saved the day though Victarion would never admit that. By the end of the day, Southshield had fallen, and the Ironborn fleet moved on to the other Shield Islands, opening the way to the Mander and the rich underbelly of the Reach.

OOOOOO

Elsewhere however, the Rise of the Kraken didn't go so well.

Alyn of House Orkwood had led 75 ships of his House, Blacktyde and Goodbrother against Lannisport. However, unlike the Shield Islands or the Reach in general the Lannisters had anticipated that the Ironborn would return to their raiding ways. The port was well supplied with catapults, scorpions and other anti-ship weapons, and Kevan Lannister as master of the Rock had ordered the port authorities to set several ships on patrol to warn of any incoming attack. They were out there even at night, with watchers on the port Towers set to watching the fires on them. If they went out, or if they suddenly grew an alarm would be raised immediately.

Despite this however, the actual attack almost did come as a surprise. Alyn led his ships in during a nighttime storm, taking out those ships at a time when the fires were already flickering from the wind and rain despite the canvas set up above them. This gained him some time, but the wind of the storm made his approach slower than it should've been, and this gave the defenders time to spot them in the darkness regardless. Warning fires were lit all around, and the alarm was raised.

Alyn however was an Ironborn captain of the old school, who believed that numbers, speed and shock value could overcome any opponent. Even with the port warned of his coming he still raced on, and most of the ships of his fleet followed him.

Nine House Blacktyde ships were the only exception. Lord Baelor Blacktyde had made no bones about not being in favor of going to war with the rest of Westeros before this began, only agreeing to have his house take part when Balon warned that not doing so would force Balon to inform the Drowned Men that he followed the Faith of the Seven.

The Faith was derided in the Iron Islands, and any such hint would have been enough for the members of his own House to remove him in a permanent fashion.

Now not wishing to face a prepared opponent Baelor took the opportunity presented to him to pull his ships back. Some of his House's ships did the same thing, having agreed with him about the idiocy of this war, but many did not, following their fellows into the port. If the attack had succeeded, he would have faced several hard questions, and would probably not have survived the questions given how the Ironborn viewed 'cowards' let alone ones with secrets such as Baelor's, but as it was, that would not be an issue.

The attackers came under fire immediately from catapults and scorpions from the towers built to either side of the port's entrance. Those ships turned and began to close with the towers, many of them being sunk before they got close enough for their archers to fire up at the towers as grapnels began to be thrown up as well. The catapults and other ballistae however continued to fire on the more distant ships, letting the other defenders handle the closer threat.

Those ships in the direct center of the natural bay's entrance were out of their range however, and they forged ahead heading for the docks. There they came under even more fire, the city watch having pulled up ballistae alongside the wharfs firing at the ships as they came.

There the city watch, much better led and armed than the city watch of King's Landing prepared to receive them. The Ironborn longships slammed into the wharf and the Ironborn jumped over the gunwales of their ships, landing on the port and charging forward to clash with the prepared defenders. Arrows flew from both sides, men went down screaming, and the fires that had been lit to light the battlefield gave everything a hellish appearance as the two sides clashed.

The defenders had numbers and the number of weapons and their own ground on their side, while the attackers had shock value and could bring more power to anyone point along the waterfront. Experience was equal, since one side had experience but the other had better training and organization. That first few moments the battle could have gone to the Ironborn as they slammed into the defender's battle line, the shock of real battle might have broken the defenders. But it didn't, the inexperienced city watch having been bolstered by armsmen from House Lannister.

Kevan Lannister had come to the port to go over the defenses himself, bringing with him half the garrison of the Rock, which had been upgraded to four thousand men since his brother had taken their initial muster into the Riverlands. He was going to leave two thousand of them here in the ports in any event to serve to back up the city watch further, and had immediately taken command of the city's defenses the moment the alarm was sounded. He split up his force, a thousand set up with the city watch in fifty man packets to bolster their line along the wharf front. This served to hold the line in the initial clash, and now training was doing the rest.

The remaining thousand served as his reserve in hundred man lots. He sent them in wherever the Ironborn threatened to break through the defenders into the city proper. After a half turn of the glass Kevan led some of the reserve himself in one such charge. He slew several, his sword work better than any of theirs before he had to duck under one blow from wickedly barbed broadsword that would have taken his head off.

Kevan was forced to jump forward into a roll as the man tried to bring his sword's pommel down on his head. The Ironborn warrior had at least a head of height on him, and several inches more in the shoulders, that blow would possibly have brained him regardless of his helmet. Realizing quickly his roll had brought him too far forward of his men, Kevan lashed out before he even stood up, his blade cutting a Ironborn's leg out from under him. Once upright, Kevan backed away quickly, his blade and shield working to keep his enemies at bay.

The Ironborn with the barbed broadsword charged at him with a roar, his blade flashing out in a lunge that would have gutted Kevan if it hit. Kevan desperately dodged to one side avoiding it, his shield taking the blow instead. The blade slammed into and through his shield getting stuck there for just a moment, the barbs on the blade now working against its owner. Kevan quickly capitalized, bringing up his longsword into the Ironborn's side, chopping through his chain mail.

A mace blow slammed into Kevan's back, sending him sprawling, but the blow didn't have enough force to break his back plate, only denting it severely. By this point his men had surged through the melee to his position, pushing the Ironborn away from him. One of them leaned down to help their commander to his feet as the others pushed forward, holding the line there until the defenders were able to reclaim it.

Kevan allowed the man who had helped him up to lead him slightly away from the battle, around the side of one of the warehouses that made up this side of the wharves. Once away from the main battle, Kevan pulled off his helm to wipe the sweat from his brow. 'Damn Ironborn fight like demons, the bastards.'



He took a glance around the side of the wharf, trying to make out as much of the battle, which wasn't much despite the fires burning in the towers and in places along the wharf. In one part of his mind Kevan knew those fires would no doubt get out of control soon regardless of the rain still coming down. But for now they were a necessary evil, letting his archers and catapult crews see their targets in the dark of night, the storm clouds having blocked the light of the moon.

After a moment spent squinting his eyes to see through the fires and shadows, Kevan grabbed a runner one of the young boys he had been using since the fight began to relay orders back and forth. "Head to the southwest tower, signal the fleet to come in and close off their retreat."

That had been his own addition to the defense of the city. Instead of leaving his family's small navy in the port he had ordered them out on maneuvers, and to dock outside the port itself in a small bay nearby. Barely big enough for them all, it was still able to hide them from anyone entering the port itself thanks to being hidden partially by high crags and its small entrance. They kept a single watchman on the highest crag to watch for signal fires, but he was the only one visible even during the day from the ocean or the north.

Now those ships would spell the death knell of this attack and if Kevan had his way every Ironborn reaver out there. Kevan had not forgotten the way the Ironborn had burned out Lannisport during their first rebellion sixteen years ago, and was more than willing to pay them back in like coin. And Kevan had found himself thinking remarkably bloodthirsty thoughts since the death of his son Lancel had gotten back to him.

The runner nodded and raced off through the fire lit gloom of the battlefield, while Kevan turned back to business.

The fight was slowly going against the defenders, with more and more Ironborn ships getting clear of the defensive towers near the entrance to the port, but then the ships of the Lannisters arrived closing in behind them, their scorpions firing at the Ironborn ships yet to reach the port. With them snarling up the sea of the port forcing the Ironborn to deal with them rather than land more troops, Kevan and the city watch were able to sweep the wharfs clear of Ironborn then take the ships that had landed.

Despite being mostly green, the number of weapons on the galleys proved to be a enough of a force multiplier that the Lannister fleet and defenders were able to win the day. In the end they took over a hundred captives, all of whom were put to death quickly, and not a single ship escaped. The military strength of the island of Orkmont was wiped out that day and House Goodbrother and House Blacktyde took further losses, losses they would need decades to recover from. This would have long reaching consequences not only for those islands, but the rest of the Iron Islands, though it would be several months before those reverberations were felt.

The only survivors were those House Blacktyde ships under Baelor. Having pulled back at the onset of the battle Baelor had gotten clear. Only two ships of the incoming galley's fleet saw them before they were too far away to be seen in the nighttime storm. Those two war galleys went after them, but were lost with all hands.

Back in Lannisport as dawn broke Kevan stood on the shoreline, staring out over the still burning wrecks of the Ironborn ships, more than a dozen merchant vessels, several of his family's own ships that had been hulled or sunk through various means, and the dozen or so Ironborn vessels that had been taken intact. That was a sign of the material cost, the cost in people was much worse.

The city watch had been decimated, and the crews of many of the merchant vessels had died trying to protect them, as had a little under half of his house's armsmen that he had arrived with. The city could make good those losses, but slowly. And the damage to the port itself, the clogging of the wharf front, would mean weeks of hard work to get it back in working order.

Kevan's face was set in grim lines as he continued staring out at the wreckage of the battle, not even turning his head to address the men around him. "Send for a horse and messenger, we'll have to send a message about this to my brother, and I may have a suggestion on how to respond..."

OOOOOO

Balon Greyjoy was a gaunt elderly man of Tywin's generation. He had a hard face set with dark black eyes and framed by long gray hair flecked with white that hang down past the small of his back, lips a thin, bitter line in his pock-marked face. Bitterness and resentment, coupled with a desire to turn back time to a period where the Old Way ruled all, dominated Balon and had for decades.

He had never truly accepted Westeros defeat of his rebellion, seeing it merely as a setback, not a true defeat and rather being contemptuous of Robert's having allowed him to live and never really grinding the islands under as Balon

would have done in his place. He resented the North for taking his son and no doubt turning him into just another weak greenlander. He had never forgiven Stannis for the destruction of the first Iron Fleet, which had spelled the death knell of Balon's first rebellion. And he bitterly resented the Redwyne fleet for aiding the Shield Islands in repelling the Ironborn's first attempt to take them during his rebellion.

Most thought the tide had truly turned against the Ironborn's bid for freedom later on, after the Redwyne navy and the Royal navy defeated Victarion at the Battle of Fair Isle. But it was the loss of momentum from their defeat at the Shield Islands that truly began to turn the tide against them. Before that, the Ironborn had truly become the reavers of old, feared and fearless, sweeping all before them. After that, their aura of invincibility was gone.

Or So Balon thought, and it was that wrong that Balon was personally avenging now, while at the same time destroying the largest of his opponents on this side of Westeros. He stood alongside the steersman on the *Great Kraken*, his flagship, a tankard of ale in one hand and the moon in the sky above him shining down. Slightly larger than even the *Iron Victory*, her bow was ornamented with a great iron ram in the shape of a kraken. It also had two scorpions set on a diagonal of the prow on either side of the ship, and another right behind where Balon was standing now pointing back down the ship's course. All around The *Great Kraken* the ships of the Iron Fleet, which he had taken command of personally, moved through the nighttime waters like the incredibly dangerous predators they were, along with twenty other ships pulled from various minor houses to add to the weight of this attack in a very special way.

The Redwyne navy was in many ways the most dangerous of the Ironborn's opponents, which was one of two reasons Balon was leading this assault and doing so with the Iron Fleet. It would take more than two months for the Royal Navy to round the Straits of Dorne to assail them, if they could at all given what rumors said the feelings of Dorne were for the bastard girl's execution, which removed Stone face Stannis from consideration. The Lannister fleet, while having decent ships, didn't have the numbers to be an offensive force, nor the training.

The Redwyne navy was the third-largest fleet that operated in the seas around Westeros, even larger even than the fleet Balon was currently commanding, and was a veteran force with excellent leaders. In a straight up fight Balon knew that he might lose despite a single reaver of the Old Way being worth a dozen Westeros pussies. But he had no intention of fighting a straight up battle. That was why his fleet was moving so slowly right now.

They had come out of the Sunset Sea west of the Arbor, and now were sailing back and forth waiting an appropriate length of time for the first wave of the attack to go in. That attack was going to be accomplished through use of several captured merchant galleys that his house had taken command of once war had been declared. That had allowed them to keep word about their mustering from reaching the mainland, and had given him the ships needed for this attack. All of those ships were packed with hay, strong spirits and other flammables, and crewed by men his brother Aeron Damphair had chosen for this task.

Drowning was a central part of the Ironborn's worship of He Who Dwells Beneath the Waves. Newborn were regularly given to the ocean, dunked in salt water. Drowned Men, the priests of the Ironborn faith, were drowned in truth, then resurrected, really resuscitated, and there were men among the faithful who had gone through the same ritual but did not become priests. Normally when a man was resurrected he would continue his life as normal.

These men, men guilty of cowardice, had been ritually drowned, sanctified to the Drowned God, before being revived, and had been... changed in the doing. Where before they had been mortal, and had mortal fears and desires, now they lived only to carry out their orders and regain their honor before dying for the glory of the Drowned God.

Aeron and his fellow Drowned Men had never shown any sign of these powers before and it had come as a shock to Balon, but it had renewed his faith in the Drowned God and indeed the faith of all of those men who among his captains who saw them. Aeron had confided in his brother that the power of the god was growing to a level he had never heard of, and that this new ability to strip men of their base fears and survival instincts was a sign of that. Neither man understood that it was simply a sign of magic returning to the world, not something attributable only to their own religion. Instead they both saw it as a sign that it was time to rise up and show the world that the Old Way was alive and well, and that the Ironborn were a power again.

Turning his head, Balon looked over at his Aeron. He was kneeling in a circle with his fellow Drowned men, fifteen of them. Originally they had all been kneeling in a circle around a wide, flat bowl filled with saltwater, but now Aeron was the only one upright. Balon took a moment to look at the bowl, which despite being nearly flat looked extremely deep for some reason, like Balon could reach inside and not touch the bottom of it despite knowing that he should only have barely been able to get his knuckles wet.

The Drowned Men had been practicing something Aeron called 'Reading the waves'. From what Balon understood, the bowl was supposed to represent, or become or something like that, the ocean, and the Drowned Men sent their

minds into it, feeling out what was happening in the ocean beyond the sight of normal men, an amazing gift from their god. It was exhausting however, the distance and time spent doing it draining the men as if their endurance was pouring out like in a battle, and could kill someone who looked too far or too long, something Balon found fitting. It was simply another way to pay the Iron Price, even if the plunder gained was information.

For now, Balon had more worldly things to think about than the power of his religion. "Well? Be the fire ships in position yet?"

"The ones we be feelin' from here by the time the fleet's in position, aye." The younger Greyjoy answered, coming out of his trance and looking around at his weaker brethren coolly, before pulling at his hair, which looked drenched despite his not having wet it with salt water since he sat down to this task. "You know we can't ride the waves far enough ta feel the ships going around the weak Seven-worshipping fools Island. Still, I be thinkin' its time ta go brother. Time for the kraken to rise and take its due, time for the Iron Price to be paid."

Balon looked up at the sky, judging their position by the stars above and nodded. He turned to his signal men, who raced to their places signaling the rest of the fleet to turn their courses once more towards the Arbor, the home of House Redwyne.

OOOOOO

Four fire-ships had been designated for each port along the large island's circumference. Their job was to get in close and then fire their ships, taking as many other ships with them as they could. Most of these attacks worked to the terrible cost of House Redwyne. Not a single defender realized what was going on until those ships docked. At which point the penitents, the name the Drowned Men had given to these men when they revealed their powers, went into action. They fired the ships, then went up onto the wharf and tossed lit bundles of strong spirits onto the nearest ships or at anything that looked remotely flammable.

Fire was one of the deadliest weapons of war at this point in history. That was one reason why wildfire was such a terrible weapon, why three dragons had allowed the Targaryen siblings to conquer Westeros so many centuries ago, what allowed Valyria to become the power it became. And ships and docks were even more susceptible to it than the rest of the city. Tar, pitch, dry ropes, dried and resin covered woods, all of them made up ships and were in abundance in any dock all over the world, and all were incredibly flammable.

Those fires quickly spread, so fast and so sudden that in many of the ports so attacked it took the people time to realize it had even been deliberate, let alone organize to fight the fires. Dozens of ships burned to the water line and hundreds of sailors and dock hands died or were burned so much as to be useless in every port along the western side of the Arbor. This cost the Redwyne Navy not only ships but coordination, as the ports didn't realize that all the other ports are being attacked in similar manner, the local lords and commanders trying desperately to get the fires under control rather than spend precious moments communicating with their fellows.

However Vinetown, the largest port of the Arbor was on the far side from the attackers. They had received warning overland from the first town to be attacked like that, Starfish Harbor. This and Paxter Redwyne's quick response allowed his navy to be alert to a similar attack. Naval cutters went out to every ship coming into the port regardless of what they looked like, and when one group of naval inspectors didn't return, their parent ships knew they had found the fire-ships attacking the city.

Stopping those ships before they could close with the wharfs still cost the fleet three ships, but their crews were saved and added to the fifty other ships of the Redwyne Navy housed in that port.

Paxter scowled looking at the burning wreckage of three of his family's ships, which had physically blocked the ships that carried such deadly cargo. He had just finished listening to a report from the men who had fought against those ships, and the men on them, and was simply incredulous at what he had learned. "Madness." he muttered, shaking his head. "Utter madness. What kind of maggot destroyed those man's brains for them to willingly sacrifice themselves like that? Even fanatics wouldn't want to die in fire like that or drown as some of them did."

"I don't know my. Lord" said the captain of the *Arbor Queen*, his flagship. The man was a second son from the green-apple Fossoways, and his normally warm expression was grim as he looked at the sight of the burning wrecks. "But if it was both here and Starfish Bay, so it wasn't isolated incident."

"No, it wasn't." Paxter replied, nodding at the other man. "Get the fleet under way Captain. I will want four converts to turn northwards and head for the other bay of the Arbor. If they haven't come under this kind of attack they are to be warned, and their ships gathered together. The rest of us will start southward and pick up ships along the way. This attack started near Starfish, and it's reasonable to expect that a follow-up attack will come from that same direction."

Paxter's prediction was proven correct as they rounded the island a day later. There in front of them a battle was going on, with a few remaining defenders of Starfish Bay defending against a numerically superior opponent. "Ironborn!" Paxter spat to one side, looking much more like a common born sailor just then than the Lord of one of the most powerful Houses of the Reach.

With him Paxter had ninety ships. Unlike the dedicated warships of the Shield Islands however, the Redwyne Navy also served in peacetime as a trading fleet, and so many of those ships were not built nearly as heavily, nor as heavily armed. But these were armed with scorpions in the main and their crews, if not true warriors, were all highly experienced sailors and skilled in using them .

Against them the Iron Fleet had 120 ships, not having lost any yet to the defenders of the port, nor having come under attack from any of the other ports just yet. The fire ships had gutted several of those ports outright, while in others they had simply disorganized and wounded the defenders, forcing them to remain home. So though he and Balon didn't know it, Paxter's fleet was the only formed defense of the large island at present.

Even if they had however, neither admiral would have changed their orders for this battle. Both fleets made for one another, with the 20 or so Ironborn ships that weren't of the Iron Fleet racing ahead, and the rest sticking to a disciplined mass coming straight at the Redwyne Navy. Balon didn't care about that, but the organization instilled in them by his brother stuck for now.

The Redwyne Navy's own lack of organization and discipline showed, with several of the converted merchant vessels falling back allowing their larger warship companions to forge ahead, breaking their line of battle a little. But Paxter was a canny man, and he ordered his fleet to keep the range open to allow his scorpions to pummel the enemy. In this manner they were able to send fifteen ships to the bottom before the rest of the Iron Fleet got within its own range and began to fire back, the bolts of both fleets 'Fwipping' through the air, most missing, but many hitting, doing horrendous damage to the ships they slammed into.

The quality of their respective ships was soon apparent. A warship was extremely hard to sink with any shot that didn't hit directly at the water line, and even there the Reach vessels were armed to take at least one shot and keep going. Merchant vessels, whalers and wine cogs however were not so well-armed. Paxter lost several ships in that first opening salvo, and that's attrition rate continued as the Iron Fleet closed, but more of their ships began to go down as well.

Paxter stood on the *Arbor Queen's* aft-castle gazing at the battle through a spyglass, his eyes narrowed. "Order the converted ships to fall back save the wine cogs. Warships are to keep the range close with the Iron Fleet, our fellows will bombard them from a distance, while the wine cogs attempt to do to them what their fire ships did to us."

The signals went out using various colored flags hung from the tallest mast of his flagship. The fleet slowly reformed along the lines he had set out, too late for some of the support vessels, another ten of which had gone down with all hands under the pummeling of the Iron Fleets scorpions and archers. Several small tangles of combat had occurred as well when ships of opposing sides crashed into one another, with the larger heavier longships able to take the punishment of being rammed by a warship or vice versa and still remain floating. The last few non-Iron Fleet ships sank at this point of the battle, leaving the sea to their heavier fellows.

A few wine cogs got close enough to a few Ironborn longships before their crews, the smallest needed to sail their cogs, lit their cargo on fire before abandoning ship. This cost the Ironborn seven, possibly nine ships before the opposing captains realized the small wine cogs represented a real threat, and began to target them especially at range, not allowing any more to close.

Paxter ordered his captain to keep the flagship to the rear of the ongoing battle, the better to keep control of the overall battle. This served his side well for the next few hours until a force of five Iron Fleet ships made their way around the main battle. Two of them rammed two of the nearby warships, opening the way for the other three to sail through to assault the *Arbor Queen* personally.

Despite all the maneuvers Captain Fossoway could do those ships brought them to battle. He sunk one of them though with several bolts from his scorpions slamming home into the enemy ship's sides before the others could close to bow range.

Paxter ducked for cover as arrows began to fall onto his ship's deck, cutting into his crew. They returned fire just as accurately, and the *Queen* had more men than even that the biggest Iron Fleet ship could. Against one attacker, his flagship would've won readily enough even if it was rammed by its enemy, but against two coming from both sides?

One ship was able to come close enough to throw across grapples, and men hurriedly went to work cutting the ropes

away as the men on the other ship began to heave trying to pull the two ships together. However the other Ironborn ship, one that had a battering ram shaped like that of a kraken, slammed into his ship amidships from the other side, snarling the two ships together. "We do not sow!" That crew shouted, charging across the heaving deck of the front of their ship onto the deck of the Arbor Queen.

Two knights in full plate armor stood in front of Paxter, the older man having not wielded a sword himself in years. The *Arbor Queen* also had several other heavily armed knights and a hundred trained armsmen armed as well as the Ironborn were along with the crew that was armored in leather instead. They held the attackers at bay where they surged across the ship, the deck of the ship become slippery from the blood being spilled on it.

But this action took so much attention from the defenders that the second ship was now able to grapple with it on its other side, those men charging across in turn. And in this kind of battle, sharp up close and on an uncertain surface, the Ironborn had few equals, especially when numbers were on their side.

Paxter gripped his sword as he saw the battle of the deck slowly turning against his men, the weight of numbers and the greater experience of the attackers in this kind of battle telling. The overall battle was still in doubt, but this portion of it... Paxter shook his head holding his sword tightly in one hand, wincing a little at the weight of it. Still, Paxter would not go down without a fight, and he would be damned if he let the reaving bastards take him captive.

His knight protectors charged forward's as the Ironborn closed, cutting down several with their heavy broadswords but being pressed aside and backwards by the weight of the numbers attacking them. Paxter himself moved forward, waiting for an opportunity and took it when he saw one of the Ironborn turn aside to battle one of his knights. His sword took the man in the side, piercing his chain mail into his guts to send his body crashing to the deck to join the numerous other bodies there.

"We do not sow, we pay the Iron Price and reap our vengeance! The sea itself is rising, and we its children will take our rightful places." Said a dark, cold voice in heavily accented Westerosi. Balon Greyjoy burst through the melee to face Paxter. Unlike the other old man he held his sword easily, and wore chain mail with just as much ease. He was winded from the battle, but that was all. "You are the first, you won't be the last."

"For the Reach and the Seven!" Paxter said grimly, bringing up his blade and attacking. Balon batted his sword to one side, and with contemptuous ease ran the other old man through his unarmored chest, his sword completely passing through the other man's body and out his back.

OOOOOO

Despite no longer having Paxter's commands keeping them organized, the rest of the Redwyne Navy fought valiantly. Not even the secondary ships retreated from the battle, and they wreaked a bloody toll on the Iron Fleet. By the end of the day only 32 Iron Fleet ships remained. Still, they won the day which was all Balon cared about. The Arbor was open for the taking.

Unknown to Balon however, many of the Arbor ships had retreated entirely from the island, under command of Ser Desmond Redwyne. Not having any idea of the strength of the force attacking the island, and not being contacted or seeing any sign of the fleet his Lord grand Uncle had led around the island's southernmost edge, he ordered every ship from every harbor along the western shoreline of the island to remove itself from the island, heading towards Oldtown for reinforcements before coming back.

But right now, he only had six true war galleys, coupled with two dozen converted ships, and only his warships had full crews. Moreover, more than sixty ships of the Redwyne fleet were elsewhere when the attacks began, going about their business as a trade fleet or other jobs. Many of those were working the ocean near the Reach at other ports, and would hear about what had occurred. Eventually the Redwyne navy would gather itself. Then they would be back, with vengeance in their eyes and ships full of soldiers to reclaim the Arbor if need be and smash the Iron Fleet if they could.

OOOOOO

To combat the Westerlands raiders causing so much chaos and death along the western border, Willas had first traveled upriver on barges to Goldengrove. He picked up a further thousand men from the Houses whose lands he was moving through, mostly light infantry and a few archers, but House Graceford had given him a force of four hundred heavy cavalry under Ser Thomas Graceford, Lord Graceford's eldest son. Being a very religious house whose faith was mostly towards the Mother, Graceford rarely took part in wars, but were more than willing to take the field against bandits and other groups who preyed on smallfolk. They also offered something even more valuable, enough horses to put a mount under every one of his men.

Once on the river, Willas sent messengers out for scouts that knew the area, local constables or any farmers that wished to fight back to meet him at Goldengrove, as well as every horse they could find to put a horse under his infantry forces, since that would allow him to move them faster that way over small distances. This was easier said than done however, the raiders had been extremely thorough in burning every farmhouse they could find and killing every person they could find, or worse in the case of the womenfolk.

The once fertile area of the Goldengrove had had something like three hundred farmsteads ranging from small to large in the last tax census of the area which Willas knew since he had helped conduct the last survey. If there were more than twenty farmsteads left unburned, and more than two-hundred men and women out there alive he would be astonished. Luckily several families had been able to retreat to the safety of Goldengrove, but still the destruction had been horrible to pass through for the little time it took them to reach Goldengrove from the river.

It had filled him and his men with a fierce desire to find the reavers and Willas set about that task with alacrity. He split his now mounted infantry and archers up into small groups of two hundred plus fifty heavy cavalry, each of which were assigned over a hundred light cavalry along with local scouts to find the Westerlands bastards before calling in the other forces.

Because of his strict orders to the scouting groups not to engage the raiders directly, they were able to find and report the reavers position to the larger units. In this manner his men surprised several dozen smaller groups of reavers calling in the slightly larger groups of mounted infantry to hammer them under. Willas' men attacked swiftly, always during the day and his ability to bring more power to a point like this allowed him to wipe out several thousand of them over the next few weeks. After that, thanks to survivors of those fights somehow linking up with them, the remaining reavers began to gather together once more in ever larger groups. Willas responded by doing the same.

After the first week Willas moved his personal command further south and east of Goldengrove. His force of four hundred mixed archers/infantry and two-hundred heavy cavalry found and destroyed any force that his scouts found heading deeper into the Reach. This, combined with the work the rest of his force was doing finally convinced the reavers to join up into one body, never realizing that he had only been fighting them with about half of the force available to him. The levees and light infantry forces he had gathered up had yet to be used but now they would be to finish this campaign.

The mercenaries had decided to retreat to Ivy Hall, the seat of the minor Noble House Kidwell, which they had taken while it's lord and most of his men was away to war with Lord Rowan. The hall was a simple two-story building with a low, ivy covered stone wall set around it in the center of an apple grove of rather impressive size, at least five acres across, with about a hundred yards of space cleared between the wall and the apple grove.

The true owners of the hall were dead. Lord Kidwell's lady had been killed no doubt after being used by the mercenaries like so many women had been in this area. Willas had already penned a note to the man informing him of what happened in his absence. It was not the first such letter, and Willas took very cold comfort in the fact he only had to write such letters to those of noble birth. The toll among the smallfolk was so much worse, and so uglier at times. Willas was getting very tired indeed of seeing the aftereffects of the reavers work.

Thanks to the fact that every battle against them had so far been during the day, Willas decided to go in against the reavers at night this time. He had two reasons for this, one because of psychological reasons, he had basically been setting them up for this after all. The second reason was because Willas was a very, **very** paranoid man. He preferred the word 'careful' of course, but his commanders called him paranoid behind his back. Willas was fine with that, because he couldn't get rid of the feeling that the next shoe had yet to drop here, and was wishful to survive such when it did.

Willas left several dozen scouts scattered all around the small keep in every direction, and each one of them had special fire arrows. The bundles the tips of those arrows had been wrapped in had been treated in chemicals back in Highgarden that would make the fire of the arrows a bright red, a perfect symbol of danger at any time let alone at night. That was surprisingly expensive to prepare, costing as much as a full suit of armor for a knight from the maester who had created them for him, but he felt they would be worth the expense if the worst occurred.

This kind of forethought and organization also marked the way he organized the actual assault. "You all know what to do." he said simply looking at his troop leaders. "First light infantry and archers. We want to see if you can dare the reavers to come out and face you. If you can, pull back in a controlled manner. Then we'll hit them from both sides with two wings of heavy horse."

"And with us my Lord." said the loan infantryman in the command circle. Unlike the light infantry that comprised the majority of Willas' forces, he wore heavy chain rather than the studded leather of the light infantry or archers. He was an older man of Mace's age, but that was all he had in common with Lord Tyrell. Where Mace had gone to seed

rather badly, Toulev Smithson was built like a rock, heavily muscled with little fat on him with close cropped hair of solid silver. He had fought in the war of the Usurper and worked as an armsmen for the Redwyne Navy after that, so was an extremely experienced man.

Though he was of smallfolk stock, Willas had made him the commander of his heavy infantry, over the objections of several of his knights. They hadn't objected because they wanted the command of course, their contempt for infantry was rather strong, though the men Willas had chosen for his command was much better at not showing it than most. They objected because part of that was Willas stating that as leader of the heavy infantry Toulev would be able to give them orders if Willas was busy elsewhere. Willas however had waved off those concerns, and the man had proven himself over the last few weeks, leading one of the smaller mercenary hunting groups with ease.

"Indeed, we'll keep back most of the archers at first, and bring them up with the heavy infantry. If we can catch even a portion of that force out in the open and wipe it out in this manner, taking the holdfast away from them will be that much simpler. We haven't yet seen that many archers among them, but be wary nonetheless."

More than one knight rolled his eyes at Willas' rather old-womanly concern. But he hadn't led them wrong yet and the knights and minor lord's sons here had also gotten some valuable leadership experience over the past few weeks, so knew better than to argue.

An hour later the assault began, with the few archers Willas sent forward with his light infantry beginning to fire at the watchers that they could see up on top of the hall. The apple grove and the darkness of the night had allowed his men to move up under cover to take the defenders by surprise. Cries abounded through the night, as the mercenaries moved out of their temporary dwelling to clash with his light infantry first along the low wall then further into the open area around it.

Watching this from further back in the grove Willas smiled grimly, as each group of sixty men followed their troop leaders, fighting as groups, rather than individuals who just happen to be standing next to one another. They covered one another's backs, forming small shield walls here and there against the mercenaries. Who, Willas noticed, had more men than he would have thought at this point.

*Or perhaps all of the men here came out to attack my troops en-masse? That would make sense given the lack of discipline they've shown so far. The Mountain was never a very organized beast after all. That bit of information had been gleaned from several prisoners over the past few weeks, adding to the grim delight the men took avenging the area on the monsters-in-men's-clothing. Regardless, it's time to end this. "Message for Ser Thomas and Ser Grendel. Tell them to attack."*

Five minutes later the heavy cavalry burst out of the apple grove to slam into the Westerlander reavers in the open around the hall, and Willas frowned a little. The light really wasn't good despite the fires the mercenaries had kept around, giving them some light to see by but also destroying their night vision. However, it looked as if his cavalry units hadn't been able to stay as organized as he would've liked. *Still, after charging through woodland I suppose that is to be expected.*

They still did a number on the mercenaries, who obviously hadn't expected to face heavy cavalry in the middle of a nighttime battle like this. He saw hundreds of men go down in that initial charge, and more follow immediately after. "Excellent!" he shouted, slapping his hands together, then nodded over to Toulev. "I believe it's time for us to get it stuck in as well Toulev."

The older man grinned at him. "Aye milord!" He waved his hand in the air, shouting aloud over the din of battle that was happening a bare two hundred feet ahead of them through the woods of the apple grove. "All right you louts! Forward! For the Reach!"

The heavy infantry answered that call with a will, rising out of where they had hidden themselves lying down in the shadows of the trees. Willas moved with them, his lame leg slowing him down slightly but not mattering near as much as if he had to rely on it to grip a horse and battle. They reached the front quickly, slamming into the mercenaries moving around the small lines of light infantry. More archers moved up with them now raking the top of the holdfast with enough arrows to keep the defenders own archers down while also being able to fire at many of the reavers at the back of the melee.

Willas raised his blade, blocking what looked like a mace in the dark though they head was a strange design. He didn't have time to concentrate on that however, quickly pushing the mace aside and bringing up his shield into the other man's forearm, breaking the bone there. The Westerlander screamed, but that ended abruptly when Willas brought his longsword back around to slice the man's throat open. The next moment he dodged under a sword thrust from a greatsword, then lunged upright quickly, wincing as his lame leg was forced to take too much of his weight for

a moment. His own sword point slid into the eye-slits of the visor of the man he was facing.

The next moment Toulev was beside him with three other men, and they battled their way forward, linking up with two knights who had been unhorsed in the darkness. Both men nodded thankfully to Willas, pointedly ignoring the smallfolk infantry around him something that caused Willas to frown. Nonetheless, the battle was going well.

Moments later however Willas was disabused by that notion. At that moment he chanced to look up into the sky and saw from the northeast that several of the scouts had fired off their warning arrows into the nighttime sky. Cursing Willas wondered if possibly it was a false alarm of some kind. *We're winning Warrior-dammit!* However Willas' common sense came to the fore, and he realized he could ill afford to ignore such a warning.

Reaching down to his waist Willas pulled out the horn that he had kept for just such an emergency. Looking around he blew it five times in quick succession first two short blasts then along one then two short blasts again. Shouts of surprise and astonishment answered that call, and he frowned as he didn't see the cavalymen pulling back as they should. He blew it again in the same signal this time louder and finally the knights that made up the heavy cavalry began to respond, pulling back into the apple grove breaking contact with the mercenaries.

The infantry too began to fall back, but they had a **much** harder time of it. The former Mountains men didn't want to let them go. Willas cursed in the thick of it for a moment before Toulev and another man killed two of his attackers, buying Willas sometime to pull back, his lame leg once again hampering him. "Best get out of here my Lord." Toulev said grimly, moving with Willas as more men covered their retreat from the front line. "Especially if we have more company incoming. These bastards don't seem to want to let us go though."

"I can see that." Willas said, bringing up his shield to block an errant arrow shot from somewhere in front of them. "You have a messenger somewhere?"

A young squire ran up to them, the younger man's short sword dripping with blood. "My Lord?"

"Gather all the archers you can, one heavy volley straight at the enemy from point-blank range. That'll buy us time to pull away." Within seconds the archers had coalesced once more behind the infantry line, and the squire shouted aloud, his voice barely carrying over the clamor of battle. "Ready my Lord!"

"Infantry down!" Willas bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Toulev and the troop leaders took up the call. Quickly every infantryman along the line, mostly heavy infantry by this point the light infantry having fallen back with the cavalry, crouched down while raising their shields. More than a few died at that moment, overcome by the enemies they had been clashing with, but most had been astonished at the sudden move to hunker down. Then bowstrings twanged behind them, and that first line of enemies fell like wheat before a scythe along with many behind them.

A second later Toulev grabbed Willas and began to pull him away, while the rest of the infantry and archers fell back through the apple grove. They soon reached the area where they had left their horses. At that moment they learned it truly had been a good idea to pull back when they did.

From the northeast came the shouts and clamor of battle, along with unfamiliar war cries as more enemies appeared on that edge of the apple grove coming towards them through the trees, catching small groups of infantry and a few knights that hadn't pulled back in the fight direction. From the sound of it there were more attackers than there should have been if they were just the Clegane men they had been hammering for the past few weeks. *This wasn't a simple trap then*, Willas thought grimly. *This was something that the old lion must've set up, the Clegane rabble as bait and to test the waters, and this other group to destroy any unwary force sent against them.*

Willas motioned over to the heavy cavalry leaders who had gathered there, disorganized in the middle of the apple grove but still a viable force. "Split into groups of five gentleman." he said, quickly thinking of a scenario to get them out of this trap. "You won't be able to form for a charge in this grove, but you'll still be able to hopefully hold off any attacker that tries to encircle us with your heavier armor and reach. That is your only task, do not, I repeat do not get bogged down I need every one of you alive understood?"

Both knights nodded grimly, their young faces set sternly, though a moment ago they had been looking almost panicky. Willas' calm commands however had reassured them that they would be able to get out of this, and that reassurance carried over to their men. Within moments the heavy cavalry were on their way through the grove, their heavier armor and the armor moreover on their horses able to stand them in good stead against the weapons of their opponents despite the ground not favoring the momentum-based tactics that they were best suited for.



Willas gestured over to the light cavalry commander, another younger man but this one was from House Hightower, and had served under that House's lords for years. He was not blessed with great intelligence but he was steady, and that was what Willas needed right now. "I have another job for you."

After a few moments the man shook his head in amusement at the scheme that Willas it come up with. Nonetheless he bowed obedience then ran off, taking with him every spare horse, including the ones that Willas had used to move his infantry around so quickly, leading them off through the woods. Willas meanwhile took command of reforming his infantry and archers, the time his heavy infantry bought them allowing him the time to do it.

Throughout the rest of that night they fought their way through the grove, almost encircled a dozen times but yet breaking out thanks to the heavy cavalry and Willas' steady command. The archers were almost entirely up out of arrows however, and they had lost countless men in this sudden reversal, the night and the nature of the battle not allowing Willas to get an accurate count. They were never able to completely break contact, which of course was part of their enemy's plan, but that plan was derailed as they broke out into the surrounding farmland.

The Reach forces broke out, quickly filtering through a line of heavy cavalry that looked over a thousand strong along with the light cavalry, still nearly a thousand strong themselves. The attackers skidded to a halt seeing that, and quickly retreated back into the grove knowing they had the advantage there.

If they had looked closer they would've noticed that the men on those horses didn't seem at home there nor did their armor seem to be as heavy as one would expect. But with the sunlight coming up and casting their shadows into bass relief and after the fierce nighttime battle that they had just fought, it was to be forgiven that the Westerlanders couldn't tell that the men up there were smallfolk and scouts. Willas had had his light cavalry round them up and stick them on horses with some of the levees that had gathered at Goldengrove. Barely trained they had been good camp servants but now served a different purpose.

Willas stumped along, wincing with every step now from his leg but bellowing orders to reform his lines, his heavy cavalry breaking out after his light and heavy infantry, while his archers raced ahead, now without a single arrow to their names. Before the enemy could realize that they had been had, his men had reformed, and though exhausted at least seemed ready to receive them.

Those enemies haven't yet seen through the trick when Willas ordered his men to slowly start to pull back and retreat. By the time they realized that he was going to keep on going, his force was well on their way, and only what horse forces they had could've kept up. Instead they refused battle, pulling back to lick their own wounds.

Willas kept his men going until the horses began to tire then called a halt. He slid from the saddle groaning in pain from his lame leg as well as numerous other injuries he had taken through the night. However he was surprised to note that morale seemed to be high. At least judging by the laughter and chuckles he heard from all around him at the trick having worked.

He leaned against his horse's side, absentmindedly pulling out a carrot from his saddle for the noble creature. The stallion had been one of his, bred for endurance as well as strength, and he had succeeded rather remarkably well in its case. It was also incredibly loyal, and it nuzzled at his shoulder huffing wearily before it lipped at the carrot.

"Make sure the men have time to get some food in them," he said opening his eyes again to look at Toulev, who had remained with him throughout the blood-drenched night. "Make sure the horses eat moderately and that both horse and man at least drink some water from their supplies, no matter if they say they aren't hungry."

"I'll do that thing milord." Without another word Toulev moved off.

A moment later Ser Graceford moved wearily through the resting army, almost collapsing out of the saddle as he dismounted with none of his usual grace. The other young man removed his helmet, wiping at his sweat streaked face shaking his head. "Grendel's dead. They pulled him off his horse in that damn apple grove." The man almost sounded in shock at how the night had gone, but he was rallying quickly. "What do we do now?"

Willas rubbed at his own face wearily but answered quickly enough. "We send out scouts to determine how large this second force out of the Westerlands is, while the rest of us continue to pull back towards the river. I'll send word ahead to Goldengrove and across as far southwest as Old Oak. We need reinforcements, and Oakheart is the only family I know that hasn't already sent its men to Highgarden or Bitterbridge."

"I'd heard that Oakheart refused to participate in a war against House Lannister in memory of Ser Arys Oakheart." Thomas said, alluding to the former Kingsguard.

"They did, but they can't sit this out any longer, else their own lands might be in danger soon. Stranger take it, depending on the size of the Westerlands force, this could be the start of a small-scale invasion. We can't let the Westerlanders get deeper into the Reach."

"No Ser we can't." Thomas said firmly nodding his head in emphasis. "By the grace of the Mother, we will prevail!"

Willas nodded back, pushing himself away from his horse and going to do a survey of the men, his face set grimly. Whatever their losses, and he wasn't naïve enough to think they were anything but horrible especially among his knights, this wasn't the end of things not by a long shot. Indeed, if these men came from the families he suspected, then the opportunity he thought might be there in the long term could possibly still be realized. *After all, the Westerlands are much more open on their southern front than anywhere else, aren't they?*

OOOOOO

While battles and war continued elsewhere, Ranma's army had finished their trek along the western side of the Green Fork to the nearest point where they would have to start trekking overland and away from the River towards Fairmarket. Knowing this, Ranma had allowed the army to rest for a full day off to rest the men to build up morale. All the troops were allowed to simply laze about and to whatever they wished save for a dozen men who knew some carpentry, and an old troop leader who had served once in the Manderly navy. He set these men to building a small, rather primitive river barge that could carry a few men across the River to send a messenger to Brynden and Groaton, working with them along with Roger, who also knew some carpentry having learned it as a hobby.

The rest of the wolfsworn busied themselves in various ways. Edd and Cley went over the boy's bow-work. Arya and Meera went out together on a hunt just the two of them and Nymeria. Hathan began to teach his new squire Luke the rudiments of horse-care. Smalljon slept most of the day away 'because I can'. Dacey, Domic and Lord Mallister entered into a card game with some of the smallfolk troop leaders that became bloodier than the battles so far and more costly to the losers pay than the time spent in Seagard.

Myrcella, Alayaya and Daenerys had decided to take a day for themselves a bit away from the army. Surrounded by the army all the time had been rather irritating at times, not that the men were crude toward them for the most part. After a few of them had been soundly thrashed by Ed and Smalljon, that had stopped even in Alayaya's case. Still, the opportunity to take a real bath was one they weren't going to miss, and it was nice to get away from the menfolk for a time

The Green Fork was a powerful, wide, deep, and very fast river for most of its length, only slowing down near the Ruby Ford, hence why the Twins had been such a powerful and very profitable position. Even in those places where you could wade out into the water, you couldn't go very deep without being in danger of getting swept away. Here however there was a small culvert, a tiny curve in the river bed filled with water, where the current wasn't nearly as strong, but which was deep enough to dive into.

With Fenris and Ghost on patrol around them, along with the draklings lying nearby, who Daenerys had rather loudly ordered to bite anyone that came near them before coming out here. Jason, despite his dislike for Daenerys, had offered to add a few ladies to her retinue. She had refused, citing the fact they only had a single tent for the ladies, nor was she about to ask for special privileges on the march, such as having dedicated servants like that.

Her austerity won her some points, and Daenerys had kept on doing so throughout the march, slowly winning the old man over. Jason was still visibly leery about her dragons, and worried for the future when she could ride them and thus become a true power to be reckoned with rather than having most of her power and all of her personal welfare relying on her marriage to Ranma. Still, Daenerys considered that an appreciable amount of progress.

She smiled a little looking over to where Alayaya lay with her feet in the water and the rest of her body laid out on the soft grass of the side of the pool. Alayaya had shown a remarkable ability to dive when they first arrived, well above what Myrcella or Daenerys were willing to try, but it had tired her out. Now she lay there, having pulled off the short shift she had been swimming in, her dark skin glistening as she allowed nature to dry her off, her rather large, perfectly formed breasts on display in such a way that would have inflamed any man who saw it.

"What are you thinking of?" Myrcella asked, nudging and Daenerys with her shoulder from where the two of them sat a little further away from Alayaya. Between them Rhaegon lay, the two women having taken turns trying to remove the remains of his last molting from between his wings where they lay along his back. Sunfyre was slightly further away, gnawing on a fish he had somehow caught with an incredibly smooth head-dive into the water. By his side another fish lay, which Daenerys had mentally ordered him to save for his brother.

Daenerys smile widened as she turned her head to look over at the younger girl. Since they had first met Myrcella

had moved from being an object of sympathy but still a hated Lannister to a dear friend and finally to a younger sister over the course of this march. "Oh just how life is strange sometimes. Here we are, marching down to continue a war that is already been bloody and bitter, yet we can have this little moment of peace and quiet, it's just rather odd to me."

"Ranma says to enjoy the quiet times when they come, because the noisy ones never give you the chance!" Myrcella laughed. "I suppose he's right about that too." Her smile disappeared as she frowned. "I know I miss the quiet times, before Tommen was murdered and I had to walk on tenterhooks most of the time while I was at home, and without... without Ranma around to protect me."

Daenerys looked at her, wrapping one arm around the younger girl shoulders in a gentle hug, somewhat squeezing Rhaegon's body between them. The dragon huffed irritably, but didn't try to move away. "He does have that effect. Despite not having taken the vows and coming from a religion that denigrates them Ranma really is the epitome of a knight isn't he?"

"Ser Oakheart was my knight." Myrcella said, her voice catching when she said the man's name. "Ranma was something else. I knew that Ser Oakheart couldn't protect me from everything, he was bound up by other things, and his duty was always first to the Throne. But somehow I knew Ranma could or at least would try to defend me from anything or anyone regardless of who they were or what they wanted."

She paused, looking up the Daenerys, gathering herself, for a moment, before blurting out, "I, I really love him you know! It's **not** just a crush, and I realize I'm still young, at least he thinks I'm young, but my feelings are **real!**" As Daenerys made to speak she went on quickly. This was costing her a lot of courage to say, so she wanted to get it all out in one go. "I know somehow that I'm not a Baratheon, I'll be a Waters, and that means I won't be anyone important. I'll be able to...become whatever I must to, to join the two of you! If you're willing to share him."

Daenerys frowned in automatic anger at the very idea, but after a moment she slowly lost the expression. She really had come to care for Myrcella, and she didn't want to hurt the girl. But neither was she prepared to say that she was exactly happy with what Merry had just proposed. "Your right, you're young yet." She said instead, after having carefully leached all anger from her voice leaving only slightly brittle sounding compassion. That took a lot out of Daenerys, but she wasn't going to wreck their friendship for a problem that may never occur in the future.

"Moreover, Ranma sees you as a little sister, a little girl at the moment. That won't change anytime soon. You can still grow up, and still fall in love with someone else nor, despite what you think, is your status that cut and dried. You may be declared a Lannister if you are not a Baratheon, and it will be a while yet before we're in a position where we can receive any messages that the Citadel might've sent on that subject in any event."

"And if it doesn't happen? And if my status as a Waters is confirmed?" Myrcella asked, taking courage in the older girl's calm response to her outburst. "Will you allow me to join you two, if I can convince Ranma I'm not the little girl he thinks I am?"

Daenerys looked at the other girl, and saw no jealousy there, only anxiety, anxiousness. No desire to take her place or push her to one side or even compete with her at all simply a desire to join her in Ranma, deep need and love for her husband shown in those green eyes. She sighed, then spoke, not knowing why she was saying what she was at the time, though in later life she would look back on this moment and thank her instincts. "Then we will revisit this discussion at that time."

Myrcella nodded, moving away slightly and turning back to the dragons deliberately changing the subject to the draklings rate of growth, something that Daenerys grasped with relief.

OOOOOO

Lord Serret sighed in relief as the huge Lion Gate closed behind the last man of his command. *Safe at last, well for now anyway.* He turned to Jaime, smirking at the younger man, who grinned back. "So while we're riding up to the Red Keep, why don't you fill me in on the defenses you've put in place already young Jaime, and I can tell you what adventures me and mine had along the way."

In the Red Keep Cersei was ecstatic to see Lord Serret's arrival, though of course didn't allow that to show on her face. After Joffrey formally bestowed the position of Hand on him, he called for a council immediately, going over the defense of the city and what news Varys was able to tell them from elsewhere. His report on Stannis' was particularly troubling, though Serret was not pleased to see that Joffrey didn't seem to understand that.

"We have over ten thousand men here now!" Joffrey complained, his tone a petulant whine, so unlike his mother's

cultured controlled tone, or even his father's bluster it made Serret's teeth grind. "I don't understand why we can't just take the field against the Reach or Stannis! Surely they aren't as dangerous as all that."

Cersei smiled lightly at her son, but Lord Serret answered first. "There is confidence and there is being blind to reality. The forces we have here consist at least a quarter of barely trained city watchmen. My own forces are exhausted from the march, and the Crownlands forces aren't the best trained I imagine. No, the city is our strong point, we can break them on the walls."

His word choice seemed to settle down Joffrey, and the new Hand went on, talking about his own experiences against Renly, and what that said about his command ability. From there they moved on to the food issue slowly beginning to be noticed in the city, and what to do about it, then on into more strategic issues. Throughout this discussion, Lord Serret was watching those of the small council closely, and being watched in turn. *A den of vipers this is, but it's not my job to defang the serpents, at least for now. After we've broken the Reach army and Stannis, maybe then I can think about the small council and what to do with them, but for now, we have more pressing concerns.*

At that thought Serret's eyes slid over to Joffrey, sitting with his mother to one side and Petyr Baelish to the other. He wondered if Joffrey and his apparent trust in Petyr was one problem they would have to solve, or something more pressing, but had no way of knowing. For now, he had to concentrate on exterior problems, not interior ones.

OOOOOO

For the next few days Ranma wasn't certain why Daenerys was looking so introspective sometimes, or why Merry kept on shooting him such odd, hopeful glances. He thought at first that she had wanted to try riding Fenris, and though she had enjoyed it, and the fact that he once again regaled her with some stories from his past life, that didn't seem to be it. With more serious matters coming up to concentrate on Ranma decided to place that issue, whatever it was, into the 'inexplicable female things' folder in his mind. It was a rather large folder, but it served him well.

An easy four days march brought the small Northern expedition within sight of Fairmarket. And sound too, which made all of them start because the sound of battle carried clearly to them here through the brush, scrub and woods that surrounded them.

Ranma looked around him and began to wrap out orders. "Uncle, Hathan, Roger, form up the heavy cavalry in case we need a charge. Jason, gather up the archers, be ready to follow and exploit any openings. It sounds like there's fighting **in** the town, so be careful of being surrounded. Daryn, Edd, Smalljon, gather up the infantry and follow behind. Jon, Arya, with me." With that, Ranma raced ahead, Fenris following after him like a bolt from a bow, followed swiftly by Jon, Arya and their direwolves.

The six of them swiftly reached the northeastern side of the bridge across the Blue Fork to Fairmarket, barreling past several hundred villagers desperately trying to flee the town.

Inside the town there was madness. From where Ranma stood just inside the town he could see straight through the village down its one paved road. Ranma could see that the walls were still standing, but there were hundreds of soldiers in Westerlands colors, red and gold, everywhere. There were also a lot of men in patchwork and threadbare armor with the image of a black goat on their shoulders. These men were laughing as they chased after the smallfolk here and there.

They were fighting men House Mallister colors. In some place the defenders seemed to be holding them back but they had already gained a total hold, and looking straight ahead Ranma could see that the main through gate was still open. The defenders knew that as long as that portcullis was open, the army outside could send forces in, so were trying to push forward to recapture it, but the attackers were trying equally hard to hold onto it, a shield wall of Lannister men forming and moving outward to clear more room.

The press through the gate however was being held up by a man in a homespun cloak, who was dueling with three swordsmen at once. He had evidently been the first to reach the portcullis, or perhaps he had been there when the attackers had forced it open somehow. In any event he was giving a good account of himself having apparently already slain four men, their bodies strewn on the dirt road around him.

"Take and hold!" Ranma shouted, pointing ahead of them with Ice, then racing on. Jon and Arya nodded grimly, and the six of them, three humans and three direwolves barreled forward, baying their warcries. "Winter is coming!" The wolves howled, and at that sound every defender and attacker looked up, only to see Ranma, Jon and Arya slamming into the attackers like an unstoppable storm of steel and fang.

Ranma slew two men before they could even get their shields up, then leaped over the Westerlands line to land behind them, Ice sweeping out at waist level to cut open four others spilling their innards out into the courtyard, their leather armor not having even slowed the Valyrian blade down even without its edge being enhanced by ki. With the way clear he now stood in the center of the portcullis laughing grimly, his blue eyes dark with fury. "Come on, who wants to step up next!?"

He nodded cordially to the man who had been fighting in the gate, noticing in that kinetic time dilation effect he always entered in battle that he wore plate armor under that cloak of his. He also wielded a battered and dirtied sword, but it looked to be of excellent quality. Even in the midst of battle he kept his head covered by his hood, though that did nothing to stop the long white beard that hung down to his chest from sticking out. "Is this the only gate old man?"

The man shook his head silently and added in a gruff tone. "Two more elsewhere, one leading into the stable yard of the Paige keep. That one is probably already in our hands, I haven't heard much fighting from over there."

"You hear that Jon!" Ranma roared. "I've got this, you take Arya and take that other gate! "

Jon nodded, making his way around the melee that had developed between the attackers who had already made their way inside from this gate and the defenders trying to crush them under with numbers. Arya followed after, while but two wolves followed after.

Fenris stood with his master, with teeth bared in a snarl and a continuous growl that set the bowels to loosen among the Lannister men, many of whom were already falling back. "Winter is coming!" Ranma yowled, chopping at any that dared to come close, while behind him the remaining Mallister men finished slaying the attackers on the side of the gate. Of course there were about four-hundred or so still within the town, but the main gate was once again in the defenders hands.

OOOOOO

By this time the rest of the army had reached the bridge, and the infantry now streamed across. As they did Smalljon and the others worked with their troop leaders, breaking them into groups of fifty archers and 25 swordsmen before sending them deeper into the village. Jason let the wolfsworn to that task, moving forward with one such group. They swiftly came upon a group of twenty Lannister men who that had taken time out of the battle to start looting houses. Two of them even carried tied up women over their shoulders, though they had hurriedly threw them down upon spotting the approaching northerners

One of them was about to take the woman he held as a hostage, but the arrows of the northerners took him in the face throat and chest. The other men fell similarly under a hail of arrows, even the heavy plate armor he wore standing no chance of stopping the powerful northern longbows at such short range. At a distance of over a hundred yards or so he might've been able to survive an arrow to the chest plate but under forty feet no chance.

The looters were then taken by surprise by a force of defenders coming out of the space between a few houses further down, charging into them as Jason led the Northerners forward. He found himself facing his son Patrek over a body of a fallen Westerlander. "Patrek! In the name of the Seven what happened here!"

"Father!" Patrek said, pushing up his visor on his helm. Despite not being on a horse, Patrek wore the full plate of heavy cavalry man, and he was sweating heavily from moving around in it. But Jason had taught him how to fight well enough on foot that it wasn't that big of problem. His legs would be feeling it tomorrow, but that was all. When he pushed up his visor any onlooker could see that the two of them were definitely related. The same hawk eyes under heavy brows, the same thin features and aquiline nose.

Patrek reached over, pulling his father into a loose hug for a moment before kneeling down to rip a portion of a Lannister tabard off to clean his blade. "We've been getting refugees from the other side of the Red Fork for weeks in a steady trickle. The Lannister's disguised themselves as refugees then waited until they had a sufficient force in the village before they took the gates to open them for the rest of their army. I don't think there's a large force out there, but they took us completely by surprise."

He grimaced angrily. "Most of our men were within the Paige's keep, and we held that gate as well as the gate into the rest of the village from the keep, so we haven't taken that many losses. The smallfolk and the town itself took the brunt of this assault. We might have to go house to house to clear them out."

"If we must, we must" Jason said philosophically, though his eyes were burning with anger at what the smallfolk had been forced to endure over the last hour or so.

At that moment, Daenerys rode up at the head of another group of eighty northerners. With her two dragons circling in the air over the town and thanks to her warging with them she had a bird's eye view of the battle and had been using that to organize the northerner's counterattack. "There is a force of about a hundred men making its way back towards the one gate that the attackers still control, and another group is forming a few streets over. That group seems to be the more dangerous. I've already sent Daryn with a force to reinforce Jon and Arya, they're making their way to that gate. Should we call up the heavy cavalry to smash the nearby gathering, Lord Mallister?"

Patek gaped at the young woman who could only be from house Targaryen, then up into the sky where two flying creatures flew. It actually took him a moment to realize what those creatures were in actuality, and he looked at her with wide eyes. "Father, what's going on? What are, why are you with..."

"That is a tale for another time my son, for now we have a battle to win." Jason said, cutting his son off. He looked up at Daenerys and shook his head. "No, heavy cavalry would be a liability in the small streets of most of the town. Leave them on the main road through town, if Ranna loses the gate they might be needed to close it, or better we could use them to pursue the remaining Westerlanders outside the walls."

Daenerys nodded, turning her force away as her two dragons slowly circled around, the town before diving down, their target, the bridge, well out of sight. "As I said," Jason chuckled dryly, turning back to his son. "A very long story."

OOOOOO

Jon carved his way through four men, his twin sword style taking them by surprise until he came up to one Westerlander who was a better swordsman than most. His sword and shield worked as a single unit, blocking Jon's initial blows, and he reposted quickly, using his longer sword to good effect. "And who are you to use such a style, I've never seen anything quite like that." The man said in an almost conversational tone of voice, despite the battle going on around them, his features obscured by the helmet he wore, along with very good infantry style plate armor.

Behind Jon, Arya moved out from behind guarding his back, taking another man in the gut with Fang before wheeling away, her buckler slamming into the visor of another man crumpling the metal so much he couldn't see. She kicked him between the legs, then her sword took him high in the neck as he buckled forward before she moved on to her next opponent.

With a sharp series of thrusts and cuts from Fang, Arya threw two men back through the small gate that must've been used by farmers at some point, while her Nymeria moved up from out of nowhere with Ghost, finishing off the six attackers that were about to turn on her. More men however were gathering on the other side of the gate and on this side, and the three were hard pressed.

Jon however didn't have much attention to notice this as he dueled with the man in front of him. Several moments passed silently between them, neither man having breath or time to exchange badinage. At last, Jon spoke while at the same time smacking the man's blade aside as it tried to seek his throat. "Isn't it polite to give your own name first?" Jon then jumped up as the man brought his sword back in a blow to cut at his knees.

His own sword flashed out and the man barely raised his shield to block it from slicing into his chest but he was still thrown off-balance for a second, and he backed away on light feet, circling warily. "Addam Marbrand at your service." The man said. Then he twirled around, dodging another blow from Jon to bring up his sword in a whirling arc that should've caught Jon when he was off-balance from his own thrust.

However Jon's other blade came up, blocking the below from reaching him, allowing him to twist and bring his other sword arm up and around underhand, smashing into Addam's side with punishing force. However Jon was just off-balance enough that he couldn't get his full strength behind it, so instead of shearing through the plate mail and into the man it simply made a tremendous dent, and through Addam to the side.

With that bit of space, Jon bowed slightly, his tone dry and ironic. "Jon Stark, at your service and your family's." With that he moved forward, his twin swords moving in a dance of steel forcing Addam back. This allowed Jon to take a moment to view the action around them, his eyes widening at what he saw.

Arya was having a much tougher time of it. Ghost had once more faded into the background, coming out to rip and tear at the Westerlanders from behind. He didn't realize that this put more pressure on Arya and Nymeria at a time when they were trying to be a cork in a bottle, stopping the men already inside the town from retaking the gate, and stopping men outside from coming in.

Both of them were already bleeding from several wounds. Nymeria was limping, one of her paws cut badly, and one eye closed from blood from a cut over one eye. But she was still moving easily, evidenced by her nearly ripping one

man in two while at the same time dodging a sword blow from another armmen.

Even as Jon watched Arya's helm was ripped away, her eye-slit having caught on a mace's spike even as she dodged the majority of the blow. Another spike left a gash along her cheek that would no doubt leave a scar as the helm was ripped away. It didn't matter to Arya though. Her return blow gored the man through his chest, and she snarled as she left her feet, her leg kicking out against another man so hard that he flew backwards into three others.

It was only the training that Ranma had given him since coming back that was allowing Arya to fight this many people at once. But the gate and the need to remain guarding it forced her to stay in one place, unable to use the full 'Ranma Air Style', and that was costing her a lot.

Worse, Jon could see at least two dozen more Westerlanders coming out from deeper within the town towards them. But just then a familiar voice roared out from the other side of the incoming Lannister men. "Righteous in Wrath! Hornwood for the Wolves!"

Arya laughed aloud, Fang a blur of steel in her hands as she dueled with two men, her buckler having been dropped moments ago. "Daryn I could damn well kiss you!"

"I think Alys would probably object pack-sister!" Daryn replied, charging into and through the men retreating to the gate, his company following him shouting their own battle cries. As he slid into place alongside Arya he smirked. "But I'll tell your brother you've finally begun to notice boys, he and your lady mother will be most pleased."

"Forget I said anything, seriously." Arya growled, dodging a blow from a flail, grabbing the man's arm and doing a perfect over the shoulder throw before stabbing him through the gorget with Fang. She pulled her sword out, flicking the blood at Daryn. "Or else."

Daryn merely laughed, driving back three men before whirling away to slay a fourth, then back before any of the three could react. "Message received Arya, they do say females are the more dangerous of the species after all." Their banter signaled the turn of the battle, as more northern men surrounded and pushed back the attackers.

Across their crossed blades Jon could see Addam gritting his teeth at this turn of events, and he grinned, pushing him away then moving forward, no longer conserving his speed or strength to be used later. His blades were a whirl as he attacked, his short swords cutting here there, everywhere.

Addam, knowing he was overmatched, tried to reverse his fortune by a sudden lunge forward. But Jon dodged just slightly, allowing the blade to pass to one side of his body by a bare inch, before clamping down on it with one arm. He held the other man's sword arm there for a brief second while he brought his other sword across to slam the flat of his blade into the other man's helmeted head with punishing force. Addam collapsed boneless to the ground.

Above the battle Jon could hear the thrum of several dozen bows sounding off in quick succession, not against the men on this side of the wall, but on the outer side of the wall around the town. Arya laughed again, moving back from the gate as Daryn and a few men took her place. "Go get'em Meera!"

**OOOOOO**

Instead of staying with the heavy cavalry, Rickard had grabbed every archer that hadn't already been assigned to unit clearing out the town and raced ahead to House Paige's keep. There he met a force of heavy infantry moving out into the town, but ignored them, passing them behind with a bare nod at the men in the lead, his banner and the war cries of his men telling the Mallister force he was friendly.

It was only as he was leading the archers up onto the keep's outer wall, which connected to the palisade around the village, that Rickard noticed Meera was with him. Before he could stop her, the young Reed girl raced on with a dozen archers following after. They came to a stop along the top of the palisade right above the gate where Jon and Arya were battling the Westerlanders. From there, Meera directed her archers to take the men still trying to press into the gate under fire.

That force broke under their fire, retreating frantically. Most of those men however were ridden down by the hoarded northern heavy cavalry, who barreled out of the main gate held by Ranma. After that, the initial battle was over, though the cleanup would take weeks.

Myrcella had set up tents during the battle on the clear portion of the bridge and main road through Fairmarket. As soon as the main battle was over she, the maester healer, Alayaya and the others Ranma had seconded to the 'hospital group', the name Ranma had given their efforts, went to work. Daenerys surprisingly joined them moments

later. She guided wounded smallfolk to the tents, then took over organizing the search efforts for others for a time. It was a sign of caring that few lords would give to smallfolk caught up in the wars of their betters, and it won many a wondering glance from the people they were helping.

Leaving Roger and Hathan to lead the cavalry pursuit, Ranma moved back to help the searchers with the rest of the wolfsworn save Arya, who joined Meera on the wall. Dacey took another route to aid the town, organizing a bucket chain from the river and wells to put out the numerous fires the raiders had. Their prodigious strength allowed them to move burnt or simply collapsed pieces of thatch and wood to find trapped smallfolk, though more often than not they found bodies. The Westerlanders, either the regular armsmen or the ones with the black goat mark on their shoulders, had not been kind to the smallfolk.

Heaving up a piece of wood that had fallen in from a house's ceiling, Ranma began to hear noise coming from deeper within the ruin. He moved forward, tossing aside the pieces ceiling and other wreckage until he cleared the top of a hidden door in the floor. Pulling it up he leaned over the hole, grabbing the point of a spear that was thrust up at him. "Um, hello ma'am, would you like some help out of there?"

The woman who had just tried to kill him stared at Ranma's almost blasé tone, trying to wrench the spear out of his grip, which despite being on the iron tip of the spear was too strong for her to budge it. Behind her, two little heads stuck out from behind her ragged dress, not ragged through age but misuse and several rips here and there.

Ranma spoke softly, trying not to scare the family, who must have hidden down in their cellar the moment they heard the battle. "Do any of your children or you need to see a healer, ma'am? I'm Ranma and I'm with the House Mallister troops, we're here to help."

One of the two heads peeking out around the woman bobbed up and down before speaking in a voice Ranma recognized as that of a very young girl. "Yes Ser, my father and my mother're hurt. My father's fallen asleep, but he was thumped real hard over the head."

The woman let go of the spear reluctantly. Ranma pulled it out of the cellar, tossing it aside and leaping down into the cellar. He looked around, noticing the two people on the floor, and noticing one wasn't even twitching. He exchanged a grim glance with the woman, who shrugged her shoulders. As the woman helped the two kids up the staircase Ranma moved over to the injured duo, breathing a sigh of relief when he felt a pulse on the man's throat.

Giving the man a once over Ranma saw it looked as if he had been clobbered upside the head with something heavy, but it hadn't broken his skull or cut the skin. The woman was actually worse off, having a bad cut in her side deep and still bleeding. Ranma did what he could with her cut and to make her decent. Her dress had been halfway torn off which told Ranma a lot about what her husband had saved her from at the cost of a concussion at the very least. "From common people comes great courage..." He murmured then moved back to the entrance into the cellar, the woman in his arms while Smalljon leaped down after him, quickly moving to life up the man.

Ranma dropped the wounded off in the hospital area, then went in search of Daenerys and Merry. He found them by seeing Fenris sitting upright like a sentry in front of a large tent. Daenerys was helping a young septa who Ranma supposed was from the town set a man's broken arm on one side of the tent while Merry was working feverishly on stitching up a very ugly cut on a Mallister armsmen's leg. On the other side of her Alayaya was bandaging a head-wound on a Umber man.

Daenerys finished her work first, turning to see Ranma in the doorway. "How is it going?" He asked softly, his arms twitching as if he wanted to pull her into a hug, but didn't want to interrupt her work.

"It's going." Daenerys said grimly. "Merry's been a miracle worker, without her organization efforts this would be a lot worse. And despite his horrible level of empathy, Martyn, the maester of House Locke, is indeed an incredible healer. We have only lost four men so far, and I doubt more than a dozen of the injured will have to remain here when we move on."

"And the smallfolk?" Ranma asked, his voice still soft.

"Much worse, at least a hundred maybe as many four hundred dead, and dozens wounded." His wife replied grimly, shaking her head. "The mercenaries, I recognize that patch as belonging to the Brave Companions. They have an evil reputation, and they lived up to it here. We're doing what we can but..." Daenerys shrugged her shoulders, then nodded over to Merry before going on in a whisper. "Send for Dacey or someone to watch her, if we don't I have no doubt she'll keep going until she collapses."

At Ranma's smirk, Daenerys shook her head. "I know when I need to stop, it's precisely the time when my little ones



inform they're hungry again. I've got them out well past the shanty town's edge with Ghost right now." She pushed his shoulders slightly. "Go on, do what you can do, we've got this under control as much as possible."

Ranma nodded, moving out of the tent to rejoin the search efforts. Neither of them noticed the old man who had tried to hold the main gate loitering around outside the tent. If someone could have looked under the old man's hood, they would have seen eyes widening in shock, before a faint smile appeared over the long beard.

OOOOOO

Even after having it all explained to him Patrek still couldn't keep his eyes from tracking to where Daenerys sat next to Ranma on one side later that evening in the dining hall of House Paige. The two of them were holding hands almost absentmindedly as they listened to him talk about had been happening. "Ser Paige and Ser Grell sent most of their combined force into Hag's Mire to bring House Nayland to heel, while we stayed here with a few men from House Paige. Their senior knight is Ser Damon Paige, but he's still recovering from wounds taken in, well internal issues caused by a difference of opinion with his sons-in-laws, both of whom were Freys, and isn't mobile enough to do anything but maintain order in their keep."

Patrek looked at the expressions around the table, breathing a sigh of relief when he realized his father must've already shared that horrible tale. "He's laid up even now, nearly ruptured something trying to join the battle earlier and their houses healer, a very young septa, forced some herbal concoction down his throat that knocked him out. At any rate, we've been somewhat reinforced from House Shawney, they sent a few dozen back, but they did so because most of those troops were injured in some fashion. From what we know their castle still stands, both Lord Shawney and the new Lord Lolliston are as determined as ever to not side with the bastard who sits on the throne, no matter how much money the Lannisters try to wave in his face. But Lord Shawney is a proven combat leader, Serec Lolliston is not."

"When was the last time you heard from them?" Ranma asked, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Six days ago."

Domeric groaned a little. "They might've faced the same sort of attack, unless their castles are closed entirely and ready for a siege."

"That, that could be." Patrek said, tugging at his short, neat goatee for a moment worriedly. "Serec I know was wishful to keep his castle open as long as possible to take in as many of his House's smallfolk as they could. I'll send scouts out tomorrow first thing, though we won't hear back from him for six days at a minimum, that's as long as it takes to get a runner to House Lolliston's castle and back."

House Lolliston's castle was on an almost straight line between Fairmarket and the Kneeling Man's Ford, and was slightly closer to the ford than the town. House Shawney's was closer but to the east of Fairmarket, out of the way from an advancing army's point of view from the ford, so it might not have been subject to the kind of assault they faced here. More to the point, Shawney had closed his House down the moment he and his men reached his castle from the battle at the Ford.

With a shrug of his shoulders Patrek went on. "A messenger arrived yesterday from the knightly houses who said that they had finished with House Nayland, and they were on their way back. But we've also received word that the second echelon of the Lannisters arrived a few weeks ago. I have no idea what the old lion is doing with those men, he hasn't made any move to cross the ford that we know of. He might not wish to be bogged down in sieges against Lolliston and Shawney or here though I doubt we would put up much of a defense against a full army. You might not have noticed, but most of the palisade here's wooden. A single good fire would have them in and among us, and unlike today I doubt we'd have the numbers advantage then."

"The man I took prisoner, I think he was the leader of this attack." Jon said from where he sat, sipping quietly on wine (some of which had been distributed to the men) and eating some bread having worked up quite an appetite. "His name was Adam Marbrand, and I remember hearing something about him though I can't remember what." Actually Marbrand was the only prisoner taken. None of the northerners or Mallister men were feeling very merciful after seeing what had been done to the smallfolk of the town.

"You took him prisoner!?" Patrek said astonished. "Adam Marbrand is supposedly one of the better blades in Westeros, rumor has it he's almost as good as the Kingslayer."

"But not quite up to the wolfsworn standard." Ranma said smirking a little while the rest of the wolfsworn chuckled grimly. But Ranma went on more seriously, asking. "Do we have any news from Riverrun, how is my grandfather?"

Arya looked up at that from where she had been lounging on the ground of the sitting room with her head on Nymeria's side. She and Ranma exchanged a glance, both hoping to meet their grandfather before he passed away.

"Lord Tully is still alive as far as we know." Patrek said his hands held up in an 'I don't know' gesture. "The Lannisters have made no attempt to besiege Riverrun, which is smart of them since that would've forced them to use at least half of their total army. Instead that old lion has most of his men ready to defend the fork across the river, either at the Kneeling Man's Ford, or down at the Trident." He gestured to the map on the low table set between most of the people taking part in the discussion, pointing at both spots.

"Does House Blackwood still hold out?" Daenerys asked.

"They do, your um, milady." Patrek said, wondering how to address her. Plus he had often been told about what had happened to his uncle and so many others under the old mad King. *She's truly gorgeous though. Ranma's a lucky man, if she doesn't develop any of her family's fire madness that is.*

"That's good to hear." Ranma said nodding his head. "I'll need to look at the map some more, this is the most detailed map of the Riverlands I've seen, but I think I'll have a plan ready for us tomorrow. We should keep the army here for at least two days though, to help the locals repair their houses and everything, but after that I want us to move out quickly. I've no doubt that the Lannisters already have an idea of what happened with the Twins, and they'll certainly hear about what happened here, but I want us to retain the initiative."

*Speed over all, quickness over all. While I don't go for the whole utter ruthlessness part of Genghis Khan's philosophy, he got those parts right at least. And when we do strike, I mean to be as thorough as need be.* Ranma thought grimly. *Strike hard, strike fast, cause chaos and opportunity will follow, heh the anything goes school of warfare you old gold fucker.*

"Speaking of this past battle," Ranma went on clicking the fingers of his free hand. "That old man who tried to hold the main gate before I arrived, do you have any idea who he is?"

"Not a one. He was just one of the refugees, came in with the last batch, pulled out his sword and began to attack the Westerlanders from behind the moment the Lannisters made their move from what my surviving men who were there said. He could be a traitor to them for all I know, someone who hates the Lannisters for his own reasons?" Patrek shrugged ignorance again.

"Why don't you send for him, I'm certain there is a story behind his skills and his being here at this point in time." Dacey said. "Old men with beards like that and skills like that should be rather rare shouldn't they?"

Edd got up from where he had been sitting, comically making as if he was groaning in agony like an old man for a moment before leaving. It actually didn't take long to find the elderly gentlemen in question. He was loitering down in the courtyard helping take care of some of the horses. But it was pretty obvious to Edd that he had also been watching the entrance to the keep for some reason. Edd explained that Ranma and Daenerys wanted to talk to him, and the man nodded, following after the spear wielding Karstark wolfsworn.

The moment he walked into the room being used as a meeting hall however Fenris cocked his head from where he was laying down by the two draklings behind the small sofa Daenerys and Ranma were sitting on. He got up, leaning over the sofa's back to stare at the man before turning his head to look at his master. Ranma gasped shaking his head with a laugh. "Ser Barristan? What are you doing here?"

Everyone's eyes wide as they all stared at the old man, who simply shook his head in resignation. "Should've known this wouldn't work for long. What gave me away, lad?" Ser Barristan Selmy said, reaching up with one hand to pull back his hood, revealing his craggy but familiar features, hidden by a large beard at the moment but still recognizable to those who had met him before.

Ranma couldn't say Fenris of course so he made up a story on the spot which at least sounded believable. "The way you stand and that voice of yours earlier. You made a good try of trying to disguise it, but I know that voice, I didn't have time to think about it during the battle but it was obvious now."

"So you are Ser Barristan Selmy?" Daenerys said cocking her head to one side and looking at the old man. "I thought you had hair on top of your head rather than completely situated on your chin."

Dacey and Arya both laughed, while the men simply chuckled and Barristan shook his head ruefully. "It's a new affectation your Grace, I did after all have to disguise myself after I was removed from the Kingsguard."

"What?" Ranma gasped, shaking his head. "**Why!** I don't have much truck with the Kings you've served, but you at least served them loyally, no man alive could doubt your oath."

"Joffrey." Myrcella said shaking her head. She had been falling asleep leaning against the arm of the sofa by Daenerys where she sat on the floor, utterly exhausted from her work in the hospital. She had roused however when Ranma shouted his surprise at seeing Barristan. "Hello Ser Selmy, I'm sorry that my despicable brother treated you so badly, but I'm glad to see you."

Barristan smiled, bowing from the waist towards the Princess. "And I am glad beyond all knowing to see you still alive, lass. Whatever your true heritage you were still one of my charges in the not distant past. I was sorry to hear of Ser Oakheart's passing, but at least his sacrifice allowed you to reach a place where you could find safety."

Myrcella nodded looking away again at the memory of her protector, while Barristan turned back to Ranma and Daenerys. "Yes, I was dismissed in favor of the Kingslayer, setting aside all precedent and law, in favor of that murderous bastard. I was tempted to carve my way towards Joffrey and cut his throat, but I left instead. After that, I wondered which King was worthy of my blade and found both the Stag brothers wanting for one reason or another."

"Renly is a grasping little ass, whose only good point is that he's likable and has a sense of humor. He's done nothing else, he's not even as loyal to family as I would like to see. I've heard some of the comments he's made about Stannis's only daughter, and I wouldn't say such things about the meanest smallfolk lass. And Stannis is cold, and apparently has taken up with a foul foreign religion from some rumors that have gotten out from Dragonstone. Then I started to hear about your return with Ranma, so I decided to make my way north."

"I'd hoped to observe you my lady and see if you had any of your father's madness in you before coming forward with my true identity however."

"You're not the only one who wanted to observe me Ser Selmy." Daenerys said wickedly, smirking over at Jason who coughed into his fist for a moment looking away while Patrek chuckled lightly at his discomfiture.

"I can believe it given what the Mad King did to your brother Lord Mallister." Barristan said nodding his head to the other man. "Nonetheless, I have served one mad King, one King who was a worthless drunk and for a few days one who was a pulling whelp of a boy who might be worse than both combined. I think..." Barristan said looking at Daenerys closely, the way she and Ranma were so close, and how she had worked so hard in the 'hospital' earlier that day. "I think... I think I would like to see what serving a Queen is like. If you will have me."

"Not just a queen Ser Selmy." Daenerys said her voice now serious. "Ranma and I are equals in rank and power. True equals, something we hope to put into law and custom after we win this war."

Ranma nodded his head at that. "Nor will there be a Kingsguard as you understand the term, a group of the best blades or whatever you wish to call it from the entire kingdom. "The Wolfsworn, the River Blades, others like that and the Royal Regiments, yes." *But no more Praetorian Guard BS.*

The wolfsworn all chuckled all around him, even Arya laughing quietly as she stared at the old man one hand rested on Nymeria's head.

At the word 'regiments' Sir Barristan cocked his head wondering what it meant, but shrugged his shoulders. "In that case, I will serve you both, what oaths would you have me take?"

"So you would become the first of our Garden Guards?" Ranma asked, smirking a little.

"Oh that's just horrible!" Arya groaned shaking her head, as everyone else, even Jason and Patrek, did the same. "We'll need to think of a new name for the swords we get from the Reach brother."

"I'm not good with making up names so sue me." Rama said growling a little, causing Fenris and Nymeria to both huff in laughter.

He turned back to Sir Barristan, who was grinning through his beard, but he could tell that the older man didn't like that name either. "Fine, we'll consider changing the name later, but the oaths we ask you to take won't change. Kneel Ser Barristan."

The old man did so quickly. Ranma rose from his chair, picking up the sword from where it had been leaning against the side of the sofa he was sitting in. Raising it, he placed the flat of the blade on one of Selmy's shoulders, while Daenerys stood up, her hands joining his on the hilt. "Do you, Sir Barristan, swear to uphold the law and the customs of the land? To always be true to the crown, so long as it remains true to defending the people it is charged to protect?"

Barristan blinked at that, nor was he the only one. Normally oaths to join the Kingsguard were all about obedience to the crown and defending said crown. This was something new, and the emphasis on being true to the crown so long as it was true to the people was very strange. Yet at the same time, also very gratifying, showing Barristan he had chosen wisely here. "I do." He replied firmly, no hesitation in his voice.

"Will you defend the innocent and the weak against those who would oppress them? Will you both offer and keep our council, fight by our side in these troubled times and beyond, in the pursuit of fairness and the rule of law?" Daenerys asked. She and Ranma had spent many hours over the course of the march thinking about these oaths, and while at first she hadn't been happy about many of them, she agreed they needed to be said.

"I will." Barristan replied for the second time, his eyes staring into Daenerys own.

"Will you show mercy to those who deserve it, generosity to those who need it, and bring justice down upon those who break the Crown's peace?" Ranma asked.

"I will."

"Will you defend the realm against the forces of darkness and other dangers, both foreign and domestic?" Daenerys asked.

Barristan actually blinked a little at that then realized that the two were talking about the Red Witch rumor placed at Stannis' right hand. Or so he thought, anyway. Regardless, he had no qualms about giving his word to fight such as that. "I so swear to do."

"then rise Ser Barristan Selmy, and join us at our side from now until you or we take our last breaths." Both royals chorused. There was a moment of profound stillness, the Riverlanders looking on in awe and the wolfsworn merely grinning, along with Rickard though his smirk was much tarter than theirs. He was always amused by the panoply the southerners needed to add to their vows to one another.

Slowly Barristan rose from where he was kneeling more certain he had made the right decision to serve these two than he had ever been about anything before, while Ranma and Daenerys both sat down once more, their faces solemn. But then Ranma smirked, clapping his hands together. There was a strange sort of promise to that sound, as if it started something or rather signaled the start of something. "And now, tell me what you can about what went on in King's Landing after I rescued Sansa, and as much as you can about Tywin Lannister..."

Just then there was a knock on the door, causing everyone's eyes to look in that direction. A second later an armsman in House Paige colors poked his head in, his voice somewhat hesitant. "Milords, there is a septon out here. He says he wants to talk to the, um, the 'Northerner heathen' and the 'Dragon Queen'."

End chapter

Whelp, the Ironborn are on the playing field now, though their first strikes didn't go nearly as well as they hoped. And, in case it looks as if the North is getting off too lightly, remember that there are other enemies out there than the Ironborn.

There will be a lot more about what is going on in King's Landing in the next chapter, as the siege begins and certain events come to light. That, Stannis and the conflict about to begin between Ranma and Tywin directly will be the main sections of that chapter. After that, a chapter centered on the Wall and events at sea.

Oh, and I know the oaths are sort of meh, but I can't come up with better ones.

Hope you all liked this one, and the unfolding war.

## \*Chapter 13\*: Chapter 13

I don't own Ranma 1/2 or Martin. I believe in actual endings and don't believe that assholes/bastards should prosper.

Here is chapter 13, and kudos to everyone who knows where the name of the chapter came from. It works given what Ranma and his army do here. I would like to thank Antony444 for his work as a beta and ASolaF info. However we seem to be dealing with some format issue, so there might be a few missing spaces here and there. We tried to catch them all, but...

Oh, does anyone know any Tenchi Muyo War on Geminar fanfiction? Preferably some that have a main character whose balls have actually dropped and isn't mentally retarded? Despite having the WORST REDHEADED FEMALE LEAD EVER, of all time, the combat and robots are cool, and a few of the side female characters are fun. Aura in particular, dark elf FTW!

want to give a shout out to MilandaAnza and Rakaan for pointing out mistakes when they read through this chapter!

And now comes the Violence!

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### Wild Wolf 13 Deadly With A Blade Is...

For a moment Ranma and the other simply looked at the man then Ranma laughed causing the rest of the wolfsworn to chuckle though Rickard looked a little angry at that as did Daenerys. Seeing this Ranma reached over and took Daenerys' hand. "It's not exactly the most diplomatic way of addressing, but you have to admit he's got a point."

"I am well aware of my family's rocky relationship with the Faith, Ranma." Daenerys replied tartly. "While I believe that people should be free to follow what religion they believe in, I cannot say I'm happy with the fact that in the Faith of the Seven's eyes I am apparently an abomination. So I do not see why we should let a mere septon in to talk to us, especially one who seemingly lacks tact."

In the Faith of the Seven, incest was one of the worst crimes possible. But unlike in the faith of the Old Gods, the Faith of the Seven also loathed the results of incest, calling them abominations. This had made the Faith's relationship with House Targaryen **very** rocky indeed, considering that incest was not only allowed but almost insisted upon among them especially in the early years, begun when Aegon the Conqueror married not one sister but both of them.

The Faith Militant Uprising, a series of wars spread out over most of Westeros and seven years, was spurred by this and several other factors. They began when Aenys, the son of Aegon the Conqueror, wed his son and heir to his sister. This was just one of many slights Aenys rather foolishly paid to the Faith in his rule. Others were backing the Greyjoy desire to remove the Faith from the Iron Islands, and instead of denouncing his brother Maegor as a heathen when he took a second wife, simply removing him as Hand and banishing him.

Nonetheless, the marriage of his son and daughter was the rather giant oak plank that broke the mule's back. Maegor, Aenys' younger half-brother, put down many of those uprisings in a brutal manner earning the name the Cruel, but the rebellions didn't end until Aenys' son Jaehaerys took the crown and offered an amnesty for anyone who had been part of the rebellion in return for the disbanding of the Faith's militant orders.

Yet even after that, the Targaryens, fearing the diluting of their blood would take away whatever it was that allowed them to control their dragons, continued the policy of intermarriages, which of course the Faith detested, but were no longer strong enough to do anything about. Daenerys, as a daughter of King Aerys and his sister Rhaella, fell under that same stigma.

So Daenerys had every right to be leery of a septon of the Faith. *And considering the rumors we've heard*, Ranma thought his eyes flicking over to Myrcella, *she isn't the only one*.

However Myrcella was looking at Daenerys shaking her head. "This is one of those things you don't understand because you come from Essos, Daenerys." She said reaching over and taking Daenerys's other hand. "The faith of the Seven is very important here in Westeros. Well," she flushed a little. "Not so much for the nobles and maybe not in some of the cities like King's Landing, but I know it is important for most of the smallfolk, most of the Knightly Houses, and especially in the Reach."

Patrek Mallister smiled nodding his agreement. "The princess is right, Your Highness, in the big cities the Faith might

be seen as corrupt, but out in the fields and villages, it's a very important part of the smallfolk's lives. Births, deaths, marriages, education, healing, even matters of law, or sin rather, all of that is seen to by the septons and septas." His father nodded, as did Hathan, the only Northerner there who followed what the Northerners called the New Gods.

Daenerys shrugged, not really understanding it but when Ranma nodded agreement with the others she at least willing to listen to it. "Very well, I suppose we can see what he wants to say, though if Damon Paege is well enough to take part, could we ask him to join us? He might be able to tell us who this is."

It turned out that Damon was indeed well enough to take part, though not to actually move. Smalljon, with quite a bit of grumbling went with Dacey to get him bringing Damon and a sofa back just for him. However he didn't know who the septon was.

"We have a septa here in the keep, she's quite a pretty girl if a little too quick to feed me concoctions, still very easy on the eyes. But Fairmarket's septon passed away several years ago, and we never received a replacement. There is a wandering septon who stops in occasionally. If it's him, he's a good, firm believer in the Faith, not like the septons in the city are supposed to be like, though his feet are rather scary looking, like, like the feet of a tree almost." Damon said rambling slightly, a sign of the latest concoction that the 'pretty young septa' had given him.

A moment later the septon entered. He was a small thin, grey-haired man. He wore simple woolen robes, which looked rough to the touch, and no shoes on his feet. Like Damon had said they looked so rugged and tough they more closely resembled gnarled roots than normal feet. His eyes were hard, yet they and his mouth, which at the moment was set in a thin line, had smile lines around them interspersed with the grimmer lines and those made simply by his face being too often in the sun.

"Septon Sparrow!" said Damon, smiling brightly, almost pushing himself up off his sofa but Edd reached over and gently pushed him back down.

"Hello, young Damon." said the septon, his mouth curving upwards in a thin smile for a moment. "Do not move on my account my boy, you have obviously taken enough hurts of late. In that vein" the man said, now turning those deep, appraising eyes on Myrcella. "The Mother, the Maiden and the Crone bless you for your work in healing the smallfolk after this battle, my child."

Myrcella blushed scarlet, stammering that she hadn't done anything much to deserve a blessing like that, but Ranma and Daenerys both shook their heads. "You and maester Martyn saved a lot of lives Myrcella. If it wasn't for your organization and for his healing skills, there would be hundreds more dead among the smallfolk especially."

"Indeed, in this you have certainly risen above your abominable origins."

At that Myrcella's blushing stopped with the suddenness of a guillotine and she stared coldly at the septon while nearby Domic wincing. "You speak of the rumors from my uncle Stannis? I will note septon 'Sparrow', that he has not shared any evidence, he has merely shared blandishments!"

"Yet you cannot say that you or either of your siblings have anything of the Baratheon in looks, can you?" The septon said, ignoring for now Ranma's growling anger and Daenerys's violet eyes becoming harder as he almost seemed to interrogate the younger girl.

"That does not equate to any of us being of incestuous origins. And even if my older sibling is not the king's son, that does not mean I or my younger brother are not!"

"So you had already heard about those accusations?" asked Domic, looking at her askance. "Here I thought I was trying so hard to save your feelings."

"I shared with her that rumor after we broke the Twins, I felt she had a right to know." Ranma said shaking his head. *And I wanted her to scream and shout and get her initial response over with just me and Dae around before someone else brought it up, though I never thought a septon would be the one to do so.*

Now he spoke up before the rather abrasive old man could go on. "Stannis hasn't shared any proof about the incest accusation. As Merry said we do know that Joffrey isn't Robert son, but I won't tolerate any such accusation against Tommy. He was a nice, humble young boy who should have lived a long and fruitful life."

"As for Myrcella herself, we have asked the maesters who study lineages to send us proof by raven to Seagard about whether the daughters of previous unions between House Baratheon and House Lannister also followed the trend of taking after their father. We have not received any proof yet, so until we do, Myrcella is a trueborn princess of House

Baratheon. And you will treat her as such, am I clear?"

There was something very dangerous in Ranma's eyes just then, and almost against his will septon Sparrow found himself nodding. After a moment however, he realized that really he didn't have anything to lose in leaving that subject. Nor was Myrcella really the only issue with hand that he needed to delve into. "I will apologize then, I did not know that you were already looking into the matter, nor did I realize Stannis has yet to share any proof of his accusation of incest." He said calmly, though the words came out as if being drawn out of him, but they seemed sincere enough and Ranma nodded.

He looked at the older man appraisingly, scratching at his chin for a moment while absently noting that he needed to shave again. Everyone else could grow a beard, Ranma hated the damn things, they were itchy and uncomfortable in the extreme, which was possibly a holdout from his first lifetime. "I have had neutral and bad experiences with septons before. The High Septon is as corrupt as they come, and I doubt he believes in anything more than money. Yet on the other hand while I didn't particularly like the woman, Septa Mordane at least believed and followed the tenants of her Faith. At the moment I'm wondering where you fall on that scale. Are you an agent of the High Septon or are you equally corrupt but with your own agenda, one that puts you in Renly or Stannis' camp? Since the incest accusation can only help them, your questioning of Merry wasn't the best first impression either way."

"I am a septon of the Faith," said the Sparrow simply. "At present I am the only septon in this town or anywhere within walking distance and as such I have concerns, questions I need answers to share with both Fairmarket's flock and the rest of the Faithful."

"Septon Sparrow isn't tied to any lord or faction." Said Damon looking at the older man respectfully, his voice somewhat more firm and controlled than it had been. "He travels around, not just the Riverlands but everywhere I've heard. He goes to towns and villages that don't have their own septs and performs ceremonies, weddings and the like."

"I am a servant of the Faith." Said the older man humbly, bowing his head.

Ranma could tell from his attitude and tone that he really believed that, he wasn't trying to put on an air of false modesty, he honestly believed that. After moment of searching the man's face Ranma nodded. "If you wish to sit, sit septon, then ask your questions. So long as you do not share with anyone else my wife's presence or that of her little ones, we will answer them as best we may."

Daenerys nodded agreement, leaning back from where she had been leaning forward her hand still clasped with Ranma's. "Anything we can say to put the smallfolk's minds at ease on our intentions in the future is all to the good, though I will reiterate my husband's statement that your seeming interrogation of Princess Baratheon was ill-done."

The septon nodded, but remained standing. "The North is dominated by a heathen religion even if those who follow the old gods do not differ much from their sense of honor from those of the truth Faith, yet there are distinct differences there. The Targaryen family on the other hand has varied in its relationship with the Faith wildly since its arrival in Westeros. Worse, that family has almost always continued its abominable acts of incest! While you're actions here in Fairmarket have won you much respect, I must know what your intentions are towards the Faith. Will you replace the Faith of the Seven with that of the old gods, or something from Essos?"

"I'm not going to go around converting people by the sword if that's what you're asking." Ranma said, actually laughing at the very idea. "The old Gods religion isn't like that, we don't convert others to our faith, if you believe then that is enough. The old gods want willing believers, not those converted at sword point." Rickard and all the other Northerners nodded firmly.

*On the other hand, I'm not even certain if the 'The Seven' really exist,* Ranma mused. He wondered if the Faith of the Seven, the organization of the Faith, had replaced the actual faith of the Seven in people's minds so much that the actual god no longer had any power. If the majority of people were like those in King's Landing, simply acting as if they believed only when it suited them, performing the ceremonies and what-all but not really believing like a Northerner did in the old gods, then that might be case. Then there was the fact he hadn't yet seen any evidence of the Seven having power, as he had the old gods. He wasn't about to bring up that idea however.

For her part Daenerys smiled thinly, her words almost echoing Ranma's thoughts. "While I am nominally a follower of the Seven I was raised most of my life in Essos where to put it mildly religion is far more varied than here. I can think of at least fifteen or so religions off hand whose temples I've personally seen. I honestly don't think most people over there worship anything really save for the almighty coin, certainly no one I met was very religious regardless of the religion they followed. I would be willing to learn more about the Faith, I haven't been around a septon since I was... two? at the most. On the other hand, I have seen the strength and power of the old gods, I **know** they exist, and

magic as well. I cannot say the same of the Seven as yet, and I know the Faith doesn't allow for magic to exist."

That shocked septon Sparrow. "Whatever you saw were merely parlor tricks or heathen witchcraft young lady." He said sternly, forgetting Daenerys rank for a moment. "The old gods are dead and gone, and magic no longer exist in this world, the Faith has seen to that."

"Say that to the men who died under the Shadow Warriors blades when they attacked our ship from Kings Landing under Stannis' orders!" Ranma growled. "Say that to the undead wights I've seen, say that to the spirit of the woods when you stand in front of a living heart tree! You would sing a different tune then." Around him the rest of the northerners all nodded firm agreement.

Again something in Ranma's eyes caused the oldman to pause and he backed away from that topic. "I see. As I have not seen such proof, I cannot say I would agree with you, but it is obvious that you do believe it, and so I will say no more about it. Your word that you will not make the faith of the Old Gods the religion of the realm removes one worry, though we do have other concerns since neither of you were raised in the Faith, regardless of your being anointed by the seven holy oils at birth Your highness." He said looking at Daenerys.

"And those concerns are?" Daenerys asked.

"Certain laws of the land were based off of the Faith's beliefs, will you change them? This is in fact a major sticking point, because word has reached my ears of a rumor that King Joffrey has changed the law to allow for the royal house to have multiple wives. And then in your own case of course there is the well-known incest of the Targaryen line that must be addressed."

The first part of what he said caught Myrcella's attention, and Daenerys responded quickly. Before Myrcella could even so much as twitch Daenerys' elbow smacked into the side of her head slightly, while the platinum haired woman turned slightly toward her, mouthing 'No'.

Myrcella sighed and shrugged philosophically, as if to say that she really didn't care about the whole marriage thing just the joining bit. But at Daenerys's stern glare she pouted. Exhaustion was making her much more honest than she would normally be about so many people.

Thankfully everyone else was staring at the septon in shock. "What?" Ranma exclaimed, "**Why**, that's so, so..."

"Blasphemous?" said septon Sparrow helpfully.

"I was going to say idiotic really." Ranma said shaking his head. "Of all the things he should be doing, he concerns himself about that?"

Myrcella yawned, shaking her head as everyone turned to look at her. "I'm sorry I've had a very long day." She said, apologizing before looking over at Ranma. "But I think you're overlooking something. My brother isn't the one in charge in Kings Landing, he's an incompetent you should know that."

"I do, but still, what, you think this was your mother's attempts to distract him or something?"

"No she dotes on him, but that idea would never have occurred to her, though if it was indeed made into law without her knowledge she will run with it." Myrcella replied bluntly. "This was probably Joffrey all the way, but could also become a political move. This way his hand in marriage can be used as a tool multiple times. But I bet he isn't thinking that way, or not really. Joffrey has never been one to give up anything that he really wanted, and this will allow him to both appease mother and get what he really wants: Sansa."

All the Riverlanders and even Septon Sparrow, for all his self-control, quailed as a **growl** went around the room. "Never!" snarled Ranma his hand crushing the side of the sofa unconsciously in his free hand. "That little shit will **never** touch my sister, no matter what else happens!"

Around him his two siblings and the rest of the wolfsworn all nodded while the three massive direwolves, picking up on their bonded's moods growled deep in their throats, causing the septon to shudder slightly, wondering how the Starks controlled the massive beasts but deciding not to address it right now. "So you will not do something of that nature?" he asked.

"No!" said Ranma shaking his head emphatically, the word coming out through clenched teeth.

"As for the incest that is so much on your mind septon I can promise you that that will not occur as well." Daenerys said smoothly taking over from Ranma as he looked ready to tear into someone at the very idea that Joffrey still had



designs on Sansa. "To put it bluntly, I think that was a mistake all along, and one that I will not continue. I would even be willing to put that into law to appease the Faith if needed, as well as a promise to put into law the idea of freedom of religion, while also repealing that bit of idiocy."

Septon Sparrow stared into the Targaryen girl's purple eyes then slowly nodded. "I will hold you to that as will the Faithful Your Highness." Despite his almost challenging tone however septon Sparrow was cautiously pleased with how this interview had gone. Yes, he wasn't coming away with what he had hoped to come away with, he had failed to talk either of the would-be royals into converting, but placing freedom of belief in the laws of the land was an excellent idea, along with outlawing incest even in the royal family.

"Do you have any other questions or horses to drop on us?" Ranma asked sarcastically crossing his arms and staring at the older man.

"Not a present, though I will ask you what your intentions toward the lands of your enemies are, and more importantly those who work them. Far too often the smallfolk pay for the wars of their nobles."

"Not in this war, not on our side of things at any rate." Ranma said shaking his head, then went on to explain his policy of what they would do with prisoners.

Any smallfolk levy captured would have to work a year on various royal projects before being allowed to return home with room and board paid for throughout that year by the crown, or could go to the Wall and join the Night's Watch. Armsmen, Knights sworn to Houses that fought against Ranma and Daenerys would be forced to work on such projects for five years. Before being offered that choice any enemy that was captured or surrendered would have to first be cleared of further wrongdoing against the men and women of the Riverlands, such as rape, theft or murder of a noncombatant.

Those lords that followed House Lannister unwillingly or under coercion could be allowed to return to their lands after the war was over after paying reparations but they would never be allowed to have more than fifty armsmen to their name after the war. The Westerlands lords would face paying similar restitutions only somewhat less so since they were following their oaths to their Lord Paramount and couldn't be blamed for that.

Any lord from the Riverlands like Lord Bracken or Vypren who joined the Lannisters willingly would have their houses removed from the nobility, their lands seized and themselves executed along with any heir that followed them willingly. Their womenfolk would be dealt with on a case by case basis.

On the other hand Ranma's forces weren't going to go out of their way to capture lords as most armies did for their ransom. Indeed though he wasn't going to mention it now of course, Ranma was going to instigate in-battle assassination of lords in the near future. Since they were often officers as well, the chaos this would generate would make any battle much easier.

The Lannisters however, their fate would be decided after the war. Ranma chanced to look at Myrcella as he said that, though the younger girl did not catch it, having fallen asleep against the side of the sofa. Ranma turned his attention back to Septon Sparrow, smiling faintly. "Does that satisfy you?"

"And the actions of your own Army? What are the fates of those among your own men who prey upon the smallfolk?"

"Castration or death." Ranma said bluntly. "They know that too, I gave a speech about that soon after we started marching from Winterfell. No one's pushed me on it yet, thankfully."

Septon Sparrow actually smiled, his austere face seeming much kinder for a moment. "I could wish most knights felt that way, and most nobles too. I thank you my Lord, my Lady, you have answered all of my questions. With that I will take my leave."

The two royals nodded, dismissing the fellow and was about to turn to the others to say that they should break up for the night when the guard at the door who had just ushered the septon out poked his head back in. "Um, my lords, there's a man here who claims to be an Iron Bank representative. He, um, he wants to talk to you."

Ranma groaned leaning his head back. It had been a long day, and he really would like some sleep. He wasn't exhausted physically, but mentally and emotionally certainly. Towns and villages were not places for battle, and it would be a long time before he stopped remembering some of the sights he had seen today.

"I don't think most of us have anything to say to any Braavosi, let alone one from the Iron Bank." Said Arya, getting up swiftly. She had disliked the talk about the Faith, since she felt the Seven were rather ridiculous, but not nearly as

irritating as money matters. She, Nymeria and the rest of the wolfsworn hurried out, not one of them very interested in such matters like that.

Motioning Dacey to wait for a moment, Daenerys gently shook Myrcella awake. The Mormont woman did so, then helped Myrcella to her feet and escorted her out of the room. Ser Barristan stayed, having remained silent throughout the discussion with the septon, moving over to lean against the wall along with Rickard and Lord Mallister.

Seconds later the guard showed in another man. He was an older man, small, and thin looking, with a bald head, and a calm deliberate manner even when simply walking into the room. He was dressed in simple yet well-made clothing, and a heavy Iron and gold torque hung from his neck down his chest. Though stamped from the same cloth he was not the Iron Bank representative that had spoken to Cersei and Joffrey weeks back. In this war-torn time the Iron Bank had seen fit to send several different representatives, along with their bodyguards, to search out the various claimants to the Iron Throne and sound them out on the payment of the debt the Iron Throne had accrued.

"Lord Stark." The man began with a faint nod of the head. "I am a representative of the Iron Bank of Braavos, I am here to ask what you will do in regards the massive debt the Iron Throne has accrued to us in the past few years if you win the throne. Lord Stark, your father, did a magnificent job in trying to offset that debt and set up a payment plan for the debt. We wish to know if you will continue his work if you win the throne and honor that lawful debt."

He smiled thinly. "Needless to say if you did agree to that, certain... aid at present can be yours." He was authorized to make that somewhat open-ended offer because Stark honor was well known to be as firm as granite, and because of the work Eddard had done as Hand before the start of open hostilities.

"No." Ranma said bluntly. "Why should we? It wasn't us who went into debt to you in the first place. We have no connection to either the queen or the former king who did so."

"But it was not the king or the queen who is in debt, it is the throne itself." The iron Bank representative riposted. "If you claim the Iron Throne, then the debt of the Iron Throne is yours."

Daenerys shook her head. "I am afraid Ser, that the Iron Throne is done. It was a magnificent symbol in its time of my family's strength and power, the unification of Westeros into one nation, but it has failed since. The throne is done, and any debt it holds as well. We are starting afresh, building on the old but not a part of it. As such, to talk of us owing money accrued by the Iron Throne is laughable."

"Such an action will set a bad precedent." said the Iron Bank representative, now in a much colder tone of voice. "The Iron Bank is due that money, and we will be paid it, one way or the other."

Ranma laughed. "Really? Would your bank really wish to stick its nose in the mire that is Westeros right now? You'd lose a lot more than you'd gain doing so. And you would be called on it after too. So is the Iron Bank willing to lose Westeros as a place where clients can be found entirely?"

Beside him Daenerys remained silent staring at the other man, wondering what the Iron Bank would do. She knew the Iron Bank was actually much more powerful than any simple bank could be. In many ways it was more powerful than the city it was based in, and it had tendrils everywhere. *But I'm not going to bend over backwards to please them either, there is no lawful way the debt Robert Baratheon built up could ever be applied to Ranma or I.*

"The Iron Bank will have its due, and will take any action it needs to do so." The man replied grimly. He knew that the bank needed to make certain that people couldn't think they could renege on their debts like that, even if doing so cost more than the debt itself. And he knew that the bank had some connections elsewhere, connections that could give them a force that would be able to survive here in Westeros.

"That's nice." Ranma shrugged. "Then I suggest you talk to the other would-be kings, you won't get any help from us."

"That was a little more blunt than I would have been, Ranma." Daenerys said later that evening as she and Ranma cuddled in bed. She arched her back luxuriating as Ranma ran his hands down her naked back. Neither of them was in the mood to make love after the bloody day's events, but that hadn't stopped them from cuddling for a time. "Yet it seemed to get the message across at least."

"You know the Iron Bank better than I do, Dae." Ranma replied, leaning his head back looking down into her violet eyes. "Are they really going to do anything? Or was that all a bluff?"

Daenerys shook her head, her hair moving almost sensually against Ranma's bare chest. "They'll do something but I don't know what. I think that will depend upon if any of the other 'kings' agree to pay them off in time, which I just can't

see unless one of them faces major military defeats and feels the Iron Bank can help them recover. If none of them do agree to pay that debt of theirs, I have no idea at that point."

"That was my thought as well. So, do they have a standing army or anything? And if they find a backer here, what forces could they send?"

"I am uncertain if they have a standing army, though they could certainly purchase enough mercenaries to make one, possibly a sizable one given time. Though most mercenaries would not be up to the standards of most of the Westeros armies, and they wouldn't be very disciplined either, unless they pay for the Golden Company itself. They wouldn't have any trouble transporting an army however, since the Iron Bank owns or has stocks in hundreds of ships. Still, any such move as that is at least half a year down the line."

"Assassins might be more of a threat however. Especially if they are turned down, I could see the Iron Bank buying the services of the Faceless Men to simply wipe out every claimant to the Iron Throne then move in with a puppet who would organize a payment plan."

Ranma frowned thinking about what he knew about the Faceless Men. They were assassins that could apparently go anywhere and slip past the best guards, experts with poison, knife and bow. There were even tales of them changing their appearances well beyond simple disguises too, the better to sneak in and out to claim their target for their Many-Faced-God. *And given what all else seems to be happening in the world, I bet those tales have some truth to them these days*, he thought grimly.

After a moment he nodded grimly. "They aren't the only ones who might go that route. I'm going to assign Ser Barristan to you permanently, I think he'll do a great job at leading your guards from now on. I certainly don't need a bodyguard, not with Fenris to sniff out any poisons. But from now on, you eat either with me and the direwolves or your dragons present to sniff out anything in your meals if you think your dragons can do that. And I think you should choose a few of the Northerners to guard your dragons when you aren't around them."

"Dragons are nearly un-killable with poisons, still best not to tempt fate and I think they will be able to sniff out dangers, I'm not certain. You realize though that in a couple of months they'll reach an age where they will attack anyone around them not of Targaryen blood?"

"At that point I'll assign Fenris, Nymeria or Ghost to be with them at all times when you can't be." Ranma said with a nod. "Though I haven't noticed that tendency in them yet."

"That's because I've been very careful to not allow any adults near them except those they have been introduced to and seemingly accept." Daenerys replied, her brow furrowed. "They like children for some reason, I get the impression it's simply because they don't smell as much as adults do and can be wheedled into giving them scratches. Well, Sunfyre seems to get along well enough with children Rhaegon on the other hand is much pickier. He is the one I'm most worried about lashing out if he's startled or finds himself around strangers."

"Something to keep in mind." Ranma said with a nod.

"What are our plans going forward?" Daenerys asked.

"I'd like to go see my grandfather, but we can't take the time for that now. We need to bring the army back together, but also need to keep attacking. We've got the momentum now, but the Lannisters have too much defense in depth for us to keep it for long enough to finish them off, unless... Well, I have a plan, or at least the outline of one. All talk to Jon and the others about it in the morning. But we also need to bring the Riverlands houses east of the Green Fork to our side, which means sending you to talk to them. How long do you think it might take you to convince them to stop sitting on the defense and join us?"

Daenerys frowned, almost thinking for a moment that Ranma was simply sending her away but she realized after a moment he had a point. Some of those houses after all had proven more loyal to her house than to their Lord Paramount, so sending her to talk to them would be an excellent step in the right direction. "All right, I can understand that need. I think it should take me... well once I get there two weeks at most to bring them all to our side? But you're not going to tell me anything else just yet?"

"Not yet." Ranma said with a sigh. "I need to go over the map first make certain most of its doable, and then..." he shrugged. "The tactics are workable, it's the overall strategy that's the question." He smirked then. "I'll give you a pair of hints though: First, there's an old saying, 'all war is deception'. And the next clue is, 'strategic offense, tactical defense.'"

Daenerys looked at him, her mind almost visibly clicking along behind her violet eyes. Eventually she nodded. "You're going to seemingly give Tywin what he wants, then take it away? Or perhaps dangle bait in front of him then when he tries to grab it hammer him with something he doesn't see coming, to turn one of his strategic assets against him?"

Ranma smiled, hugging her, one hand gently cupping her bare rump. "Yep, that's pretty much it. Lord Lannister thinks his defensive position is unassailable and that his numbers give him a tremendous advantage. We'll see if we can't turn them into weaknesses."

OOOOOO

A *disaster*, Margaery thought to herself as she marched into Highgarden's meeting hall, *that is what we're dealing with here*. The raven-carried message that said Willas had been forced to retreat over the Golden River was one thing. He even sounded somewhat upbeat about it, though Margaery doubted he really was. Still Willas was obviously doing the best he could. But the disaster that had befallen the Shield Islands and the Arbor, that was something else entirely.

It had given her grandmother a heart attack, and it was only because of septa Nysterica being there that she was still alive at all. Her son-in-law Paxter's death and the worry about what about what might be happening on the Arbor to the rest of the Redwyne family, especially her daughter Mina, had broken through Olenna's normally solid as oak self-control. Even now Nysterica and Alerie, Margaery's mother, were seeing to her, leaving Margaery to act as the sole Tyrell in Highgarden, for now at least.

Margaery however was more worried about the Mander and what the Ironborn could do if they began to raid up it. The Shield Islands had so long been the staunch shield they were supposed to be for the Mander that much of the defenses along it had been allowed to fade or fall apart. Ignoring the two men across the meeting hall's table for a moment, she stared down at the map. Only after staring at it for several moments did Margaery look over at the two most senior commanders left in High Garden. "We face a crisis Sers, and I would like to hear some options on how best to mitigate it."

"Reinforce the city defenses as much as we can my lady." The older of the two said, with a shrug. Igon Vyrwel was captain of the guard of the castle of Highgarden, and though not very experienced in warfare, knew the defenses of the castle and its capabilities like the back of his hand.

"I am afraid Ser Igon's right. We don't have enough man power on hand to do more than that, your majesty. Indeed, if we are attacked we might have to pull back from the outer wall entirely and defend only the inner one." Despite her not having married Renly her great-uncle Garth, who served as the seneschal of the castle, was always punctilious about using that royal address for her, no doubt something her father had insisted on.

"But we cannot sit on the defensive either, Sers! The Mander would allow an Ironborn raiding fleet to sail right up to us and besiege the castle." As a castle and a city, Highgarden was susceptible to sieges of that nature just like most other cities. The city resided between the outer and inner walls, with the inner walls defending the castle of House Tyrell. "What is worse Sers, is that sitting on the defensive here will allow the Ironborn to raid along the Mander south of here with impunity!"

After a moment's thought, Igon shrugged. "We could fortify castle Oldflowers, it's right on the river much like Highgarden. And as a Noble House they should have retained at least two hundred or more men at their castle. But that would leave Highgarden undefended."

Margaery took a moment to find that castle on the map then frowned. "So House Oldflowers is the best position? Are you sure? There are numerous villages and settlements further out along the river before that..."

"But no other defensible position, my lady." Igon said sorrowfully. "None of the towns and villages along the river before that have any kind of keep or even a holdfast. Even House Graves' keep is in a worse position, because they didn't leave any men behind. Lord Graves took his entire complement of armsmen, knights and even his two sons to war with Lord Tyrell. Apparently he is hoping to win glory for his house, enough to offset their troubles."

"Can Oldflowers be bypassed by ships on the river?" Margaery asked intently.

Igon and Garth looked at one another, both of them trying to remember what they could of House Oldflowers' seat. Neither could however, until Igon remembered that the master-at-arms of the keep, Ser Vortimer Crane, had been there in his youth. They sent for him, and when asked the question, Vortimer replied after only a moment's thought, his accent, a legacy of a youth spent at sea, very evident. "Yes milords, milady, Oldflowers ships c'd move past it, but if'n the castle's ballista and catapults'er still good the ships'd take a right pounding."

"But my lady, all this is supposition." Garth said after dismissing the man. "We can't send enough forces to Oldflowers to hold the castle in strength when we barely retain enough men here to defend even the inner wall."

"Too many men away at war." Said Margaery almost to herself then shook her head. "We sent too much our strength out too quickly to back Renly oh-so pretty Baratheon! Father damn him and damn us for being fools!"

Garth actually gulped a little at the vitriol in Margaery's voice, letting loose one of the gassy excretions that had earned him the name Garth the Gross from Margaery when she was younger. "I-in your father's defense my lady, no one could have anticipated an attack like this from the Iron Islands, at least not one that was so successful. The Shield Islands coming under attack yes, but the Arbor itself?! Our fleet outnumbered the Iron Fleet two to one!"

News of the battle for the Arbor's disastrous start had come with the first raven from Oldtown sent by Ser Desmond Redwyne, who was acting as admiral of the fleet for now. It was heartening news that so many ships have been able to retreat even if most of them weren't true war galleys. With them they would be able to lift enough men to retake the Arbor from the Ironborn, but that would take more men than Oldtown had on hand.

*And it would take time, Margaery thought to herself, shaking her head. Will they concentrate on strengthening their position on the island, or reave deeper into the Mander from the Shield Islands? The Ironborn have always been too grasping, too eager to raid and plunder rather than hold to what they have already taken. I think...*

"With the men still here we can protect Highgarden, but if we do that, we won't be able to stop them raiding anywhere they want along the Mander and I'm not certain we could defend the city from them anyway. We don't have enough trained men to man the walls against a full on assault, and I refuse to pull back to the inner wall and let the smallfolk who look to us to protect them defenseless!"

"Great-uncle, I want a proclamation calling for archers among the smallfolk of the city and elsewhere on our House's lands to go out within the hour. I want to start seeing archers coming forward today. They are to be paid as armsmen for the duration of this emergency, and anyone who comes forward is to be told that, and given the first week's wages at once."

House Tyrell's coffers would easily pay that, in fact they could pay for over 100,000 such wages without making too large a dent in their treasury, though Margaery doubted she would get more than two-thousand or so archers, but any of them who could prove that they could pull a bow in battle would be worth it. "I also want the city watch to start training to a higher degree. If push comes to shove, I want them to be able to take their own places along the wall."

"But that will be a final defense." Margaery went on. "All the armsmen and archers we have presently here in the castle are to move out by sun up tomorrow to reinforce castle Oldflowers."

"I respectfully disagree with that decision your majesty." Garth said, shaking his head almost patronizingly. "As Vortimer said, Oldflowers can be bypassed. If we send our forces there, they'll simply move on from it."

"Not if I go with them and if it is known and spread about that I did. In fact we'll bring along House Tyrell's flag and place it there in plain sight." Margaery said firmly. "I would think that the only daughter of Lord Tyrell would be a prize the Ironborn could never turn away from."

Both men looked at each other then fell over one another in their attempts to convince Margaery not to put herself in danger like that, but Margaery was resolute and rode over their concerns swiftly. "With my grandmother incapacitated I speak for my family here. Are you saying I don't?" She asked one eyebrow arching in a way that Ranma would have shivered to see, reminding him far too much of Nabiki at that moment.

Her two advisors however reacted just as much. Garth let loose a series of excretions, while the captain of the guard looked down, cowed.

"Besides, it won't be for long, only until Garlan can return with enough men to make both Oldflowers and Highgarden secure." Margaery thought for a moment, going through the knights who she knew that were still in residence in the house.

Thankfully Horas the Halfwit was not among them, nor was his brother, who in her opinion was a little worse than him. One in particular came to mind, a man that her brothers all respected for his steadfast loyalty and perseverance. "Send for Ser Willam Wythers, and assign him five other men. I have a mission for him."

With that she dismissed the two older men despite their continued protests, her frosty and haughty demeanor cowing them both despite her being a young woman possibly with the help of Olenna's vicious tongue lashing looming over

their minds. After they left Margaery turned her attention to penning a letter for her brother.

It was simple enough: 'Garlan, a catastrophe has occurred. The Arbor and Shield Islands have all been taken by the Ironborn in a surprise attack. They somehow used crew fire-ships to destroy much of the fleet in their docks, we do not know how the Shield Islands were overcome. Enough ships survived so we might be able to win them back, but we need more men both along the Mander and in Oldtown with the fleet. I trust you to do the right thing. Your sister, Margaery.'

She could have mentioned that her grandmother was incapacitated by the news, but it was unnecessary. Garlan would know what to do. Margaery put that note to the side, then began to pen another message, which was certainly not to her brother. This one was much longer, filling up the piece of parchment from top to bottom in small lettering, but it would hopefully help both her and her family in the long run.

By the time she was done Ser Willam had been found, and both he and his men were ready to go. Willam came up to the meeting hall, and bowed formally. He was a little below middle-aged, of average size though his shoulders were wide, with light brown eyes and brown hair. "Milady, you have a mission for me?"

"Ser Willam." Margaery said looking up at him with a faint smile. "All three of my brothers agree that you are a good, dependable man, one of few things that all three agree on I can tell you. I have a mission for you, should you choose to volunteer for it."

"My lady does me too much credit." Willam said bowing his head slightly, not obsequiously, simply modestly.

"I hope not, because I'm going to put that dependability to the test. She said holding up one missive. "This is for my brother Garlan. We'll be sending a raven ahead, and that might reach him if he's got to Bitterbridge already, but if not, you might be able to find him faster than the raven can. I hope you do, because that will mean that his march back won't take as long."

William bowed. "I will find your brother milady, have no fear."

"That I don't have a fear about, it should be a relatively easy task. The next one however, is the one which I ask you to volunteer for. I want you to find Ranma Stark for me and deliver him this."

Margaery passed over the next message as William looked at her in shock. "Milady, the Starks have raised their banners...."

"Against the Lannister regime, not against House Tyrell. As far as I know he has no issues with our House, and if we can keep such from happening, we might be able to convince him to ally with us further down the line. I know for a fact he doesn't want to take the throne for himself, which will leave an opening there my father will accept."

Actually Margaery didn't know anything of the sort, Ranma might be willing to take the throne simply because he didn't trust any of the other claimants with it, and frankly at this point she couldn't blame him. *Damn father and his eagerness, we should never have sent so much of our strength to war! Garlan at least and the second echelon should've remained here in Highgarden at least. The first echelon should've been more than enough force but no, father was so convinced of the bigger hammer idea just like Renly! Men!*

Willam nodded thoughtfully, taking in her words, not knowing the vitriol of her thoughts. "I see, that makes sense Your Highness, but surely he's still up in the North."

"No he isn't." Margaery replied shaking her head. Olenna had received a message from one of their factors in Seagard telling them that the Northern army had been there, as well as the rumors of what had happened to the Twins. "He'll be somewhere in the Riverlands by this point."

"Are you sure you're grace? I don't doubt that the Stark boy is an exceptional warrior, but to move an army that quickly?" Willam wasn't scared of dying, but he knew the Riverlands was a war zone right now, and the Crownlands might well be heading in that same direction.

"Oh yes, Ranma is far more capable than most would give him credit for, and that extends to his ability to get the most out of his men. Just look for a victorious army celebrating a victory somewhere in the Riverlands. Trust me, that'll be him." Margaery said dryly.

Later that day Margaery was accosted by her mother as she continued to put Highgarden on a wartime footing. Alerie Tyrell was a tall, dignified woman with hair that had gone prematurely silver, the only sign of age anywhere on her face or body. Most of the time she ran the household and remained in the background, having no interest in war,

politics or anything but the running of the castle and her family.

It was that second concern that made her come to see her daughter now. "I have heard a disturbing rumor Margaery, that you are going to travel with the armsmen we're sending to castle Oldflowers? Tell me this is just a rumor."

"I'm afraid it isn't mother." Margaery said, looking up from writing out the missive that would be carried into Tyrell lands. They were already getting archers from the city's smallfolk, a very good sign. "I need to go, to show the Ironborn a prize that they can't possibly ignore."

"But you'll be in danger!" Alerie said, almost losing her composure at the very idea of her daughter being that close to the raping, murderous Ironborn. "Please, just send your personal banner and a servant dressed as you. Will that not do the same thing?"

"It might then again it might not depending on if rumors spread to the Ironborn. Moreover the morale of our own men is a factor to consider. If I send a double it will appear as if this is all a forlorn hope, that I do not trust them enough to keep me safe." Margaery shrugged, then turned from her desk to take her mother's hand. "I understand your concern mother, and I don't like to distress you like this, but to be blunt these are distressing times. If I can do my part in keeping Highgarden safe, I need to do so."

Alerie looked at her daughter, or rather the young woman that had been her daughter, and sighed. "As headstrong as your father, I could wish you got more of my personality! Still, if you are set on this I will only wish you luck." She smirked suddenly. "And I will make certain not to mention your absence to mother, I doubt she could handle the strain at present."

Margaery sighed with relief at that, causing her mother to laugh, but there was an edge of seriousness in that. Olenna wasn't in the best of health now, she would pull through, but it remained in question what shape her body or mind would be in.

The next day she rode out on a horse at the head of the remaining armsmen of her family, marching proudly with her personal banner over her head. And in her bodice, Margaery had a small hold out dagger that Ranma had given her and taught her to use. One never knew, after all.

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The next day, Domic and Alayaya made themselves at home, routing out anyone who was sending out information as to what had happened in the town to anyone elsewhere. They didn't find many, only a single small scale merchant who was sending information to the Reach of all places, but was more than willing, with the damage to the town laying all around him, to leave off such. This, along with the fact the Lannister's acts against the smallfolk had cut them off from the local rumor mill, might allow Ranma to plan a bit of a surprise down the line for Tywin.

He had hoped that would be the case, hence why he and Daenerys hadn't used the banner Sansa had created yet, or the dragons except in cases where the enemy could be beaten in such a way as to keep news from spreading. The problem with armies at this level of technology was they were out of the information loop, only able to send easily not receive, unless they had partisans among the locals who had that ability.

Bracken and the other local lords Tywin had coerced or forced did not have that ability. While rumor might reach Tywin eventually about the dragons returning, he was a man who wouldn't believe such until his agents could back it up. This might allow Ranma and Daenerys an opportunity to use her dragons decisively on many different levels despite their still not being the strongest or most agile flyers.

While the two spymasters were at work Ranma and Myrcella went to see the prisoner that Jon had taken, Ser Addam Marbrand. Ranma hoped to use the man to plant some long term seeds as it were.

As the only noble prisoner (only prisoner really) they had taken, the Marbrand heir had a room all to himself in the keep though it didn't have any windows and the guards were specifically ordered not to talk in his entered first, one eyebrow quirked in amusement at the man who was lying back on his cot staring at the ceiling. "Addam Marbrand?"

The man looked up at him smirking. "That would be me, and you would be?"

"Ranma Stark. Ranma answered cocking his head slightly at the other man. "You met my brother Jon, he's the one that knocked you out if you've somehow forgotten. Head wounds are tricky like that."

"Oh I've had head wounds before, this was more of a love tap than many really. Jon **was** much quicker than I'd expected though." The man replied blithely, reminding Ranma strongly of Jaime for a moment despite not looking at

all like the golden-haired Lannister. Though having much the same build as the Kingslayer, Addam had dark, shoulder-length copper colored hair and dark brown eyes.

Now those eyes hardened. "It is a mistake I will not make again."

"Hah, if you're looking for a rematch I suppose Jon would oblige you, though I doubt you'd fare any better against him a second time." Ranma said chuckling at the other man's bravado. "On a more serious note, I regret to inform you that I don't believe in playing that old ransom game."

"So what you're here to talk to me before sending me to the gallows?" Addam asked.

"In the North we don't use gallows." Ranma replied coldly, losing his jocular tone as he fingered Ice's hilt where it rode in its sheathe on his back. "The man who passes the sentence wields the sword."

"Ranma." said Myrcella from behind him pushing forward lightly to get him of the doorway. "Enough of that." After Ranma moved to one side and Myrcella moved in, looking at the Westerlands knight with her head cocked to one side. "I don't know if you remember me Ser Addam, but I believe we met once when I traveled with my mother and siblings to the Rock when I was... five or six I think? You and my uncle put on a show of swordsmanship for us all." She blushed faintly. "I'm sorry to say that's the only reason I remember you."

"You were quite young your highness," said the man, swiftly getting to his feet before bowing floridly. "It is good to see that these northern dogs have treated you appropriate to your station."

"I am not a prisoner Ser." Myrcella said, her own voice becoming cold for a moment before warming as she looked over at Ranma. "I am a guest of honor, and an ally of Ranma Stark." She then turned back to Addam, frowning as she took in his bandaged chest and the blood clotting his hair on one side. "Did someone actually look at that, or did they just toss some bandages on you before putting you in here?"

"Um, just bandaged me your highness, but I am not badly hurt, thank you for your concern, nothing cracked just some nasty bruises." Addam replied, then looked mystified as Merry rolled her eyes and turned to shouts some orders out the door.

Ranma laughed lightly. "Our Merry has become quite the healer since we left King's Landing. I'd just go with it if I were you."

While they waited for the supplies Merry had bellowed for, she turned back. "A lot has changed since then yes." She went on to describe to Addam what had occurred in King's Landing, which she, Daenerys and Ranma had all agreed she should share with the man if he was going to be used as a messenger to her grandfather. Ranma didn't really think anything would come of it quickly, but he was willing to muddy the waters.

"So I really had no choice but to come with the Northerners, and since Ranma returned, he has put me under his personal protection. And frankly with all I suspect I would be killed if I ever return to King's Landing." Myrcella finished, then turned back to the doorway, taking the medical supplies, some new bandages, and a small bottle of firemilk with a smile for the guard before turning back. "Now, tilt your head for me please."

Somewhat bemused Addam obeyed, wondering where this officious little thing had come from since all the rumors about her had said Myrcella had a gentle, shy disposition. He winced occasionally at her touch and the touch of the spirits she was using to disinfect his head wound, but not much.

"A princess needs no northern dogs protection or wouldn't if said northern dog knew who his master was." Addam said after a moment, looking over at Ranma and almost visibly deciding to ignore the princess's ministrations.

Ranma laughed. "If you're trying to get a rise out of me for some reason Ser Addam, you better try harder. Besides, what do you think would happen to you if you did anyway? I routinely beat Jon in our spars easily." *Well not easily really, but routinely certainly.*

"Can't fault a man for trying." Addam muttered, having thought he might have been able to make a break for the door if Ranma would try to move forward to attack him, or at least taint the northern whelp in the princess' eyes. It was obvious the girl liked him too much for their disparate positions. Still he didn't really want try to fight Ranma one on one anyway. The tale of Ranma literally ripping apart Gregor Clegane had spread to the Westerlands well before this. "Why are you here then, if not to gloat?"

"I said I wouldn't be asking for a ransom for you and I meant it. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to use you as a messenger. First though, can you tell me if anything new has been discovered about Tommy's death?"



Addam blinked at the sudden change of topic, then blinked again at the nickname of the dead prince. "No, certainly nothing about it had reached the Army before I led the assault force here. But, I, why, I mean, he's been dead for months now, and his murderer too." He flinched then as he looked over at where Merry had just pulled back from him, having bandaged the side of his head to her satisfaction. "My apologies your highness, of course it would be playing on your mind still, but I had thought that a cut and dried matter of the poisoner being found red-handed."

"Too red-handed," said Ranma and Myrcella as one. Ranma laughed lightly then, before motioning for Merry to talk. "I was always leery of that story, it seems too false to me. I talked to Tyene a few times, and she always struck me as rather intelligent and subtle of mind."

"For my part," Ranma interjected, "I thought that Tyene was too bright to let herself be caught with the poison still on her like that. If she even had a reason to attack Tommy. She was around Tommy dozens of times before that, why would she kill him?"

Addam scowled, looking at them both. "I don't know anything about what happened in King's Landing Stark, why are you asking me this?"

"I told you you're going to be used as a messenger. I want Lord Lannister to realize that there might be another player in this game, one that is willing to pit us all against one another. I tell you now, on my honor as a Stark that if Tommen was still alive, neither my father or I would ever have moved against the Queen. We both felt Tommy was beginning to show true Baratheon qualities, unlike Joffrey who has never shown anything of the sort. In that alone we agree with the propaganda the two Baratheon brothers are putting out, Joffrey is no Baratheon, though we have no idea why Stannis thinks he is a child of incest."

Addam glared at that slander, but said nothing and after a moment Ranma went on. "Tommen on the other hand, while not having any of the physical features of his father, was beginning to act a lot like him. And before his death, my father and Robert wished to name Tommen the heir, indeed they had decided on that a bare five days before Tommen was poisoned."

For a moment Addam was silent staring at Ranma. "The timing was that close? You swear that on your honor as a Stark?"

"Yes. Interesting coincidence isn't it?" Ranma said sarcastically.

"But if not the Martells, then who would want to pit the Lannisters and Starks against one another? The Tyrells?"

"Doubtful, maybe they could have schemed against Sansa and Joffrey's upcoming marriage, but they couldn't gain anything from Tommen's death. No, it was someone else within the court, someone who is willing to play that kind of underhanded game and had the resources to do it well."

"So either it really was the Martells and they were willing to sacrifice the Sand Snake, or the eunuch or the master of coin?"

"Someone who didn't want the Lions and the direwolves aligning that's all I know." Ranma replied with a shrug. "At the moment, we're still playing their game. I'm not going to stop, I won't say that I will, Joffrey isn't legitimate, nor worthy of the throne even if he was, but this war would never have broken out if Tommen was still alive."

"How can you stay with a man who..."

Merry shook her head before Addam could go on. "My brother is not a Baratheon, I've seen the proof of that. Besides, would you want a boy who doesn't know the difference between shooting water at a cat and ripping it's stomach apart to look at its babies on the throne?"

Addam gulped a little at the coldness in Myrcella's tone, startling from one of her lineage though her emerald eyes glared so much it reminded him starkly of her mother for a moment. "I, I see. I'll certainly pass your words on to Lord Lannister. What else do you want me to do to earn my freedom?"

"I want your word on your family's name that you will not raise your blade against the forces of House Stark, Tully or our allies for the remainder of this war."

"Just your forces?" Addam said with a smirk, recovering some of his attitude then laughed aloud as Ranma smirked back at him.

"It's a good offer my lord, especially since the Ironborn are on the move to judge from their predations into the Cape of Eagles. I have no doubt that a blade of your skill will be better used elsewhere." Ranma said with a laugh. "We'll let you go tomorrow morning, but remember what I said. I want Lord Lannister to think really hard about who benefited the most from Tommen's death, in the long and the short term."

With that, Ranma led Merry out of the room, leaving Addam to his thoughts. Once they were well away from the prisoner's room, Ranma put his arm around Merry's shoulders gently. "Sorry to bring up bad memories Merry, and sorry we couldn't come out and say that Joffrey was the one behind Tommy's death. But no one would believe it, not without the evidence staring 'em in the face."

Merry nodding nuzzling slightly into Ranma's side for a moment before the two of them were joined by Daenerys, who put her own arm around the younger girl from the other side. "I take it your bit of acting went over well?"

"I think so." Merry replied, smiling up at the only slightly taller Daenerys. "I hope it works, but..." Merry hoped that this bit of information might add up with all the other occurrences that Tywin had already heard from King's Landing and possibly convince her grandfather to back off from armed conflict with the Starks. After all, there were so many enemies elsewhere.

Ranma on the other hand knew there had already been too much blood spilled, not just in King's Landing but here in the Riverlands for that to happen. No, he wanted to just add a little more worry to Tywin, to make him spend just a bit more time worrying on what could be happening elsewhere. That kind of thing could add up over time. "We planted a seed at least. Now we just need to make certain he is sent on his way without hearing of you or your little ones, Daenerys."

The next day, while Ranma's men continued to aid in the rebuilding of the town and the reinforcement of its defenses, eight Stark men took Addam Marbrand out of his room. With Daenerys out with her little ones on the other side of the Blue Fork, they quickly left the keep and headed south for half a day. There they cut Addam loose and sent him on his way with three horses taken from the force that had attacked the town. He went on his way none the wiser about the Targaryen girl or her dragons but with his mind a-boil about other matters.

Later that same day, while Merry and her new bodyguard had returned to her work in the hospital, Ranma and Daenerys led a war council. Ser Grell and Ser Paege had arrived, racing ahead of their men by a good half a day, a move that might have had disastrous consequences if the Lannisters in the area hadn't been routed so badly. Still they were here now, and listened as Ranma described the bare bones of his plan to his senior commanders.

Newly arrived just in time for this conference, Desmond Grell stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Ambitious my lord, possibly too much, besides, what you're describing is pinpricks, not killing blows. Tywin's army might not be able to move as fast without supplies, but they'll still be able to live off the land. Worse, every successive attack will take more of your own strength away from the main battles."

"We don't need every part of the plan to work perfectly. Besides, I think Tywin is arrogant enough to set tactics over strategy, much like you Ser Desmond. Those pinpricks as you call them will cut his army off at the knees." Ranma replied.

Desmond scoffed, but seeing none of the others agreed with him didn't speak up again, admitting to himself he didn't really understand logistics either. Still it seemed farfetched to him.

"I like some of it nephew, but that bit about the second attack group splitting off, that might be too... well too good to be believed. Tywin's a cagy man, he might see through that, and besides, I don't know how much damage they'd be able to do on the other side of the Red Fork, not with the amount of men Tywin has and the smallfolk either serving him or having already fled." Rickard warned.

Jon was silent as was Daenerys both of them going over House Paege's map of the Riverlands.

But Jason Mallister shook his head and when he spoke his tone was impressed. "In politics, Tywin is cagy, as a general that is something very different. He didn't take part in Robert's Rebellion until the very end, his campaign against the Ironborn on Great Wyk didn't show any particular skill simply a high level of brutality, and the battles against the Houses he tore down when they challenged him in the Westerlands were simple affairs. Logistics and long term strategy didn't matter much if at all in them."

"You're talking a grand strategy, and moreover attacking him in such a way that none have done in the past. Like Desmond, we are all too used to thinking in terms of armies assaulting one another openly, of battles for position and head on clashes. This is an oblique approach, one I doubt he will see coming because, well it is so Un-Stark-like,

forgive me for saying so."

"It's a crooked way, I'll give you that," Ser Paige murmured, his eyes on Ranma, something a little like bemusement in them, as if he wasn't certain what he was seeing. Rickard was looking at him too, lips quirked in a very odd grimace. "But are you certain you can pull off even enough to give us a slight advantage in the field?"

"With this strategy my lords we have four arrows in our quiver." Daenerys murmured, not looking up from. "If one works we will gain a strategic advantage and at least split Tywin's attention then with each successful arrow going home, the damage becomes worse. It's a magnificent strategy, and I think it will work at least enough for us to gut Tywin's forces."

"What forces were you thinking for my role in this grand strategy yours, brother?" Jon asked.

"House Grell's men and seven hundred 'll make most of those numbers up with men from mountain clans along with two hundred archers. No horse though, the way you're going they would slow you down." Ranma replied.

His brother nodded, smiling grimly. That would give him a thousand men give or take, local guides plus excellent irregular infantry, the type that wouldn't be good for a shield wall, but in the woods..."I was going to ask for the clansmen in any case. They'll be perfect for this."

Jon's orders were to head down the Tumblestone, a river that ran down from the mountains of the Pendric Hills to meet up with the Red Fork at Riverrun. It was wild, utterly unnavigable by boat thanks to constant rocks, shoals, and a very fast current, which was one reason why there were no villages or farms along it, that and the fact most of it ran through heavy hills and dales. But that kind of terrain would pose no problem to Northerners, particularly mountain clansmen like the Wulls and the Burleys.

His objective was to follow it west then cross it and take Wayfarer's Rest, shutting down the logistics train from the Westerlands to Tywin's army. "Close the River Road any way you can." Ranma reiterated. "I don't care how much supplies they're getting from the traitorous Brackens or anyone else, that will hurt them. And if the rest of the campaign goes off as it should, then it will loom even larger in the stomachs of Tywin's troops..."

After that the meeting went on to more particulars, but after the battles he had won so far, none of Ranma's Northern fellows were willing to argue overmuch. The Riverlanders would have, but Jason actually agreed with Ranma that his strategy would work, which took the bite out of the other's argument. That very night Jon and his forces set out, marching through the night with House Grell's newly arrived men guiding them, heading west towards the Hag's Mire. After that they would cut straight south to make for the Whispering Woods.

The next day, with Ranma unwilling to wait for House Paege's scouts to get back to them, the rest of the army set out at midday moving quickly toward Shawney castle, ready for anything. They were accompanied by a force of woodsmen and carpenters, who would be useful to create barges that would carry a force of men further down the river to the Ruby Ford to link up with the defenders there as well as, by this point, the Northern army.

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A few days after Ranma's force left Fairmarket, another commander was thinking about barges as well. Garlan cradled the message from his sister in one hand, thinking hard as he gazed at the map in his other hand. "We have another week's worth of marching before we reach Bitterbridge... I want two men to take four horses, ride ahead of the army, tell whoever Caswell left in charge to start constructing as many barges as he can. We'll use them to barge down the Mander back to Highgarden, further if we can safely though I know not how deep in the Mander the Ironborn will be willing to raid so quickly after taking the Shield Islands."

Around him some of the other lords and knights nodded grimly. The Florent boy, Alekyne looked scared but given his lack of experience even in tourneys Garlan wasn't surprised by that. Garlan himself wasn't very experienced, and he knew it, but, at least he'd squired under one of the best generals in the Reach, which made up for it. The others, especially the Redwyne twins, looked worried, angry and determined.

Not all of them seemed to understand the danger though. "My lord, we are due to join the assault on King's Landing!" Said Steffon Verner, a Noble House whose seat was east of Highgarden. Steffon was Mace's age, and was eager to join the battle with his friend.

"We took too much of our strength off the defenses." Gunthor Hightower replied, his dark eyes narrowed in thought. He was another young man of Garlan's age who was known more for being bookish than any martial air but, as Willas had been quick to point out to Garlan, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. "We need to reclaim the Arbor and

the Shield Islands quickly, who knows how much damage the Ironborn can do to both the towns and the people there if we don't? And their ships can go deeper into the Mander than any war galley. Highgarden itself might be in danger if we don't turn back."

"Yes my lord, but we can't take the full army, your father's orders were explicit." Lord Martyn Mullendore said. Ostensibly sworn to House Hightower, they were a minor Noble House who had chaffed under that oath many a time. Here and now however Martyn, another man of Mace's age, and his son Mark were both eager to prove their House's worth on the field of battle. That was why their House had fielded a little over four thousand men, half of whom were heavy cavalry.

*And of course, cavalry is useless on ship-to-ship actions.* Garlan mused, a thought very few Reach knights would have been able to understand, let alone acknowledge. *I find it interesting though that he and lord Cuy both put forth nearly their entire strength, while Lord Hightower sent a bare two-thousand, five hundred or so, mixed infantry and cavalry. On the other hand, his infantry are all trained well above the rest of the 'infantry' the other houses provided...*

Out loud Garlan said, "You are right of course my lords, so we will split our army once we reach Bitterbridge." Over the next hour, while the army continued to march the lords began to hammer out how the army would split as well as who would command the force continuing to King's Landing.

Garlan decided to put Lord Arthur Ambrose in command of that force. Arthur had seniority and he was a thoughtful, intelligent man who had served with Lord Randyll Tarly in the vanguard of the Reach forces during the Robert's Rebellion in the only battle which the Reach really won in that war. The composition of the two forces went easily save for Cuy, Mullendore, and surprisingly Florent insistence that they and their forces keep going.

Florent was surprising because Garlan thought Lord Florent would have given his son orders to avoid any battle that might pit them against Stannis, given his niece's marriage to Stannis. Mullendore and Cuy too should have turned back with the Hightower contingent, as their Houses were sworn to Hightower. But since Gunthor didn't say anything, Garlan decided to not make an issue of it in Mullendore's case, unlike Lord Cuy whose keep, Sunhouse, could be in danger from an attack from the ocean. However he wasn't able to convince the man of that danger.

He had at least 'convinced' Mullendore and Cuy to send their infantry back with him. Actually both of them were happy to foist their infantry off on Garlan, since neither saw the levies that made up their infantry force worth anything at all. Garlan might have thought the same if not for Lord Tarly's teaching, and while he wasn't very good at using them, he knew they would be of use in any ship battle.

In the end, Hightower, Blackbar, Costayne, Bulwer, and the levies from Cuy and Mullendore would join his own House's men in turning back. This would give him over 13,000 men in order to protect the Reach from the Ironborn and take back the Arbor and Shield Islands, a tall order possibly, but doable. The rest of the army, made up of the vast majority of the second echelon's heavy cavalry with only a smattering of infantry and a somewhat decent archer contingent, amounted to a little over 19,000.

"If we could, we should take the Mander as far as House Oldflowers, then march across to Brightwater Keep then take the Honeywine down to Oldtown. It will save us at least two months of marching." Gunthor Hightower murmured.

"Agreed, but I doubt we'll be able to get that far before we run into opposition on the Mander." Garlan replied grimly, then at last put his map back in his satchel before looking over to Ser Willam, who had kept up with the rest of the commanders as they rode along. "You have my thanks for delivering this so quickly Willam. Are you to ride back with us, or did my sister order you to ride on to inform father of what has occurred?"

"I have other tasks my lord yes," Willam said, mindful of lady Margaery's orders to not share his mission with Garlan. "But I will ride with you if I may to Bitterbridge."

Garlan nodded, turning away from Willam already as his mind grappled with the problems that would face him.

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Frowning thoughtfully Tywin put the message from his brother down on the small field table. "Interesting." he murmured. At a wave of his hand his nephew Daven reached out and picked it up. Reading it quickly Daven stood back, not saying anything allowing his uncle to gather his thoughts first, one of the many little things that Tywin approved of in the young man.

The older Lannister stared off into the distance, his fingers tapping on the hilt of gem and jewel encrusted sword at his side in a very slow staccato rhythm as he thought. *If the Ironborn have attacked Lannisport, where else have they*

*attacked? Where was Westeros weak before this war began? The Cape of Eagles, portions of the North, possibly Fair Isle, where else?*

"My pack." He ordered without looking around. His servant hurried to obey, retrieving a large satchel pack. It was not like one a normal soldier would use, this one was made to hold scrolls and parchment and keep it watertight. "Find me the reports from our spies about the readiness of the Shield Islands, Greenstone, Tarth, and the Arbor."

A moment later he frowned thoughtfully several small pieces of parchment, each covered with small tight script spread out on the table in front of them. *Greenstone and Tarth would be excellent targets, but it would take time to get to them and such an assault would not matter to me in the slightest save for it taking more of the Ironborn's strength away from their islands. The Arbor is a question, and the Shield Islands are prepared, the houses that hold them have always taken their duty seriously. Would Balon be willing to avoid them by goin further out to sea, could he overlook the challenge they represent?*

After a moment Tywin decided that Balon hadn't become anymore intelligent or thoughtful, believing in his people's martial strength despite being taught otherwise. Especially since he'd decided an attack on Lannisport would be a good idea after the last war. *He should've known that we would've been prepared for that. So he might well have attacked the Shield Islands rather than a softer target. Could he have taken them? Doubtful, but possible if he had enough strength on hand...*

*Now, if I was Balon, I would have concentrated my strength on the North, that would have suited me both because it is not nearly as defensible as elsewhere, and because it would fit Balon's personality. The Northmen were the spearhead when Robert took the castle of Pyke, as well as in charge of taking Harlaw.*

He smiled thinly at that thought, amused that this latest disaster could be laid at the foot of Eddard's softness. During Balon's rebellion the lords present for the invasion of the Iron Islands had each been assigned an island to assault. Eddard had been assigned Harlaw, the Reach forces Blacktyde and Saltcliffe, the Stormlands Pyke and Orkmont, which slowed them down enough on Pyke for Eddard's forces to join the assault on the castle of the same name. Eddard had used a soft hand, letting his enemies surrender when he could, and trying to mitigate the damage to the island or its populace while being very thorough in the destruction of their ships and ship building capacity.

Tywin had been assigned the attack on Great Wyk and had brutalized the families there, nearly wiping out several before the others had been ordered to surrender due to events on Pyke. And he would've continued it afterwards if not for the King's order to leave off. *Fools, they should have known the Ironborn only respect power and brutality. If you don't have your boot on their neck, they will always lash out, the Ironborn are no better than beasts really.*

*Still they did cause a lot of damage in Lannisport, and that must be answered. Moreover, if they've gone to war then their main strength will be elsewhere. There is an opportunity here, or... perhaps more than one.*

"My Lord?"

Tywin looked up at the interruption, his cold emerald eyes locked on the unfortunate messenger who gulped but went on gamely. "My Lord, Lord Moreland has asked me to inform you that Ser Addam Marbrand has arrived, alone. He begs leave to speak to you."

For a moment Tywin continued to glare at the man, then nodded his head coolly. "Send for him."

A moment later Addam Marbrand was led into his tent, looking much the worse for wear those his injuries looked as if they were healing well. Tywin stared at him for a moment, while the younger man fidgeted under his gaze. Addam could all too easily remember the times when he was younger, and he and Jaime got into trouble and were stared at just like that.

"You look as if you had a bit of an adventure." Tywin said finally his voice cold yet somehow biting amused. "Did your assault on Fairmarket fail so miserably then?"

Addam licked suddenly dry lips but answered him. "Well my lord, it was going well but luck was against us. A force of Northerners arrived during the battle and turned the tide. I would assume that some of the stragglers are still trying to make their way back here though I don't know how many."

In fact that number was precisely zero. Roger and Hathon had been **very** thorough in their chase. Those few they hadn't found had gone to ground, and were no longer interested in fighting for anyone other than themselves.

"I see. Well, it was always a chance proposition at best given your force strength and the fact the Mallister force had

arrived already. I had report from Lord Estren who was leading the infiltration of House Shawney's castle that he didn't even try seeing its defenses. But on the other hand, you can see Lolliston fell easily enough."

Considering the army was camped around the open and gutted keep of House Lolliston, that was rather a redundant statement. Normally Tywin would have punished the man, Lord Regenard Estren, severely for not following orders but he had given the man leeway in those orders to pull back if he felt the assault couldn't work.

"And you were released to us as a messenger." Tywin stated, his voice certain. From the fact his wounds had been seen to despite the younger man's general dishevelment that was the only conclusion he could reach. "What is Ranma Stark's message to me?"

"Your granddaughter the Princess Myrcella spoke to me personally. She is being well-treated, and seems to think that the Starks are her allies. They are treating her as a princess, and have stated that they do not believe Stannis's lies about..." Addam trailed off as his lord's eyes became noticeably colder. When those chips of emerald latched onto you like that, you could almost see your life flashing before your eyes, but it wasn't nearly as pleasant.

He went on hurriedly, relating the story that Myrcella had told him about events in King's Landing which had led to her willingly going with the Starks. The fact that Ranma had put Myrcella under his protection and the rather astonishing fact that she seemed to have continued her studies in healing, which Tywin hadn't even heard of because she personally saw to Addam's wounds. "Rather efficiently too my Lord, I've gone to better healers but more often far worse ones in the past."

"That is interesting, but it cannot be all you were left out to tell me. And no doubt you were personally forced to give your oath about something?"

"I have vowed not to raise my hand or blade against the Starks or their allies for the duration of this war. That is all my Lord, I am free to wield my blade against any other enemies of the Crown, just not them."

Tywin raised an eyebrow at that, rather amused though it didn't show on his face of course. Amusement never showed on Tywin's face, nor did he ever laugh, and he mistrusted those who did so in his presence. *The Cape of Eagles has been attacked then, and Stark is wishful to leave me a weapon good enough to be used against the Ironborn. Addam may not be my most capable commander but he's decent enough and my army's best blade, which will matter rather more in a sea action than any skill in leading men on land.* "I see, and what else?"

The younger man went on to describe Ranma's thoughts on Tommen's death, the reason behind it, and his oath that on his name that if Tommen had lived the Starks would not have rebelled against the crown as they had. And he reiterated that both Ranma and Myrcella stated unequivocally that the poisoner had hundreds of moments where she could've done something to Tommen before his death.

Unlike with the Shield Islands and the rest of the Ironborn's possible targets Tywin did not need to get out his notes from his spies in Kings Landing or the messages his daughter and grandmaster had sent him, he could remember them offhand. *Of course they wouldn't have, they had influence over Tommen, if he lived he would have been easy for the Starks to influence, as I noted long before this.* One part of his mind said. *And whatever else, the poisoner must have suspected that Ranma at the very least would suspect her, so waited until he was out of the city. Nothing simpler.*

*Yes, but would I care which grandson was sitting on the throne so long as it was one of my blood?* Another part of his mind said. *Besides, by all the reports from the Pycelle and Cersei, before his death Tommen was showing a marked degree of intelligence and growth whereas Joffrey by all neutral accounts of the boy has only shown a certain base cunning. Which would have made the better king? And I already didn't believe that the Sand Snake was really behind it, if only because I know Doran would never be a party to it. The Dornish play the game of thrones subtly and with great ability, Tommen's death would have been far too blunt for them.* That part of his mind went on.

"Who does Ranma believed to have truly been behind Tommen's murder then?" he asked aloud.

"He hinted at it either being the Master of Whisperers or Coin. The princess said that Baelish seemed to've been growing close to Joffrey before Tommen's death, though she didn't know how close he was."

Tywin slowly began to tap the hilt of his sword once more, not looking at Addam now rather staring off into the distance as he thought. Ranma's opinion matched his own when he heard of his grandson's murder, yet hearing it now brought that back to his mind and made him think about the long term ramifications of either of those men attempting to manipulate the crown through Joffrey.

He shook himself of those thoughts as well as numerous 'might have been 's' with difficulty. *There is nothing I can do about anything in King's Landing from this far removed.* He had to deal with the here and now. *And here and now, Ranma Stark is my enemy and possibly the most dangerous one.*

"Tell me... he said looking back at Addam. "How close are the young Stark and my granddaughter?"

"Very friendly, she seemed to trust him implicitly, and vice versa. The princess could've passed a message on to me at any point during that conversation when she was looking at my wounds, but she didn't."

"So if I sent a few men to try and sneak in and get her out of their camp you are afraid that would not work?"

"I believe that the princess would not willingly go, no. She is very frightened about King's Landing and returning there. She bluntly said that she would probably be killed if she returned."

The idea that Myrcella would think her mother and the crown couldn't protect her startled Tywin somewhat. But another part of his mind said *it's already been proven that it can't, hasn't it?*

"Very well," he said aloud, shaking those thoughts out of his head once more. Once this war was over he would have more than enough time to plumb the depths of the cesspool that was King's Landing, and burn all the shit in it away. "While interesting and informative, indeed it clears up several minor mysteries it does not help us right now. Do you intend to keep your word to Stark?"

Addam stiffened slightly. "Ser, I am a knight, and I gave my word of honor."

Tywin refrained from rolling his eyes with difficulty. *Seven save me from honorable fools.* Tywin thought that the given word was something that should only be given out sparingly, and even then if it had to be broken or manipulated to gain an advantage, that was simply part of the game. Addam unfortunately was one of those knights that took his vows seriously. *Still, that doesn't mean he can't be of use.* "Very well, leave me and see to yourself. I will be sending you orders in a few hours."

The man bowed and left and Tywin turned to look at his nephew. "What do you think of all that?"

This was a test, Daven realized. He wasn't an idiot, nor was he blind. He knew that his lord uncle had seemingly begun to favor him since this campaign began, and Daven had made certain to step up his game in return. But this was the first time Daven had been asked about his opinion on something even slightly political. So he took the time to think his answer through before speaking.

"I think it's another reason to watch Petyr and the eunuch closely, but that's nothing new. What is new is that one of them might have been willing to act in such a manner. Surely both of them must know that regardless of their scapegoat they will be viewed with suspicion irrespective of any proof. If they were really part of this, the gain must've been large enough for the danger to seem worth it."

"And you don't think open warfare between the Starks, the Baratheons, the Tyrell's and us is enough?" Tywin asked rhetorically.

If he didn't know how his uncle would react Daven would have replied that it would depend on whether or not the Queen could have been convinced to set aside her oldest in favor of her youngest as heir in return for evidence of her infidelity not coming out. If that had occurred, Stannis might well have faced the united front of the Starks and Lannisters, and so would, to use a smallfolk phrase Daven had heard recently 'be up shit creek without a paddle'.

That topic however would not be helpful at this time. Instead he said. "Neither of them are military men, or have any kind of power base where they could reasonably assume they'd get anything out of a war between us and the Starks regardless of which side wins. So they must be playing for something else. Some other goal that will allow them to wield more power from the small council."

Tywin nodded thoughtfully, having considered and discarded that idea already. *The Master of Whisperers is not one to take chances, it's extremely doubtful that the man would've been involved with Tommen's death in any way. Petyr however is a possibility, especially if he could gain larger influence over the crown. I wish I had better communication with King's Landing, but with the army on the move I have too few ravens to waste on a message that would tell Pycelle and Serret nothing they don't already know, and it's doubtful any messenger I sent would ever arrive.*

"Enough," he said aloud shaking his head. "We have enough to concentrate on here and now with the Northerners. We'll keep all this in mind for later when we move down to King's Landing to battle the Baratheon brothers, but we can't let ourselves become distracted."

"Yes my Lord," Daven said though he said it in such a way that Tywin cocked an eyebrow at him. The younger man shrugged. "I'm just worried about King's Landing my Lord, it's a decent defensible position especially if Lord Serret reached it. But even so with the numbers the Reach can bring to bear, and it's lack of internal supplies..." He shrugged uncomfortably. "It just seems as if we would be better served to head down there ourselves even if the Starks come after us later."

"If the Starks hadn't split their forces as they have I would be inclined to agree with you." Tywin replied honestly, something he would not have done in front of any non-family member in hearing range. "But they did, judging from the reports of the few spies we have on the eastern side of the Green Fork that have been able to send messages to us. Judging from the notes of one spy from House Wayn, the talks there aren't going well which means that more than a half of the Stark's army will have to backtrack all the way up to the Twins in order to get across the green fork in any substantial number."

For most of its course the Green Fork was too wild for any kind of barge to get across, only stabilizing somewhat near the Ruby Ford judging from the note from his spy in old Wayn's house it was doubtful that the defenders there would allow any army across even well away from their own lines, fearing that it would break the treaty they had clandestinely agreed to with Tywin.

"That defense is one I don't want to take on, but if the young pup is with another portion of his army coming out of Fairmarket as Ser Addam just confirmed, that might allow us to defeat them in detail. Why else did you think I let our own defenses behind? No, Stark made a strategic blunder there thinking he could reform his army later on while devoting time to first destroy the Freys and then meet with Lord Mallister. Send out our scouts, good trustworthy men. We need to know where his army is, I have no doubt he's already moved on from Fairmarket but where is the question. We need to bring him to battle and crush him then we can leave a holding force at Harrenhal and the position back at the ford and move down into the Crownlands."

Daven nodded as Tywin continued, outlining further orders.

Two hours later the Army was once more on the move, leaving behind the current forward position that they had established in the ruins of House Lolliston. It had been taken by subterfuge, bands of men dressed as smallfolk ostensibly fleeing from the path of the Lannister army infiltrating the keep and then attacking the defenders from the inside while the swiftest moving portions of the Lannister army arrived to attack the outside.

Not all of the army was going in the same direction. Half of House Marbrand's forces, along with a thousand more pulled from other houses marched back down to the defensive position on the other side of the Red Fork then onwards, heading back to the Westerlands, picking up a further thousand from the holding force left at the defense across the Kneeling Man's ford, which had initially been composed of the forces stationed in Stone Hedge before the main Westerlands army set off.

In total this gave Ser Addam around four thousand and five hundred men. They would march back to Lannisport, there to be placed under the command of Kevan Lannister for whatever task he wanted to put them to. Tywin had already sent a raven back with some suggestions, but as man on the spot Kevan would have final say, something Tywin would never have allowed to anyone but his brother.

This left nineteen thousand men directly under Tywin, who had recalled his portion of the forces besieging Raventree Hall weeks back, replacing them with further Riverlands forces. He knew that was a side show, if the Starks lost the Blackwoods would surrender and it kept Jonos Bracken and the other Riverlands lords busy. He didn't want anyone with his army who might feel they had divided loyalties or could gain their House something by switching sides as Lord Vypren had done in the crown's favor.

Lord Vypren and his men stayed with Tywin however. While Tywin had sent a thousand men up to reinforce castle Vypren, he had retained the lord because he and his scouts were excellent local guides. That force was under Ser Lymond Vikary, the head of a knightly house sworn to House Lannister.

The massive army moved northeast, heading for what Tywin felt was the most logical place for Ranma to head to, Castle Shawney.

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*There was fire, fire taking the Red Keep. Stannis, grim, cold, haughty Stannis was standing there with a blade of flame in his hand and contempt in his eyes. Her son Joffrey, her darling boy, his body falling into a shadow that was so deep nothing inside could be seen. Myrcella's body, used and abused, being tossed onto the flames. Then the*



*fires came for her...*

Cersei shuddered awake as someone knocked on her door, gasping in relief as the images faded from her mind. "Who is it?" she barked out, using anger to cover her quaking voice.

One of the keep's maids on the other side of the door replied, her voice stuttering in fear. "Y-your highness, the small council is due to meet in half an hour. Y-you asked to be told?"

"Yes, well done. Send for my handmaidens to help me dress."

A moment later two young women entered, both Westerlander ladies who had served her for years. They moved to help her out of bed then quickly dressed her, working efficiently and expertly while Cersei simply stared off into the distance, her mind slowly coming out of her post-sleep stupor. Cersei had not been sleeping well lately to say the least.

Almost every night she had dreams like that, of fire and shadow, of rising floods, of simple elemental forces coming to claim her and her family, or of Stannis and Renly and the dragons killing them. Sometimes the dreams were intermixed with more positive images, of Myrcella standing with a wolf made of gold and blue flame and silver dragon against the shadow, or of her and Joffrey standing over the two Baratheon brother's bodies. But most of the time they were far nastier than that.

She knew what was behind these of course. Varys had confirmed that Stannis burned his enemies at the stake at times, and that he had given himself over to the worship of the R'hllor. His victories down in the Stormlands had even reached the news of the smallfolk, as was the news his army was marching out from Duskendale. He was moving slowly but he was coming with fire and shadow.

Even her brother was taking those rumors seriously now. In consultation with Varys who had travelled in Essos, and the grand maester, he had scoured the city for any Valyrian steel he could find, coming up with four knives and a single sword, which had been stored in the High Septon's own treasure vault. Jaime bought it off the Fat Man for a king's ransom, but it was worth it if they worked on the Shadow creatures as they were supposed to. Yet even Jaime knew that was scant comfort.

So it was no wonder that Cersei wasn't sleeping well. She had even attempted to cozen Joffrey, keeping him close. Her brave lion however didn't have any of her fears about the future, and complained about it being confining, but put up with it for her sake.

Despite that Cersei refused to relinquish all control to Lord Serret, and wanted to always be present when decisions were made even if these days she didn't really have much input into them. The time for politicking and the game of influence had subsided. Now it was the organization of the city and preparation for war that dominated the small council, areas where Cersei's knowledge was sorely lacking.

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Cersei was not the only one who was being summoned to the small council. Petyr too was being summoned, and he wearily got out of bed. Normally the small council would have met in the afternoons, but Rupert was one of those deplorable people who enjoyed getting up in the mornings and demanded that everyone around them get up as well.

Yet that was not the biggest change that had occurred since Lord Serret had arrived in the city. Lord Serret was now firmly in control of the small council and the city, his men and the backing of Cersei and Jaime as the King's Hand allowed him to run roughshod over every other faction in the court and the various smaller powers throughout the city. Petyr was pleased with some of that, since it had cut the knees out from under quite a few of the merchants and thus allowed him to expand his holdings in turn. However, his power on the small council had slipped badly.

Rupert was very blunt in stating that he did not trust Petyr or Varys and had stated their positions were not secure, indeed he seemed to nearly be waiting for an excuse to remove either of them. He also had them watched all the time. Of course Petyr could slip such watchers easily enough and he had no doubt that Varys could do the same but even so it had curtailed his activities.

*And of course I still can't get out of the city!* He thought to himself as he grabbed up a cup of mulled wine that one of his servants had prepared for him then splashed his face with warm water from the washing basin to further wake himself up. *I need to get out of the city and head to the Vale!*

The last message from Petyr's agents there had said that the Vale was slowly slipping into anarchy. With only Lysa at

its head House Aryn wasn't strong enough to command the other noble houses of the Vale any longer, and word of the fall of the Three Sisters had reached both his ears here and the Vale proper, causing much consternation and anger. Despite only being nominally under the command of the Vale at the best of times it was still technically part of the Vale lands, and the Houses there resented the Northerners annexation of them, and their own inability to field a navy that could do something about it.

*If I was there I could use that,* Petyr thought angrily, pounding one hand on the porcelain washing basin as he stared at his reflection, absently noting the new wrinkles under his eyes. *There's only so much I can do from here, even if my factors there are among my most loyal and capable.* Lysa herself should've been a perfect pawn, but without him personally being there to give her orders, that wasn't possible. Instead she had descended into a paranoid sort of madness that saw enemies around every corner.

But Serret refused to even consider sending him, and the news that had reached them yesterday was an example of the reason why. It was also probably why the small counsel was being summoned, though what Petyr could offer to such a discussion he didn't know.

*Enough,* Petyr thought looking at himself still in the frame of the mirror. "Enough," he said aloud. "That plan is no longer viable, and I have to let it go at least for now. I need to regain some power in the city, and I need to make certain that I keep it."

*I also need to begin to think of moving against Serret. It's obvious that he is merely waiting for an opportune moment to remove me, and he won't use the law or anything else, he'll simply order me killed. He's pragmatic like that.* That thought was almost grudgingly respectful. Rupert Serret was not a politician, and refused to play that game or to care about who had what information or knew who had skeletons in their closet or anything of that nature. If he had to clean out the corruption of the city, he would start by mounting Varys and Petyr's heads over the Golden Gate.

*But the only way I can offset his influence is by influencing Joffrey further.* Petyr shuddered a little. Like most people who have no morals of their own, there were some things that still repulsed him. There should be pleasure in an enemy dying, but there should not be pleasure in the torture of random people. *But that might be the only card I can play now! My power as master of the coin isn't enough now and my paid-for Houses aren't powerful enough to give me security from Serret, not if he can call on the crown...* With a sigh, he pushed himself away from the wash basin.

The small counsel gathered in the queen's meeting hall, finding Lord Serret already sitting at the head of the table. He rose as Cersei entered with them, bowing his head to her. "Your Highness," he murmured. She nodded her head slightly to him, then sat down in the seat alongside his.

When they all sat Rupert began without preamble. "Jaime and I sent out scouts on two days journey for a man over the Blackwater, and a few of them reported back late last night. There is an army marching slowly towards the city. It's flying the Baratheon and Tyrell banners, so we can assume that we will be facing a siege within a week and a half. How are we set for food?"

Jaime smiled thinly from where he sat next to his sister wishing, not for the first time that they dared take some time just for themselves. But with his position in the city defense and commander of the Kingsguard and her own duties, plus her desire to have Joffrey near her as much as she could, they simply didn't have the time, not even for a quick one. "We're better than we were thanks to you sending out men to the nearest castles and demanding food from them the moment you arrived."

That wasn't the only addition to the defense that had occurred since Serret's arrival. More Crownlands forces had arrived to reinforce the city, all of them carrying their own supplies. Byrch, Buckwell, Cressey, Edgerton and Harte had all sent men, amounting to a little over three thousand, five hundred. This had given Lord Serret enough men to send them out into the countryside in search of foodstuffs and scouts to watch for the approach of Renly's army.

"We're still not in a very good position though, the city is simply a massive sieve for food. The pirate fleet's blockading of the port has only made worse a problem that began months ago when food stopped coming in from the Reach. The nearby Crownlands are barely able to feed a quarter of the city's population, and until we put one in place there was no centralized system of distribution. We lost control of at least half the foodstuffs coming into the city while we were still organizing the food depots." Petyr spoke up.

"The ration system is not making us many friends, true." said Varys nodding his head in agreement. "The smallfolk resent us both coming and going as it were. They resent the need for the ration system that they blame on the nobles, and they resent us for the ration system itself."

That had been one of Lord Serret's major changes since he had taken command of the small counsel. The

Goldcloaks had moved through the city, taking command of the grain stores and the rest of the foodstuffs that had been built up in the city here and there. All of the foodstuffs thus found had been gathered in a few nodal points, those points under control of a few of the Noble Houses that had rallied to the crown's defense. The smallfolk were then forced to come to them for food, or fend for themselves. Needless to say, the lowest echelon, and indeed much of the middle class, did choose to fend for themselves, making the ubiquitous 'bowls of brown' the primary food for parts of the city and not just Fleabottom.

The depots were all commanded by Lord Edgerton, who had become one of the crown's staunchest supporters, bringing nearly a thousand men to defend the city. He had even become a friend of Joffrey's since his arrival because of shared interests, though only Petyr had an idea of what those were. Serret was aware that Joffrey seemed to be building his own faction among the men in King's Landing, but felt that, since those willing to follow him outnumbered them four to one, that it was simply good practice for him.

Edgerton and his house were doing a decent enough job keeping the smallfolk somewhat fed for now while also making certain the armymen and Goldcloaks got enough to keep their strength up. That would change once the city was truly under siege, but it was good to have the template in place already.

So the defenders would have enough food for a time, which was all Rupert cared about. "Take care of the defense of the city, then when the war is over throw enough gold at the city-folk and they'll love you again." He had said when he created the food depot plan.

Rupert and Jaime took command of the meeting then, passing between them suggestions and orders for the army and the disposition of the defenders, including Varys and Cersei only when they began to talk about the numbers the enemy might be fielding, if any of the merchants in the city had ties to the Tyrells or the other families from the Reach or Stormlands, and if any of them had connections to the much reduced court.

Serret ordered every gate but the Gate of the Gods shut, with stones and rubble piled in front of them. That still left the houses on the outside of the walls as defensive cover, but Cersei spoke up then, telling Rupert about how the Pyromancers had been hard at work well before the 'Stark's attempted treason', making a certain substance. Some of it had been sent North to the Wall, but more of it was still stored inside the city, available for use.

All the while Petyr watched, worried and at last... decided.

OOOOOO

With Cersei busy that afternoon helping Lord Serret write up the proclamations for the city to further organize it for the coming siege, Joffrey was for once able to have a midday meal without his mother there.

Petyr heard of this, and his decision having been made, acted on it with alacrity. "I note your highness that the queen is not with you this afternoon?" Petyr said, sitting across from Joffrey and pulling a plate of dried meat towards him.

"Now she isn't thankfully. I realize that she is worried about me, and she should be of course with coming troubles but I am a man grown." Joffrey said slightly pouting though there was something dark rather than childish about it. "And of course I'm not allowed to head out of the Red Keep at all, let alone out of the city. There's only so much I can do to occupy my time here in the Red Keep."

Not that Joffrey hadn't found some ways of enjoying himself even so. There were now several prisoners who would not leave the dungeons with all the body parts they went into them with, and he had butchered several dogs as well, imagining them to be those damned direwolves of the Starks. He had actually enjoyed that though surprisingly not as much as watching the heart tree in the godswood cut down on his orders, knowing how Ranma and the other northern heathens viewed the monstrous trees. It had actually one him some small praise from the High Septon and a few of the devout, though certain other acts had worked against that.

"I can understand that, especially with Lord Serret handling the duties of the small counsel so ably giving you even more time to your own devices. No doubt you are becoming bored?" Petyr asked blandly, looking around.

"Quite yes, I have taken to exercising as much as I can, yet that too is rather dull." Joffrey asked, now with his eyes locked on Petyr's face, sudden supposition flickering in them. "Do you know of any amusement that can be had?"

Petyr leaned forward slightly, smiling as he noticed that the only servants in sight were those answering to him, and that Joffrey's Kingsguard were the only ones within hearing. "Well it would depend on your ability to keep silent. I would not wish to get in trouble with the Queen Regent for putting you in danger."

"That will not be an issue." Joffrey replied, nodding his head slightly over to where his chosen guards were standing by the doorway. "So long as the entertainment is worth my time of course."

"I'm certain we can find something that will peak your interest." Petyr said, while the inside of his stomach began to crawl as Joffrey's eyes lit up with eagerness.

That very evening Joffrey slipped out of his chambers with his two Kingsguards behind him, making their way quickly to Petyr's rooms where they were met by Petyr himself and a few of his own men. "Come this way your highness, and I will show you a bit of a secret."

Petyr lead Joffrey and the others to the nearest passageway murmuring how he had found all the passages of the red keep, and how a few of them could even take one outside the red keep. "Of course, most of them can only be opened on the inside, or else they would be a deadly weakness in it a siege of the keep but they can be used to get you out into the city where any kind of pleasure you wish can be found, if you know where to look and how to hide..."

OOOOOO

Ranma's army was able to move far faster than the Westerlands forces, which was why that by the time Tywin's army was on the move Ranma and his army had already arrived at castle Shawney. They were spotted hours out, and outriders had gone forward to mark their passage so when the gate opened they were greeted by cheers from both the smallfolk and the armsmen around them.

Lord Shawney came out of his keep to greet Ranma and the others personally as they dismounted in the center of his castle. Not the entire army of course, the castle wasn't big enough to house that many men, even after Ranma had sent Jon and his forces off back at Fairmarket. Ranma, the wolfsworn and the other lords however could be housed in relative comfort. Daenerys joined them after making sure that the dragons were still hiding in the carts assigned to them, with Fenris and Nymeria watching them alongside Merry.

Silas Shawney was a swarthy man of average height and build yet seemed to have a nervous sort of energy to him, his hands and fingers constantly twitching. The stamp of Essos however was easy to see in his tan and a small tattoo on his bared upper arm showing the flag of the Windblown which he must've served with at some point. His grip was strong and his eyes calm when he nodded to Ranma. "Glad to see you my Lord, for many reasons." He looked over taking in the wolfsworn with a glance, nodding cordially to them all.

"It is good to meet you Lord Shawney, though I wish it could be under better circumstances." Ranma replied shaking the man's hand firmly. "Do you have any new information about the Lannisters and their movements?"

"I'm afraid not" Silas replied shrugging. "I pulled nearly all of my men into my castle after we retreated here, and I'd ordered my smallfolk to be ready for a similar move before I left for the ford in the first place. Still, come inside and you can tell me what our future plans are."

Daenerys joined the group as they were walking up the staircase to the dining hall and Lord Shawney looked at her quizzically before, when the door closed behind them, she pulled back her hood revealing her hair and eyes.

Silas' eyes widened and he bowed formally. "You **must** be Daenerys Stormborn. I heard about you while I was in Essos several years ago. The tales said you were growing into an amazing beauty, I am amazed that rumor was understating things for once." He glanced at Ranma and then across at Jason Mallister who he knew had suffered losses under the Mad King. "Though your presence here is astonishing to say the least."

Ranma chuckled, slapping the man on his shoulder. "You don't know the half of it." Then, with Hathan and Ser Barristan on guard outside the door, Ranma outlined what had been occurring, as well as his in Daenerys's position.

After he finished Shawney looked at him contemplatively. "I can't say I'm enthused about the return of the Targaryen dynasty my lords, but I won't jump to conclusions about you personally either Your Highness." he said almost unconsciously using the royal address. "However, my oaths are to lord Tully and I will Seven as my witness keep to them. You are his representative, and if something happens to Edmure you'd be Lord Tully's heir in any event so I will follow you."

"However, I can't give you that many men." He grimaced angrily. "My men and I were hammered hard in our retreat from the ford, and I'd like to retain a strong force here to defend my family and our smallfolk. May the Father strike down Vypren for his betrayal!"

"We'll be crushing that toad soon enough my Lord, in fact if we can swing it that'll be where we'll strike next." Ranma

said grimly. "I don't really need that many men of yours. A hundred or more who know the lay of the land and are fit enough to travel quickly will be enough."

"Those I can give you and I'll go lead them personally. My castellan is one of my former subordinates from my time in Essos, he can keep the castle in my stead."

"Then, tell me what you know about Tywin's forces." Ranma said looking down at the map. "We'll see if it matches what we already know. Then tell me where the nearest place where we can put a barge in the Blue Fork."

It turned out that the Blue Fork actually dipped slightly nearby coming much closer to House Shawney's seat than Ranma had thought it did going by the map. Thus it was decided that the Army would split again there. Daenerys would take seven hundred men from the North and a thousand men from House Mallister as protection led by Lord Mallister and Smalljon plus the carpenters to the Blue Fork where they would create enough rafts to get the men down the river. She would then go across at the Ruby Ford, linking up with the rest of the army under Brynden and Greatjon, then begin discussion with the Houses there.

Jason would ostensibly be in charge of the mission, or at least would be the visible person giving out orders, while Daenerys would remain with her dragons keeping them under cover. The two of them had been flown to exhaustion every day on the march from Fairmarket so would hopefully be willing to remain undercover once they were within sight of the defensive bulwarks that the Riverlanders had thrown up on the Ruby Ford.

Who else was going with her however engendered some discussion.

"What do you mean you're not coming with us?" Daenerys asked slowly, looking at Myrcella in shock. "I need you along to watch over Rhaegon and Sunfyre when I can't for one reason or another, you and Fenris are the only people they'll listen to, and Fenris can't be spared."

"Nor can I, remember my main job isn't to help you with your little ones, I'm in charge of the healers, which will be needed with the rest of the army." Merry replied stoutly, staring back at the older girl, violet and emerald meeting.

"You're assumed job Merry, maester Martyn..." Daenerys paused, remembering her run-ins with the irascible healer, then shrugged. "Alright, he needs someone along to organize things and to make certain he doesn't insult his patients too badly, but that doesn't necessarily mean you."

"But no one else is as good at organizing and can also help him with the actual patients. The men he and I have chosen over the past few weeks can perform their tasks well, but that's not saying much alas."

Daenerys looked at her for a moment, frowning as she took in the set of Merry's shoulders, and the hard light in her eyes. It was clear that she wasn't going to budge on this. Daenerys leaned in slightly, despite the two of them being alone at present, Alayaya was off talking to the castellan for a moment. "This isn't because you don't want to leave Ranma, is it? Because if it is..."

"**No!**" Merry nearly shouted flushing red, then blushed even further while Daenerys continued to look at her and she went on somewhat self-deprecatingly, but firmly. "I mean, no, I believe that I can do more to help people by staying with the army. Not everything I do revolves around Ranma, I truly do love healing people, and you shouldn't need any help in that regard."

"I see. I could order you, you know I am the presumptive queen in these parts." Daenerys went on staring at the younger girl, wondering why that had even occurred to her, considering that she had known for months how seriously Myrcella took both her duties as a healer and her continued learning in that profession. *A flash of jealousy perhaps?*

"You could, but you won't." Myrcella replied, reaching forward and hugging the older girl, or was Daenerys now a young woman? When did that change over actually occur Merry idly wondered. Putting that thought aside for now she went on. "You're not like that, you know how much my duties mean to me and besides, you know I'll be safe enough. You, um, you also should know I won't do anything, well anything until you're okay with it."

Daenerys' arms went around Myrcella as well, and she sighed, kissing the other girl on her forehead, deciding to be honest with the other girl. "I know that in my heart, my head says different. My head is telling me to send you back to Winterfell, to keep you away from my husband. But my heart knows that's both not necessary and would be bad for the army's morale given your work."

She smirked suddenly, pulling back just slightly from their embrace. "Not to mention I'd miss your help with my little ones, and that both Ranma and I would miss your company. I trust you Merry, never fear." There was something in

her eyes however that said 'don't make me regret this, or else you'll regret it quite quickly.'

Myrcella nodded, both hearing her words and seeing the message in those eyes, not taking offense. If anything, she loved Daenerys even more for her trust, and respected her more for the hidden warning. Rather reluctantly the two girls moved away from one another, then began to repack Merry's bag for her as Alayaya entered the room behind him.

Later that night Daenerys basked in her husband's embrace after their first bout of lovemaking of the night, there would, she was certain, be more. She **loved this**, absolutely loved this, feeling his chest move under her, his arms around her. Daenerys had seen those hands shatter stone, tear apart men in armor with an ease that should have been terrifying. Yet despite his massive strength Ranma was possibly the gentlest man she had ever even heard of, let alone met. Look at how he treated the ex-Frey children, or Sansa, or Merry, or Daenerys. And at moments like this, Ranma allowed his inner tenderness out with her and his possessiveness too.

She felt a low rumble make its way through her own body as she felt Ranma's hand trace down her back to grip her rear for a moment. That rumble turned into a moan as he began to knead her pliant rear then she laughed as a sudden thought struck her. Ranma's hand stopped its loving ministrations and his other hand gently raised her chin, turning her face up to him, his deep blue eyes laughing at her. "Sorry, did I find a ticklish part or something?"

"No, just a random thought. Besides, even if you had, you don't think I'd actually admit to that, do you?" Daenerys asked, her own violet eyes dancing, and her mouth twitching from a smile to a smirk.

Ranma cocked his head quizzically, and his wife, and by the old gods that felt **good** even thinking it in his head, laughed again. "Care to share Dae?"

"Oh, I was just thinking being queen and king would probably cut into moments like this, and then I thought that would have been a wonderful reason not to make a grab for the crown, just stay in the North with you like you would have if Tommen hadn't died and the war hadn't begun in King's Landing. Then I imagined my brother's face at the very idea of me using such an excuse and... well it was just funny." Daenerys shrugged. "You can't expect humor to make sense all the time can you?"

Ranma laughed then nuzzled into her hair, moving down the side of Daenerys' face then into her neck, breathing deeply. "Ya know what I think, I think I'm doing something wrong if you're thinking of your brother right now."

With that he began to nip and lick at the side of her neck, and Daenerys could feel herself responding. She moaned her hands tracing their way down his abs to his rising arousal, then lifted one of her legs over Ranma's body, moaning even louder as she felt his length slowly slide into her once more.

Later as Daenerys lay there nearly exhausted she shook her head, slightly irritated for once at Ranma's sheer endurance. Not once since they had married had she felt that she had actually tired him out in bed. It was immensely pleasurable to try, but embarrassing to fail at, striking at her pride as a woman.

Right now however even as Daenerys waved Ranma's hands away from her sensitive breasts pushing him lightly away with one weary thigh, she had something else on her mind. She reached above her, touching his face gently. "You will come back won't you?" For just a moment the queen in the making was utterly gone, taking with her the woman Daenerys was becoming.

All that was left was a young girl, who was, for the first time since they had married, watching her husband go marching off without her. This was vastly different from the time he had left her behind with the army at Moat Cailin as he faced the Freys, this time he would be away for longer, and was facing a much more dangerous opponent, one, moreover, that was one of the boogymen from her childhood. Admittedly, the Starks themselves had been another one, but the point remained.

Ranma smiled at his wife gently, tracing her face with one gentle finger. "I promise Dae. I'll come back, I promise. We both have our roles to play love, but trust me, whatever else happens, I'll come back to you."

Daenerys nodded, leaning up to kiss him gently on the lips before realizing, as their tongues caressed one another in her mouth that perhaps she wasn't totally exhausted just yet.

The next day Daenerys had to be roused by Merry letting her dragons into the bed she and Ranma had shared. Their morning breath woke her up faster than anything else could have. She groaned, pushing Sunfyre's snout away from her face for a moment, growling as she saw Merry behind them, smirking at her. What threats she uttered Daenerys didn't know, but they were enough to chase Merry off, then she came back with a loaf of fresh bread and some

mulled wine and Ranma, who kissed Daenerys one last time, murmuring 'I love you Dae', against her lips, before moving off resolutely to prepare to leave.

Hours later Daenerys was still out of yet somewhat, yet despite this she kept on looking back at the castle and the army marching out heading in a different direction from her own force. Under her, her horse moved on with the rest of the column with no input from her.

"He'll be all right my lady." said Smalljon quietly from where he rode next to her on his horse.

"Was I being that obvious?" Daenerys asked wistfully, yawning fitfully every other word, though her wits thankfully had returned to normal. "I know I am not the only woman to watch her man march off to war, but still, I can't help myself."

"No fear there, I doubt anyone'd begrudge yer worries." Smalljon laughingly replied. Indeed, the obvious love between Ranma and Daenerys was a major morale boost to the army. "Ya shouldn't worry though, the gold humper's army ain't near big enough to kill Ranma. And it's always better ta concentrate on what you can do, rather than worry about what you can't control."

"Philosophy Smalljon? I didn't think you had that in you." Daenerys quipped, looking at him quizzically.

Smalljon laughed. "Oh, I have hidden depths!"

"I don't doubt that, I just thought they were empty." Daenerys replied wickedly and Smalljon guffawed. Nearby Jason rolled his eyes but smiled nonetheless, realizing that Smalljon had done that just to break the Queen from her maudlin thoughts. Alayaya joined in quickly, and between the two of them they were able to keep Daenerys' mind off of the danger Ranma and the rest of the army were marching towards.

OOOOOO

Ranma's army force-marched all day that first day, resting at night and then starting out late the next day before picking up the pace again. They had to keep moving, that was part of Ranma's plan: attract Tywin's attention on him, keep moving, don't get bogged down and brought to a decisive battle. Just like in his last life where he fought Ryoga, Herb or anyone stronger than him, taunt and move.

*Of course, that doesn't mean we're not going to be striking back.* Ranma thought to himself as he raced alongside Fenris at the head of the army, with Arya and Nymeria on his other side.

When Lord Shawney and the local guides said they were coming into Vypren land, the army rested for an entire day before marching on quickly, covering the remaining distance by marching through the day and night. This put them within striking distance of the castle, though most of the army was too exhausted to take advantage of it. However Ranma and the wolfsworn were not. While the rest of the army rested far enough away from the castle that the defenders didn't realize they were in danger, Ranma and the wolfsworn moved forward.

Fenris stalked through the night, his senses at their highest level. He was one with the surrounding land, even if this wasn't the forest of the North where he had been weaned, much more open, much more shrubby and small trees rather than the giants that ruled the northern climes. He paused suddenly, one ear pricking up at an odd silence in the cacophony of the forest at night.

Somewhere nearby there was no birdsong, and there hadn't been for quite some time. He moved lightly, circling the area of silent until he stopped sniffing the air slightly. *Human, hiding under leaves from a tree, the one humans called oak, hadn't bathed recently.* That last was most distinct, and Fenris' nose wrinkled at the smell.

He stalked forward, his movements easy and controlled, not a single sound or whisper of leaves betraying him. The man he was stalking was a veteran thief taker who Lord Vypren had placed in charge of scouting out around his castle after being told he wouldn't be in charge of its defense. The scouts scattered around the castle were supposed to give warning before going to ground. They would then wait until the army surrounded the castle and began to siege it before going to work on doing whatever they could to hamper the invading army.

That was the plan anyway. For this man in particular that plan stopped mattering when he heard a faint rustle in the grass behind him. He turned in his small hide under a covering of oak leaves, expecting to see some small animal or other. His eyes barely had time to widen before he died when Fenris ripped out his throat. The giant direwolf wrinkled its muzzle irritated at the taste. Humans always tasted foul for some reason unless they had bathed recently. Still, stalking like this was fun, even if the outcome was simply killing an enemy rather than feeding his stomach.

Elsewhere Ranma opened his eyes, having ridden Fenris' mind as it stalked through the woods. He stood up, nodding his head to the other wolfsworn around him save for Arya, who he placed on his back since she was too busy with Nymeria to really concentrate on her own body at present. With one raised hand he pointed with two fingers forward, and with Meera in the lead they made their way through the woods.

Eventually they stopped however, and Fenris appeared out of the woodlands around them, while Arya woke up on Ranma's back. She quickly pushed herself away then pointed to one side of the woodlands they were moving through silently, gesturing with five fingers twice to indicate that there were ten enemy scouts in one place, then gestured to her mouth before holding up four fingers, then moved her fingers back and forth, their movement barely visible in the starlight. Then she held up six fingers and motioned as if she was laying her head on her hand like it was a pillow.

Ranma nodded, then pointed at her and then away towards the sound indicating she and Meera should take the lead. Both of them grinned, and with Nymeria in the lead, moved off through the woods moving quietly. Ranma followed quickly with the rest bar Roger and Hathon who had never learned how to move quietly being cavalymen. The two of them waited several moments before following as quietly as they could move.

They soon came upon the small, very well hidden camp, which looked to be a meeting place for the scouts so that they could get some sleep while their fellows guarded them. There were indeed ten scouts there, six of them asleep curled up by a small fire pit. Four were on guard walking around the perimeter.

While Daryn created a distraction causing one guard to turn in that direction Dacey crept up on him, an arm swiftly going around his throat from behind. With one hand over his mouth and nose and the other arm clamped around his throat she locked her hold in, hanging on beat at her arm futilely, but that faded quickly. Arya and Nymeria took out another guard between them, while Meera took out the one Daryn had distracted, a small skinning knife stabbing into the side of his throat, as her hand went around his mouth and nose.

On the other side of the small camp Ranma had made his way up into the trees, moving from one branch to the other with as much ease and noise as a squirrel. Such a natural sound didn't register on the last guard, who kept on glaring out into the woodlands until he felt a hand grip him around the throat lifting him up into the air and into the trees for a moment. He tried to kick out, but Ranma block it from impacting both himself and the tree as his other arm went around the man's neck in a sleeper hold. A moment later the man was unconscious and Ranma gently dropped him back down to the ground.

*I know I should kill him, but by the old gods, I've already got so much blood on my hands and I know that I'll multiply that by ten before this war is over. Killing a man like this, from ambush and when he had no chance against me whatever, no, I'm not willin' to do that. And I hope I never am.* He was also unwilling to kill the sleepers. He and the others moved over and thumped them all over the head. Such a blow might cause brain damage, but they would still be alive after this night's business was done.

With that accomplished they tied the survivors to another and a tree then gagged them just in case before the two direwolves took off through the Woodlands again, searching for more scouts. They found a few, but they were all scattered around the castle and fell easily enough to the warging beasts while Meera led the rest of the Wolfsworn towards the castle proper.

It took another forty minutes of travel before they were near enough to see castle Vypren, which was more of a keep really, looking for the watchers they knew would be there. Lord Vypren's castle had a few farms abutting it on all sides, but they were empty, the families inside having moved into the protection of the keep. There were at least three dozen guards manning the wall over the keep's main gate and a further eight men patrolling the rest of the wall in two groups of four. There was also torchlight showing in the two towers on two corners of the keep's wall.

*That's actually a good sign,* Ranma thought. *The watchers are using too many torches, they won't have much in the way of night vision thanks to that.* With a gesture he sent Fenris and Nymeria forward to smell out the smallfolk houses between them and the wall. Then Meera led the wolfsworn in a full circuit of the castle, meeting up with the direwolves there, neither group having run into further trouble.

Fenris stalked forward, with Ranma riding his mind as closely as he could to stare up at the wall at the back of the keep, trying to see if there was any movement there that might have been hidden in the shadows the torches. Wolf eyes were of course much better than human eyes at night.

Finally Ranma nodded. Signaling 'wait here' to the others he raced forward, crossing the distance easily disappearing under the Umi-Sen-Ken for a moment. , Once close enough he leaped up grabbing onto the wall halfway up its three stories, then flipping himself further up to grab the edge of the wall. He waited there a moment hanging in midair by one hand as one of the patrolling groups moved around above him. But as he had suspected their torches had killed



their ability to actually see out into the darkness, so unless the light hit Ranma directly their odds of actually seeing him were close to nil.

"I tell yas boyo, the Northerners aren't on their way." One voice said, slurred with drink despite being on guard. "They's couldn't even be arfway 'ere from Fairmarket if der army is as big as rumors tell it."

"Yeah, but all of those northern direwolves can run like the damn beasts they resemble." Another younger voice replied morosely, the voice of a constant worrier the sort who aged prematurely. "No telling where they'll show."

"Bah, They'll never want to face us here, we're too strong for them to take quick, and if they take too long, Lord Vypren and the royal army will be crawling right up their asses." A third voice stated dismissively. "Nah, they'll bypass us, count on it."

*Tonight is not your lucky night boys.* Ranma thought as he hung there, amused. Soon the guards on marching along the parapet moved on, and Ranma slowly, carefully and above all quietly began to pull himself up by his one hand. He waited a moment his other hand having come up and grabbed a hand hold, until the guards were well away along the wall, then flipped himself up and over the wall landing as lightly as he could before leaping down into the castle's courtyard.

His landing however caused a light hiss from the ground in front of his feet, and Ranma froze, staring down at two luminous eyes staring up at him. Ranma raised both hands to his mouth, as he fought back the urge to shriek and jump away. Nonetheless he couldn't stop himself from backing away so abruptly he smacked into the bottom of the wall. Luckily neither the hiss nor the thump of Ranma's back carried very far, but that didn't help Ranma's current predicament. *Damnit, a whole new life on a whole new world and I'm still scared of ca...ca... furry demons from hell! I hope Fenris eats you slowly you damned fiend!*

The cat was a large fat tabby, his body scarred in places, obviously a cat that had lived it's nine lives to the limits. Right now it was staring at the strange human that had nearly landed on him as he lay there, sleeping off a nice juicy rat he'd found in the guardhouse. It was rather amusing to see a human skitter back from him like that, most of the time all he got from male humans were kicks unless females were around. After a moment however he sniffed haughtily and flounced away, looking for another place to continue his interrupted post-dinner nap.

Behind the tabby, Ranma breathed a sigh of relief still holding his hands over his mouth thankfully else the noise might have been loud enough to give him away then ducked into the corner of the wall between the wall and one of the corner towers. The deeper darkness there covered him while the next patrol passed by over him.

While he waited, Ranma took in the castle's courtyard at a glance. There were no tents anywhere, which meant the men, however many there were, could be kept inside the main keep or the barracks building set next to it along the back wall.

*I'd guess at most a thousand or so then, that's a lot for just the wolfsworn, but if we can take the walls and the towers, then we can bring in the rest of the army to help easily enough. Luckily there aren't any signs of people on watch in the keep's upper floors.* Also thankfully the keep itself wasn't any taller than the walls, indeed the guard towers on the wall were the tallest portion of the castle.

After they passed, he moved to a small door set into the outer wall of the castle. It was probably a servant's entrance, many older keeps and castles had were several barrows full of stone ready to be dumped down to block it but that had obviously been planned as a last minute defense.

Feeling at the hinges however Ranma noticed that they were badly rusted. He carefully lifted up the wooden bar over the door then began to grease the hinges as well as the lock before gently opening the door. There was a faint squeak and Ranma stopped quickly, looking around then up at the wall. He waited a few more moments for the next group of guards to move away then oiled the hinges again.

After that Ranma waited until the next groups of sentries were coming back along the wall facing away from the small door before opening it quickly. The wolfsworn had already covered the distance one at a time, hiding nearby in the abandoned houses or flattening themselves against the outer wall. With Arya in the lead they entered moving through the doorway while Ranma held it open.

Using the gestures they had developed over the march to communicate at times like this Ranma assigned each of them to a different tower at the four corners, then assigned Dacey and Fenris to wait here, before moving over to the keep's door. Then he gestured to his lips with his fingers, indicating they needed to keep the battle as quiet as possible.

They all nodded, and moved off quickly and silently, using the bushes and trees, which were probably laden with fruit of various kinds, as cover along with any other patch of shadow. Even with the guards patrolling the walls destroying their own night vision with the torches, a classic mistake, they couldn't take chances.

A moment later they were all in position, with Ranma waiting for the next group of guards to pass his current position, the wall across from his former one. A moment later the two of them heard a bit of commotion from the main gatehouse, which Ranma had assigned to Arya, Fenris and Nymeria.

The guards making their rounds above him had only a moment to register it before he had jumped up onto the parapet among them. There was no time now to knock them out, Ranma had to take them down quickly and silently, and that was what he did. His hands flashed out, crushing the throats the two men not holding torches and throwing the bodies of two men over the outer wall, then he turned hands flashing out again.

Two more bodies fell, and Ranma caught their bodies with his shoulders before turning swiftly with them over his shoulders to grab the torches before they could clatter on the parapet. Slowly he lowered the bodies to the parapet, then doused the torches one after another.

The other patrol had entered one of the towers, which had been a signal for the attack to begin. That tower had been assigned to Dacey and Roger. Hathan and Meera was assigned a second, Daryn and Edd a third. Ranma himself rushed on toward the fourth, moving as fast as he could.

The men inside hadn't noticed any of the noises outside, busy getting drunk and playing dice. Still there were ten of them, and again Ranma had to strike ruthlessly lest they have time to raise the alarm. A moment after he entered, Ranma was the only man alive in the guard room. Sighing sadly he shook his head, then resolutely turned away, racing along the parapet to the next guard tower.

Daryn and Roger looked up at him. The guards in this tower had been much more awake, but it hadn't saved them, with the two of them coming up the staircase placing Roger between them and one door to that wall and Daryn able to rush to the door Ranma had just come through. Both men nodded at him, and Ranma leaped down and then off again, arriving at the next tower just as that attack went in, while the two of them ran off to the last tower.

Hathan and Meera came up the stairs moments before Ranma arrived to slam into two men who had been about to rush out to spread the alarm. Ice gutted one man while a kick caved in the other man's face, flinging him back into the room.

Inside Meera stabbed the last of the four men who had been facing them, while Hathan's long sword took the head off of a man who had tried to rush past them out onto the opposite wall from Ranma's entrance. He need wearily at Ranma shaking his head. "They nearly got away for a moment."

Ranma nodded grimly then looked over at Meera, who was shaking a little. This wasn't her first battle, but it was the first one where she was up close and personal with her enemies. "You alright Meera?"

"I'll get there, I suppose. Just, Just different this way you know." The young crannogwoman said, gesturing with her bloody trident for a moment. "Don't worry about me Ranma, my father told me about this, I'll be alright."

Ranma nodded, gripping her shoulder for a moment before moving on. By this point the other tower had fallen as well. Ranma gathered the wolfsworn together, then sent Arya and Nymeria off to the rest of the army, where the remaining mountain clansmen and Karstark men were ready for the call. They were the best at moving silently, the rest of the army would be coming after them. And while waiting, Ranma amused himself by sending Fenris around to see if he could find that damn tabby...

An hour later Rickard and the three hundred men arrived, moving quietly throw the side gate which had been opened once more. They and the wolfsworn entered the barracks, but there luck failed them. A group of guards inside had just woken up possibly to take their turn on watch and shouts of alarm quickly abounded. Yet with the Wolfsworn and the northern army already inside the barracks, and fully armored, the battle was never in doubt.

The defenders held out through the rest of the night despite Ranma trying to call on them to surrender but by the next morning castle Vypren was in Northern hands. They had lost men certainly, over two hundred dead in the vicious fighting in the barracks and the keep itself, but the Riverlands and Lannister men on the other side had died in far greater numbers, only a hundred and fifty surviving to surrender.

Worse however was that Ranma had been forced to execute his first troopers. He and Dacey had battled their way up to the top of the keep where the lord's quarters were, only to find men in Hornwood colors there before them, holding

down the lady of the House and a girl who had to be her daughter, a young boy unconscious on the floor. Ranma ripped them off the women then tossed them so hard against the wall they nearly died from that. However they lived to be brought before the army the next day.

Ranma stared out at his army, bunched in so much they couldn't move easily in the courtyard of the castle, his eyes hard as he addressed them. "You all have heard me speak of the penalty for rape or murder. These two men thought that I wasn't serious, or that they would not be caught. They were wrong. They now stand accused of attempted rape, witnessed by myself and Dacey Mormont."

The two men looked over at Daryn and their fellows beseechingly but Daryn stared back, his own eyes dark with fury and they subsided, knowing now that no one would speak up on their behalf. Behind them Ranma raised Ice. "The sentence is death, to be carried out immediately." Ranma swung Ice twice, and two heads fell to the grass of the courtyard to a murmured susurration among the men, though none spoke up.

After that Ranma set fifty men of House Karstark to guard the still shaken lady Vypren and her two children sending them back to Castle Shawney while another seventy from Hornwood took the prisoners in shackles back to lady and her children, both younger than Arya, were to be treated well. While their House would be destroyed for its treachery in backing the invaders, they personally hadn't done anything wrong. Something would have to be done with them in the future, but not yet.

"So do we invest the Castle and wait for Lord Tywin to arrive?" asked Lord Shawney, scratching at his beard thoughtfully, smiling slightly at how Ranma had enforced his discipline so ruthlessly. After an example like that he doubted many men would try anything further for a long time.

"No. Set fire to take out the supports, burn it to the ground." Ranma replied. "Then we'll move on. This was only the first battle of this campaign, we can't afford to be bogged down."

OOOOOO

Tywin had anticipated Ranma would move to Shawney castle but the speed of Stark's army was much faster than he had anticipated, though his move to attack castle Vypren had startled Tywin, who felt he'd try to move down to the Ruby Ford and across to meet up with the rest of his his scouts, which he had out in their hundreds, had reported that castle Vypren was on fire he had to almost sit on Lord Vypren, who wanted to push ahead with his men, a bare nine hundred, but thankfully they were well back in the army's ranks as they marched.

"I sent a thousand men to secure your castle, yet this is what I hear happens. Who did you leave in command?" Tywin asked Vypren coldly.

"I, I left Ser Orme in charge, my lord. He, he is a knight from the Reach, and I, I thought..." Vypren stuttered, his bravado leaving him. He had raced forward to speak to Tywin the moment the news of his castle's destruction reached him. He had been all aflame to demand that he and his men be let to go ahead of the army but Tywin's face and voice had the effect of being dunked in ice.

"Evidently your belief in his competence was misplaced." *Or could Stark have used that weapon he used against the Freys again? No, I can't assume that alas. If he could get into the castle, Ranma's own skills would have let them win the day, possibly even against those numbers against an inept commander. Still, we're close, and if the fool boy is offering me the chance to defeat his army in detail, then who am I to turn him down? Yet, better safe than sorry.* "I want the scouts pushed out further, find us the Northern army, but their orders are to report back to us here while keeping in sight of them if possible."

Tywin motioned to his senior commanders. "Plumm, Brax, Lefford, our objective is to find and pin the Northern army then bring our full force down on it. This will not be easy, since the Northerners can seemingly move much faster than ours, but it needs to be done. You will each take a thousand men ahead of the main army on a different angle. If the scouts find them you are to move to engage them while calling in the rest of the army. Take five hundred archers each, use them to try to pin the northerners down but don't try to fight them alone, unless you can entice them to attack you in a position that gives you some chance of turning their numbers against them. Other than that, I'll leave it up to you how you go about doing it."

Daven had pulled out a map of the Riverlands, which was a worse copy than the one Ranma had been using from House Paegge, but still accurate enough. "Stark has to know he can't take us on with the numbers he's got, so what is he trying to do?"

"Good question," Tywin said, nodding his head sharply at the younger man. "We'll keep that in mind, and keep track

of where the Northern Army tries to march. We will also keep between them and the Red Fork, just in case they are trying to merely pull us out of our defensive position and then attack us from behind somehow. The rest of their forces however are immaterial for now, they won't be allowed to cross the Ruby Ford, not with the Riverlanders over there desperate to stay neutral, and if they march down the Kingsroad, they'll run into the blocking forces we have in Harroway, Darry and the rest."

His nephew nodded, knowing that even if the northerners could move around those defenses, no general in his right mind would willingly leave forces like that in their rear. Tywin nodded in turn and went on. "For now, let's see if we can net the Wild Wolf then spear him to death before going after other game."

OOOOOO

Barely a week after Petyr had taken another step in his friendship with Joffrey, the combined armies of the Reach and the Stormlands came within sight of the capital walls. Despite his mother's protests, Joffrey rode out to the wall to view the approaching army. With Rupert there to watch over him the queen was forced to concede that it would be good for morale to see the King in attendance. As Joffrey watched, the army spread out slowly across the Southwest on the other side of the Blackwater, not actually coming close to the city yet. "They're not crossing?"

"I ordered the nearest bridges destroyed two days ago, your highness." Rupert Serret said smiling thinly. "This way they'll only be able to attack one side of the city, unless they want to devote enough time to build their own bridges. There was no food crossing them after all, so why not?"

Joffrey nodded officiously, as if he had been the one to come up with the idea and Rupert simply carried it out. "How long do you think?" he asked. "And if that is the case, should we try to meet them on the riverbank?"

"If we had near parity in numbers possibly." Rupert said diplomatically rolling his eyes when he knew the youngster couldn't see them. Joffrey had **not** impressed him at all, and that comment was part and parcel of why. There was also something all about the boy, something subtle but there nonetheless. Something about the eyes and those rumors he'd heard about how the little bastard treated animals bothered the hell out of him.

Joffrey sighed. "So nothing's going to happen today?" He said, his tone somewhere near a whine and a question. "I'd hoped that they at least would come within range of our trebuchets."

"Thankfully no, we've probably bought ourselves another week or so, and I don't doubt that Renly knows we've built trebuchets, it isn't hard to realize where the outer range of them would be and stay out of it. Frankly Your Highness, I'm hoping that Lord Stannis arrives soon, and the two of them battle it out weakening one another before either think of attacking us here."

Joffrey smiled, liking the idea of getting to of his enemies to fight and kill one another. "An excellent idea." He enthused, then sighed again turning away. "But one that we can't do anything to bring about. I'm going to head back to the Keep."

Rupert's prediction was proven correct as it did indeed take the combined army five days to build a makeshift bridge that was strong enough for them to send troops across. Soon after that however, they had invested two-thirds of the city's landward area, well out of siege range for now, but building their camps and preparing for battle to come, while teams of carpenters and levy forces were sent south to the kingswood.

Soon after that, a messenger was spotted coming towards the outer walls, coming straight down the Gold road. Below the white banner of parley flew his own, a white dolphin on aquamarine. Cersei actually had to think for a moment to remember the house that was from: Lowther, a knightly house sworn to the Tyrells whose lands were northeast of Highgarden. "In other words, someone who wouldn't be worth anything to ransom, but someone with connections all the same," she explained to Lord Serret, who had never made a study of the Reach houses.

The Lion Gate was open for him, and he was escorted through the city up to the Red Keep. Ser Lowther, the head of that house, was a young man of Renly's age, though he didn't run in the same social circles. Renly had chosen him because the youth had impressed Renly on his eye for detail, and because he was unassuming, plus, as Cersei had guessed, not important enough for anyone to try and capture. Renly had impressed upon all his commanders how dishonorable Joffrey was, as well as Cersei, so even the Stormlands lords with him, all of whom felt they could have done the job much better 'than this nobody', didn't make waves.

Ser Lowther knew why he had been chosen but he didn't let it bother him. Instead he did what he did best, notice things. He noticed both the numbers of the defenders and the glaring looks from the smallfolk, and paid particular attention to the fact that he only saw a few inns and taverns open, and none of the food carts that usually lined many

of the main roads of King's Landing.

After being searched thoroughly for hidden weapons Ser Lowther was allowed into the King and Queen Regent's presence. Of course Lord Serret was there as well, standing beside the large, gaudy, and above all, padded, chair that sat at the foot of the Iron Throne which Joffrey used as his throne.

No matter what he tried, the Iron Throne was simply uncomfortable to sit on regardless of the number of pillows you try to place on it. So he had commissioned this work of art. His throne was made of oak, with gold paint and glass gems studding it here and there, the padding a vibrant Lannister red. Of course it was merely a stopgap, Joffrey planned to replace the Iron Throne as soon as the war was over and commission a throne made with real gold and gems, but his mother had convinced him weeks before Serret arrived they could not afford the expense at the moment.

Cersei said next to him a small, much less ostentatious chair, as befitted her status as Queen Regent. Along one wall waited the rest of the small council, and the Kingsguard were stationed both at the door and on either side of the royals. Jaime had made certain that his appointees were mixed equally with Joffrey's just to make certain nothing would happen. He was concerned with how fanatic Joffrey's chosen appointees were to his orders and Joffrey wasn't the most diplomatic of kings after all.

Ser Lowther took the throne room in at a glance, then bowed formally holding out his missive at after standing upright again, deliberately facing Cersei rather than Joffrey. "Your Highness, I am here under token of parlay to share with you King Renly the First's..."

Joffrey scowled angrily. "King Renly! He is no King, I am my father's heir! Your Renly is simply an usurping rebel!"

"Indeed," said the Cersei motioning to one of the Kingsguard to step forward to take the terms from the messenger. Ser Balon did so, passing it over to her quickly. "Even if we were speaking of merely becoming the regent for my son, Renly would not have been considered, his rebellion has nothing backing it in law or custom, so your words, Ser, have no basis in fact."

More than one man there inwardly chuckled at that. After all while some might say Robert's Baratheon's kingship was based on the vaguest of connections to the Targaryen line, it was really about might making right: he won his rebellion and the crown. Renly was simply attempting the same.

Cersei opened up this roll of parchment and began to read while the messenger replied to her words. "We believe otherwise, we believe that the fact that King Robert, forever hallowed be his name, named Renly as Lord of the Stormlands means that he would have wished Renly to be his heir. And Joffrey is illegitimate, one only has to look at him to know that."

"I should have you flayed alive for that!" Joffrey shouted, bounding out of his chair. Rupert's hand however clamped down his shoulder pushing him down while Jaime glared at Ser Blount and Ser Buckwell who had made to move forward at their King's bellow. Both of them backed away, taking their hands off their hilts.

Joffrey shrugged off Rupert's hand but remained sitting, glaring angrily at the messenger. "That is slander! Lord Stannis has always hated the fact that Robert had children, and hated the fact that my father loathed him! The Starks too thought that none of us were legitimate, but it was a power-play, nothing more! I am the lawful heir to Robert Baratheon that is indisputable, as is the fact that any who follow Renly or Stannis have broken their oaths to House Baratheon!"

"Indeed," Cersei said, looking up from the parchment to stare hard at Ser Lowther. "The evidence of the Maesters in Oldtown do not match with the Maesters here and in that of House Baratheon lands themselves have found. There have been numerous occasions where Baratheon looks did not breed true. We have proofs here, and can send for more from Storm's End."

Those proofs were forgeries, all maester Pycelle's work and Varys, and of extremely good quality. The Baratheon looks not breeding true was still rare, they could do nothing with the vast majority of the names the Maesters in Oldtown provided as proof of Cersei's infidelity, but there were a few names of children in marriages to other houses, and one or two in past Baratheon and Lannister marriages where they had been able to... modify the history to serve their ends. Varys had even been able to get copies out to a agent of his, who would pass it on to another in Storm's End where it would be placed in the historical tomes there.

"Thus, let us face facts, Ser Lowther. Lord Renly is simply ambitious, he grasped that bit of calumny from Stannis and from the Starks to give him a reason to rebel. Everything else is simply excuses to cover his act of treason. As for

your lord's offer of terms, I reject them utterly." These are not terms you give to an equal, these are terms you give to a supplicant! Full capitulation, opening the city's gates immediately and offering my son and myself up as hostage to my father's good conduct! To freely admit to that spurious bit of propaganda, never!"

Cersei's voice had become strident for a moment, but she controlled herself with difficulty before going on. "However I have a counter offer. Not for Renly Baratheon, his actions are inexcusable and nothing can change that. No, my offer is to the Reach and House Tyrell. The Reach has not done my family any true harm as yet, and there is no need to do so now since, according to rumor, the alliance between House Tyrell and House Baratheon has not yet been made permanent."

She held up a hand to one of her handmaidens who was standing obediently along the back wall. The woman moved forward, placing a roll of parchment in Cersei's hand which she in turn handed to Ser Lowther after motioning the Kingsguard to let him come close. "Because of that I offer my son's, the King's, hand in marriage to Lady Margaery."

"I believe that will give Mace exactly what he wants, his little girl on a throne, and moreover I can guarantee the marriage will actually produce an heir which will not occur if she is forced to marry Renly. His preferences are known to me and to most of the royal court. Or is there some other reason why he has not married the girl already? She was certainly a beautiful young lady the last time I saw her here in King's Landing, why any young man should jump at the chance, irrespective of what her hand brings in terms of alliance."

Actually, Cersei was slightly understating things. Margaery had been a magnificent young lady when she was here, and if not for Robert Cersei would have quickly changed the marriage contract to her rather than Sansa in a heartbeat. Moreover, she knew there was a brain in that pretty little head, so above and beyond the strength of the house that it would bring into alliance with the Lannisters the marriage itself would probably be a good one.

She was not about to mention the fact Joffrey had passed a law allowing for the royal house to practice polygamy however. That bit of idiocy had infuriated her when she first found out about it, but he had passed it so quickly, with Varys and Petyr's help for some reason weeks before Serret had arrived, and it had passed with nary a whimper from the Faith, that she hadn't made an issue of it.

Since then she had found out why that was: Joffrey had promised that the law would only remain on the books for one generation, and that he would, upon winning the war against the Starks, use it to gain a foothold in the North, from which he would begin to convert the north to the Faith, by the sword if need be. That, the rumors about Renly's preferences, and the rumors quickly becoming fact about Stannis and his own faith, had won him and the throne the support of the High Septon and the Most Devout, which would be of immense value in the long term.

"If Mace agrees to my terms, all he need do is to retreat from this battlefield. Go home to the Reach, we understand that his realm is having issues of its own right now after all, and we would like our new ally to see to his own... House." She smiled thinly as did Varys and Petyr from where they stood along the wall.

Ser Lowther looked at her in puzzlement, not understanding that. The news of Willas and his campaign along the western front had not reached the army, nor had the news of the destruction of the Shield islands and the Arbor. But they had reached Varys, and he had shared them with the small council. He had not shared the arrival of Viserys or anything from Dorne however.

After a moment the man realized that Cersei wasn't going to say anything more and he bowed stiffly. "If that is your final word I will take my leave."

Joffrey nodded, having lost much of his anger in the face of his mother's cool control of the moment. "You may go, I hope that the next time we see one another that you have learned to curb your tongue when it comes to certain rumors, and that you bring good news from House Tyrell."

Ser Lowther bowed again stiffly then retreated from the throne room. The moment the door closed behind him, Rupert turned to Cersei. "That was well done your Majesty, though I wish you had talked to me about it before this. It'll give Mace something to think about, and the Reach forces outnumber the Stormlands two to one or more. But did you really think they would be able to break off?"

"Of course not." Cersei said waving one hand in the air. "It would be nice if the two armies out there were to separate, but I doubt they will. No, I wanted to give him something to think about, both him and his people."

She looked over at Varys who took his cue. "His Majesty is correct, with the issues that the Reach are facing on their own ground, their second echelon will not arrive here at full strength, if at all. The western front is in danger of being overwhelmed by what should have amounted to only a probing attack, the Shield Islands are gone as is the Arbor,

and many of the lord's out there must worry about their homesteads now especially those fools who took nearly all their forces to war."

"Moreover, Renly has not exactly covered himself with glory since his little rebellion began. And I was speaking the truth, while for most men the Lady Margaery would be a prize almost beyond any, it is patently not so to Renly. Worse, Mace, or at least his mother Olenna, will realize that if Renly cannot perform in bed, that this will not be the last war of succession the realm faces. If there is not a clear line of descent, there would be room for others to argue the point especially with the precedent that has already been set here." Cersei concluded.

*And before this with Robert's Rebellion*, Varys thought to himself snorting internally at the sophistry of Cersei. Still, it was all to the good from his perspective. The more the Westeros houses fought one another, the more they weakened themselves before his true patron could take the field. He would have preferred things to not have come to open warfare, stability was what he really craved. But House Baratheon had never offered that, not with their throwing off all precedent by taking the throne from House Targaryen while doing all they could to butcher that line, and that didn't even consider the fact that the dragons had returned. With them the Targaryen Dynasty would be secure once more, regardless of which dragon took the throne.

"She is a beautiful young lady." Joffrey mused his eyes lighting up. *And thanks to that law I passed I can have my cake and eat it too. I wonder if I should keep Ranma alive just long enough for him to watch as I take his sister, or make his head a wedding present to her?* Those images caused an atavistic thrill to go through him, and he felt himself respond. Controlling himself with difficulty he vowed to head out to the city that evening and find something to use up some of his energy.

"What are the odds that Lord Tyrell will go for it though?" Rupert said looking at Cersei. "I've only met Mace once that after Roberts Rebellion, so I don't have a very good idea of his personality."

"Bluff, arrogant, childish, rather stupid." Cersei said succinctly. "That is his attitude my Lord. However, his stupidity will work against us here. He'll think he holds all the cards, simply because his army is the largest, and he will assume that a bird in the hand as it were is better than two in the field. No, I'm rather afraid that this was simply something to give him thought, their army will need to suffer severe casualties before he thinks about truly backing away from his current alliance with Renly."

OOOOOO

Renly received Ser Lowther in his command tent, a large affair that was three times the size of any of the common type used by the rest of the army, and was silk rather than cotton or wool, a gift from one of the more southern Reach houses. He, the Rainbow Guard, and his advisers were all there when Ser Lowther returned, drinking and laughing amused at how the Lannisters hadn't even tried to contest their crossing the river, a sure sign that they didn't have the numbers to beat off a real assault of the city.

Only Randyll was silent at that. Seeing that even his fellow older lords believed that was the case, he knew it would serve no purpose for him to naysay it now. He was mindful of the Olenna's 'suggestions' as well: "let the young fool get blooded, let him see what the real world is like, then if he falters, step in and take control." She had even given him a message to give to Mace upon that occasion.

While he didn't know it that message simply said "shut up and let the true warriors take over!" Short, simple and to the point, which Olenna had always felt was the best way to get through with her son's thick head.

When he heard that his terms had been rejected Renly shrugged philosophically. "I thought that was a long shot, but I had to try. It certainly would've made bringing the rest of the Lannister force to heel much more easily."

Unnoticed Randyll shook his head. If it were up to him, he would never have marched on King's Landing this quickly, not with the full army they had at least. No, he would have immediately assaulted the southwestern front of the Westerlands. With most of their forces in the Riverlands they would be open to an attacking force, and that would neatly remove the long term power base of the Lannisters. Of course besieging Casterly Rock would have been difficult, but putting the rest of the Westerlands to the torch wouldn't have been hard, and might have forced the other Westerlands Noble Houses to overthrow Tywin if he seemed to be reluctant to turn around and face Randyll in the open field.

Now I can only hope that the wolves hold the Lannister army in place at least. Given the size of the two forces, Randyll had decided that the Starks couldn't really defeat the Westerlanders, not completely. But they could hold them in place which would be just as good for the Reach.

"I could have wished that Cersei would see reason but it isn't as if we weren't prepared for a siege. Start building the siege weapons, Lord Cafferren, you are in charge of that. Lord Tyrell, I believe we should also spread the army out all around the city just in case. After that, we'll launch a few probing attacks using our light cavalry and archers before our siege weapons are ready. That way we'll be able to see if the defense has any weaknesses we can exploit, a commander on one wall or the other that isn't as quick to react as he should be or something of that nature." Renly went on.

*Even in that he shows his lack of experience, Randyll thought darkly. Probing attacks on walls like that very rarely worked if the defense had enough men, archer assaults could work if you could keep them up long enough, but we don't even have wooden palisades for our own archers yet, while the parapets would provide the defenders cover of course.*

Loras spoke up. "Wait a moment my liege. Ser Lowther said something interesting, that the city is already showing signs of a food shortage. I think the defenders might be weaker than we thought. So instead of doing probing attacks, let's simply spread the army out, lull them into a false sense of security for a few days, make the defenders think that we'll wait until our siege weapons are ready before attacking. Then we send in a night assault. Or better yet, send it in right away, this very night on a segment of the wall that we haven't encircled yet!"

"An excellent idea!" Renly enthused. "If we can get through the outer wall of the city, then we can push them back into the Red Keep and besiege them there! And the Red Keep isn't nearly as tough a nut to crack as the rest of the city."

Mace nodded, looking proudly at his son, ignoring the official document Ser Lowther had passed to him outside the tent. "I agree, an excellent idea my boy! And, once we break the walls defenses, the smallfolk of the city will no doubt rise up. If they are already feeling the pinch against the Lannisters, cutting off the defenders on the wall."

The idea of relying on smallfolk made Randyll sneer internally, but it sounded as if it made sense. *Of course that suppose that the defenders are idiots, and Rupert Serret isn't an idiot, nor is Jaime Kingslayer.* Randyll looked around noticing everyone's enthusiastic expressions. *I'm not going to win this argument, let's see if something can be done with it.* "I agree the idea of launching a night attack is a good one my lords, but I think we should add a little more to Ser Loras' most excellent suggestion..."

Over the next few days Renly's army spread out around the northern edge of the city, still staying well out of siege weapon range while they built their own from wood taken from the Kingswood. The main concentration of the army faced the Lion Gate but they sent tendrils out covering all of the landward sides of the city. A second heavy concentration was built on the other side of the Blackwater as well, while scouts were sent down every road leading into the city. For the most part over the next few days there was no rush to battle, no skirmish. The besiegers simply enclosed the city while waiting for their siege weapons to be finished.

After a few days of lulling the defenders into a false sense of security, Renly ordered the sneak attack Loras had thought up. Lord Tarly however had added quite a bit to the plan, though Renly and the other Lords had not listened all of his suggestions.

Shanty towns had sprung up all around the city pressed up against its walls, most of whom were worse than even Fleabottom save the areas closest to the main gates. These shanty towns were empty of people yet they remained standing around most of the city. Though Renly and the others could see where work had begun to tear them down starting from the Gate of the Gods and moving out from there.

Now two catapults that had been built in the kingswood came forward, taking up a position at the outside of their own range in relation to the wall on the other side of the Blackwater. There they began to fire at the walls. At the same time streams of infantry made their way forward along the river's edge into the Fishmarket. This included thousands of the army's archers, who took up cover everywhere they could in the houses and former market stalls to fire at the defenders on the wall who had already begun to fire at them.

Behind the walls, the massive trebuchets were painstakingly turned on their axis as watchers on the wall began to shout out aiming information about the attacking catapults. The man on the trebuchet had practice fired them before, and all of them from the watchers to the men turning the huge things around knew their jobs.

While that battle was going on the southern side of the city, Loras was leading a small elite force of around two thousand men from the portion of the army nearest the Iron Gate. They moved as quietly as they could, entering the shanty town there. Here it was even grubbier and shabbier in comparison to any of the others, since the road out of this gate was the least used, and the area was also where a lot of the trash from the city tended to accumulate thanks to the tide of the bay.



They moved this quietly as possible, and didn't follow any kind of set order or path as they moved forward, barely keeping inside of one another. That was how Loras found himself at the back of the unit when he had started for the front. He felt himself wondering idly if the inhabitants of the town had fled entirely, or simply fled into the city. *If they fled into the city, that simply means more mouths for them to feed, which is all to the good. If they fled entirely, well at least they'll be out from underfoot.*

Looking ahead, Loras saw one of his men waving him down, then pointing up at the wall. There looked to be some dozen men still patrolling this portion of the wall, visible because of the light of braziers set here and there along it. Though the men themselves were not near enough to said fires for it to ruin their night vision, and at least a few were attending to the business of watching their front rather than turning to watch the battle occurring towards the harbor. Loras went to ground, lying in the dirt and mud next to a shed of some sort, thanking the Seven he had left his cloak behind.

A moment later the men on the wall turned their attention away, joining their fellows to stare across the city over to where the battle was going on the other side. Getting the all clear signal from one of the men in the lead, Loras stood up dusting himself off before moving around the small hut. Moving circuitously through the shanty town towards the walls, Loras followed his men each of whom were carrying rope ladders, all of them that the army had built in the last days.

Moving around what might have been a very low class stable, Loras came to another one though this one was much better built than most, having some actual stone here and there, plus all the wooden slats actually seemed nailed together. It even had a window. *How extravagant.* Loras thought to himself, laughing internally. *Though why anyone in this pestilential place would want a window is beyond me.*

He idly looked inside, cocking his head quizzically as he noticed what looked like a very large container of some kind set directly in the center of the one room that made up the building. It was very large, much larger than any family would need to keep water in, and a family living in a hut like this they wouldn't be able to afford that much wine. The incongruity of it struck him as odd, and he frowned thoughtfully.

Up on the wall Lord Harte was the one in charge of this section. He was angry because he had hoped that the Reach and Stormlanders would attack here so he could use the little surprise that the Queen had come up with to add to the defense. Of course he understood Serret's orders, that such a thing should only be used at the most opportune moment to destroy the most of the enemy it could. But still, a show of force at the very beginning might force the attackers to not try any other physical attack for fear of what might happen.

"There it is again." one of his men muttered, turning back from where he had been looking toward the sounds of battle occurring elsewhere to stare back over the portion of the wall he was in fact supposed to guarding.

"What are you talking about?" barked Lord Harte. "And if I catch any of you turning away from your posts again I'll have you flogged."

Around him his fellows hastily turned back to stare out into the night as alertly as they could appear, leaving the unfortunate armsmen to his fate. "Um, mi-milord I thought I heard something down below, but, but I can't make it out."

Lord Harte looked over the wall as well staring intently into the darkness of the shanty town far below. With the number of buildings down there clustered together so tightly and with no fires down there to see by the odds of spotting anyone moving were almost nil.

However as he leaned against the parapet he heard something as well. "Couldn't be more Stranger- damned squatters could it?"

"Most of them fled when the Queen began to remove the hovels around the God's Gate. Smallfolk might be stupid, but they can see what's happening as well as any."

"Then we might have some attackers moving down there hmmm...." He smiled wickedly. "You know what boys, I think we so need some more light down there." He turned to a nearby archer. "You, see if you can find one of the jugs down there, and light it up."

The man looked shocked for a moment. "Bu-but my lord, that's only supposed to be used on command of the Hand."

Harte growled at the man angrily. "Obey me man, or else I'll have you tossed of the wall."

The archer gulped, but nodded and took out an arrow, fitting it to his string.

Below Loras was still closer to the Blackwater Bay than he was to the city's walls. He was moving slower now, trying to puzzle out the mystery of that jug, and why he had seen two more like it in the last few houses he'd passed. They were worrying him, and he was just about to double back and open one of them up to see what was inside when he saw a fire arrow streak out from the top of the wall, just one. *W-What?*

Suddenly he heard screaming nearby, and there was a whoosh of flame. He raced around the corner of the building he had been using as cover from the wall, and stopped staring in horror. *Wildfire! Those jugs were full of wildfire!*

The fire arrow had hit a small jug that had been set in a dark alleyway between two huts, where light couldn't reach even when the sun was high overhead. After all, the Queen didn't want her little surprise to go off early. The wildfire spread quickly, racing up the walls on either side the heat of it igniting two larger jars set inside those two buildings.

Soon a conflagration began, spreading everywhere all around the small shantytown, engulfing hundreds of Loras men, including him. But Loras was still well away from where the fire began, and he was wearing full plate armor. It had made moving quietly through the night difficult, but now it protected him from the heat of the fire for a little bit as he turned, racing away and towards the water of the bay. He was almost there when a splash of wildfire impacted his armor from the back and side, covering his back plate, shoulder and a portion of his helmet with the noxious substance. He screamed as the heat from the flame quickly began to penetrate his armor, searing his skin. "GAHHHH!"

Coming to the shore he swiftly pulled off his helmet and dove in, trying desperately to put out the fire. "EYAHHHHH!" It was only when he fully dunked himself in Blackwater Bay that the flames at last went out, but the searing heat from the steam from the water caused him to scream again as it burned him further. Even so, he was able to retain enough sense to push himself out of the water and stumbling north along the shore away from the city.

Thankfully the conflagration had been seen by the rest of the Army, and dozens of men race forward on horseback getting as close as they could to the flames to shout the names of various comrades who had been part of Loras' forces. Several of them saw Loras and raced forward as soon as they saw he wasn't covered in wildfire, pulling him further away then up onto a horse before they tied him there. Then they raced off, taking him straight to a healer.

Having heard about the disaster Renly and Mace raced through the army from their command post near the Lion Gate. It took them several hours to find the tent where Loras had been placed, by which time the healers were working on him desperately, having recognized him the moment he was brought in. One of them turned to the tent flap as Renly and Mace barreled through, a few of the Rainbow Guard following in Renly's wake.

He moved over to them speaking quietly. "My lords, Ser Loras is unconscious at present, we gave him something to keep him comatose while we work. His life is in no danger but..."

"I want to see him." Mace replied, growling the words. "I want to see my son!"

Renly nodded agreement and the healer sighed. "It's not a pretty sight my lords, burn wounds never are especially when they're brand-new, and especially when they are caused by wildfire." The healer spat to one side muttering about how all alchemists should be slaughtered and sent to the Stranger who no doubt would know his own.

"I want to see my son." Mace reiterated.

The healer sighed again but moved to one side allowing them further into the tent. Loras laid on a cot at the far end, along with a few other survivors. There hadn't been many. Caught in the close confines of the shanty town while the wildfire raged all around them they had no place to go. Only the ones on the outskirts in particular the ones nearest the water had survived a bare fifty out of the original two thousand.

Mace choked off a sob as he saw his son. The skin of one side of his face looked badly scalded. Despite not actually having been touched by the flames the sheer heat had done its deadly work. His shoulder too looked raw, as if it was a slab of meat rather than something belonging on a living human.

For his part Renly looked at his lover in shock and horror, shaking his head. "Whatever you need to heal him you will have, healer." he said, looking over at Mace. "Will you wish to stay with him, Lord Tyrell?"

The older man nodded jerkily, and turned to order one of his men to go fetch him a chair. Renly reached over gripping the older man's shoulder, not looking down at his lover again, the sight was just too sickening.

He quickly left the tent followed by his Rainbow Guard. They moved back through the camp towards his tent, his mind almost blank, sickened by what he had just seen. Suddenly this whole affair seemed far more deadly and real than he

had previously thought.

Back at his command tent Renly told the other lords gathered there what he had seen. "Needless to say we need to rethink our strategy here. If all of the small shanty towns in the fish market have such traps in them."

"Could the alchemists have made that much wildfire?" Asked Lord Appleton.

"Even a little is too much." Renly barked back, most of his normal easy-going manner having fled him. "We will wait, retain our siege lines and send out scouts to safely dispose of the wildfire jugs before we try another full on assault." He carefully did not look over at Randyll, who had suggested sending in scouts initially, along with the feint idea.

For his part, Randyll was philosophical about things. Yes, he was saddened to hear how Loras had been injured but the loss of 2000 men in an army their size wasn't exactly a high price to pay for Renly being forced to listen to him. It would've been worse of course, but the moment he heard the screams and saw the flickering flames Randyll had sent runners to the commanders of the feint, and ordered them to pull their men back out of Fishmarket. With the trick already played he had no doubt that Serret would have ordered that portion of the wildfire trap to be ignited as well, which would've cost the army much more dearly.

Indeed Serret and Cersei, who had come up with the plan in the first place, had been most angry that it had been sprung with so little return. Lord Harte had been stripped of command of the wall and Serret had Jaime beat him black and blue in a spar for his idiocy.

With none of the lords in any mood to socialize or drink, most of them left Renly's tent quickly after being given their new orders. Only Randyll remained and he moved over to where Renly was sitting slumped on a field chair. Renly looked up at him coldly, but when he spoke, his voice was calm. "So what would you suggest we do now, my Lord Tarly?"

OOOOOO

Ranma and his army had not been idle since putting castle Vypren to the torch. They had moved swiftly southwest, as if making for House Lolliston's keep, moving as quickly as the army could while not completely exhausting themselves. Thanks to the training the northern contingent had been put through this was decently quick for a force their size even with the Mallister contingent not having gone through the same training.

They were several days travel away by the time their scouts began to find themselves sometimes taking fire.

Well ahead of the rest of the army Meera was racing along the path of the army through the woodlands, with several of her scouts/hunters around her. Here it really was woodlands, scattered dense copses of trees and heavy bushes set on small hills filled with small streams interspersed with flat, open areas, many of which had been farms at one point. Though of course, the farmers had fled long since with numerous armies so close. Farmers tended to be uneducated but they were not stupid, and they could read much more than a change in weather on the wind.

It was interesting territory, very different from any Meera had been through before, but hunting and scouting were the same...At that moment an arrow buzzed by Meera's ear, and she flung herself forward, thanking the old gods for Ranma and Arya's training. She landed, splashing into a small rivulet before rolling while she shouted, "Ambush, 'ware left!"

Another arrow slammed into the ground an inch from her head in the muck of the rivulet, but this time she saw where it was coming from. Pulling out an arrow from her quiver at her thigh, Meera fired back with the recurve bow that she had been given made from the bones of the lizard lion Ranma had killed.

It had a very heavy pull, but she had trained for years on a normal one, and then months on this bow. Her arrow flew out slicing through foliage to bury itself in the chest of the second archer to fire on her just as dozens more arrows flew out from around the same area.

Her scouts weren't all armed with bows, and only one of them had a northern longbow. He ducked behind a tree, holding his bow diagonally for a moment then leaped out, firing back while around them men went down, dead or injured from the sudden arrow assault.

Meera gestured to one of the nearest scouts. "Head back to the army, tell them we've run into trouble!"

The man, a Karstark armsman, nodded, crouching low and crawling away through the foliage while Meera and the longbow man began to duel with their attackers, none of whom seemed to be in any rush to leave their position and close with them. Not five minutes later she heard a howl and grinned viciously.

As soon as the report got back to them Ranma and the wolfsworn had raced ahead of the army on a diagonal, intending to take the ambushers from the side quickly before they could escape. They ran into a lot more opposition than they had anticipated however, with over two hundred men hiding there ready to ambush the army.

They had also created small, simple bulwarks using downed trees and other things and despite being taken in their own flank, they responded with alacrity. Daryn was hit by an arrow, which went deep into the meat of his thigh, while Ranma was forced to block or smack aside over a dozen arrows. Roger and Hathan were even forced to break off their charge, being on horseback they were much larger targets than the others, and they couldn't close quickly enough thanks to the foliage.

Despite this, the other's went through the Westerlanders like a thresher through wheat. Ice hewed them apart, sending limbs, heads and bodies flying. Dacey's greatsword hewed a path to one side, while Arya leaped and bounded everywhere, using the trees above as springboards, showing she had truly become at home with the Aerial Style that Ranma had been teaching her. In fact thanks to that and her own shorter stature she was doing as much damage as any of the other two wolfsworn combined.

Nymeria and Fenris howled in from the other side of the Westerlander defensive position, ripping and tearing at the men, who now were trying to break off and run. They had left it too late however, and with the wolfsworn in among them they had to stay and fight, a losing proposition despite their numbers.

"Meera, you okay?" Ranma shouted over the din of battle, bringing ice around one handed to block a sword blow from someone wielding a longsword, riposting quickly, the tip of his blade catching the other man in his gorget while at the same time his fist lashed out, catching another man in the side of the head.

"I'm alright!" Meera replied, firing an arrow at an archer trying to aim further down the trail at Roger, one of many clumped in the middle of their position who was still trying to fight as best they could. Her arrow struck the man in the side, causing him to cry out.

Then he and the other men who hadn't yet put their bows down began to wish they had, because Ranma and Edd had broken through to them. They dropped their bows, scrambling at their sides for their holdout daggers, but too late.

Moments' later the battle was over and Ranma moved to help Daryn, who was leaning against a tree, grimacing at the arrow in his thigh. "Hold on Daryn, we'll get that out of you in a second.

"Don't, it's a broad head, not a bodkin, you'll do more damage if you yank it out too quickly." The Hornwood heir gasped. "Just wrap it up, we can take it out when we get back to the rest of the army."

"Fine, but you're going to be sitting on one of the baggage animals for a bit my friend." The army had ditched all of their wagons and were now relying on pack mules to lug around most of their supplies.

"Fine by me." Daryn responded, wincing as Ranma went to work bandaging him with a bit of torn cloth from one of the dead. "You think we're likely to run into more of these little ambushes?"

"Probably." Ranma grunted, pulling the makeshift tourniquet tight over his friend's wound. "If I was Tywin, I'd try anything to slow us down, pin us in place and then wipe us out before we can 'wise up' and try to head down to the Ruby Ford again."

At that point Meera and Arya joined them, with Meera apologizing profusely for not having spotted the ambush in time. "You did Meera," Ranma corrected her, reaching over to ruffle her hair. "Scout's are supposed to either spot or spring ambushes, it's just the first is, y'know, better than the other."

Hefting his friend easily onto his back, Ranma went on, ignoring Daryn's mortified expression of the smirks the rest of his friends and even the scouts were sporting at his predicament. "Let's get back to the army, then, we'll change our route a bit, head slightly further north."

This worked for a few days and the Army advanced without further incident. But soon blocking forces began once more to ambush their scouts along the southern side of the army and at the front. This time however, Meera, once more in the lead, spotted them. She reported back quickly, switching out with one of the Shawney men. "They're ahead of us again, at least four hundred men this time, and they've taken up a position along a ridgeline, I don't think we could get close to them without taking fire. We could bring up our own archers but..."

She went on to describe the blocking position this group had taken. The ridgeline was actually the remains of a large

hill that had been worn away at some point in the past to barely anything. But the top if it was still tall enough to give a commanding view of the surrounding lands, most of which were flat rolling fields and small rivers, with only a few trees in this particular area. There were a dozen cottages, all empty of course, and the fields had been picked clean.

"Then we need to swing wide." Ranma decided, frowning for a moment then he smirked. "Let's swing south, we haven't done that yet, and I bet we'll surprise whoever Tywin put in command of these holding actions."

His order went out quickly, and the army once again changed its line of advance.

OOOOOO

The sudden move southwest did indeed surprise the Westerlanders for a few days, but then the Northerners and their Riverlands allies ran into even heavier blocking forces, forcing the army to fall back along their path before once more heading northwest. Their own scouts reported that the main Westerlander army had also kept between them and the Red Fork regardless of their own maneuvers.

This time they were at last able to come within sight of the House Lolliston's keep, but as they feared it was in enemy hands. Ranma scowled at it staring at it through a spyglass. "Damn, so much for that hope. Ah well, it was faint at best."

He looked over at the lead Shawney scout, a man who had previously served as a Lolliston armsmen before the battle at the ford where he had joined the more organized Shawney forces in their retreat. "You said there's a hill or something nearby?"

The man nodded. "It's a decent enough position, if'n ye've got the numbers fer it, though it don't have anythin' like cover."

"How much you want to bet that they've got a blocking force set up there?" Asked Roger sardonically.

"No bet," Ranma said shaking his head. "No bet on that anyway but... I bet they'll think we'll try the same thing we've been trying the past few days, trying to get around them, or try to take them in the flank. So instead, we're going to take them at the run."

Moments later as fire arrows flew out from the woods surrounding the old Lolliston Castle Ranma's army quickly moved on. The archers and 200 of the Mallister men were left with a few of the remounts so that they could catch up.

Within another hour of marching the Army was in sight of the blocking position the scout had warned them about. It was a natural ditch where some long gone stream had carved out the land enough to give the defenders some cover. The land around it was also somewhat more barren the normal in the area, and a few stones here and there seemed to indicate that it had been worked farmland at one point or another before the river dried up and with it the land around them.

With enough men this could be a very dangerous position, provided you understood the use of polearms anyway. No one besides Ranma and his men however truly did understand that, at least not to the level necessary to make a simple ditch a defensive bulwark against attackers. Yet there were over 200 men in that position, spread out along the empty streambed. Though only 50 or so were archers.

With the fire in the Lolliston castle visible in the distance the men here had been warned of the army's coming, but they were not prepared for the army to simply keep on coming the moment it hit the open area around the ditch. Normally the army would've fallen back, the archers would've been brought up and a long range duel between the two would've begun. Ranma wasn't doing that this time. Instead he ordered his men to charge with the cavalry in the fore, plus Fenris himself, Nymeria and Arya in the center of their formation.

The bows of the Westerlanders and the scattered Riverlanders who had joined them were not the longbows of the North. Tywin had understood he needed to break up the Vypren's remaining people to make certain that they didn't run off. He needed the local lord's knowledge of the land too much to let that happen, and so had spread his men out among all the smaller forces searching out the enemy. The Riverlanders bows were better than the Westerlanders, made of better wood and larger in the main, but they weren't as large as northern bows nor did they have the more powerful draw of the Northerners, lacking the slight recurve at the tips that made the Northerner's bows stronger even in proportion to their size. This meant the enemy's bows lacked the necessary penetrating power to fight full plate armored knights under fifty yards. Nor were the men as well trained as the Northerners.

With the heavy cavalry in the lead the men in the ditch couldn't get at the more lightly armored men behind them

unless they shot arching style, which was unaimed, and easily blocked by simply having the infantry raise their shields. Then as the men in the ditch thrust up their weapons, makeshift spears for the most part, to receive them, the knights veered off to either side. The men in the ditch were still gaping at that when the infantry that had been charging behind the knights slammed into them and into the ditch. The archers got off one volley at close range that cost the northerners a good dozen men.

Ranma had left Ice behind on purpose, able to tell there wasn't enough space in the ditch for him to swing it, but his hands and feet were just as deadly. Arya was with him, holding a long dirk in either hand but she was also using her legs to good effect. The rest of the wolfsworn, and Patrek, who was armed at the moment with a short-hafted mace smashed their way into the ditch with relative ease at the head of the infantry. They lost only a few more men getting into the ditch due to simple surprise at the knights veering off as they did plus the fact the spearmen weren't bunched up enough to stop the infantry from getting underneath their weapons.

All of the men who had attacked the ditch were armed with shorter-hafted weapons rather than the pole arms and the regular longswords of their enemies. In the ditch, that proved a deadly advantage. Even Roger, who was much more at home with his long-hafted axe than any other weapon, had opted for a morningstar, which he used to smash aside two men in a single blow, before a kick from him shattered the leg of another man, opening him up for a pommel strike from Dacey, who was guarding his back in the melee of the ditch. That man's skull shattered under that blow, and Dacey's return blow opened the guts of another.

Those few men that tried to escape the ditch at either end of the former riverbed ran straight into the heavy cavalry that had circled around them. A few escaped jumping out of the ditch away from the attacking army before the heavy cavalry could fully encircle them, but they were very few and far between.

Ranma leaped out of the ditch, looking down at his blood-soaked hands shaking his head. It wasn't getting any easier for him. *Still, would I really want it to be?* Shaking his head clear of such thoughts he looked over at Roger and Hathan, who had swiftly joined him. "Reform the cavalry," he ordered, "Uncle, you and Patrek do the same for the infantry."

He turned looking over at where Meera was leading up the scouts out into the open area along with the archers and Mallister men who had been left behind to burn the castle. They had lost a few men, but as he had thought, there weren't many men left to guard the ruins of the castle. The fire had merely finished the work the Lannisters had already done. "Meera, get your men out in front, I want us at least twenty leagues from here before sundown." Around him the men groaned, but complied, their morale high from the relatively easy victory.

OOOOOO

The army did indeed march the twenty leagues Ranma wanted yet even so, they hadn't gone far enough to escape the scouts that Lord Plumm, who was in charge of this angle of the chase, had set out. Like the other lords in charge of pinning the northerners in place, he had broken up his archers and a portion of his armymen into smaller groups, sending them forward, while keeping half of his strength in a more central location well ahead of the main Lannister army.

Plumm's scouts were slightly better than most of the skirmishers Meera and her people had been dealing with. They were comprised mostly of former poachers and bandits that Lord Plumm had forced into his service with a simple choice of serving him or being sent to the Night's Watch well before this war began. Since the start of this campaign a few had attempted to run, but he had made the rest of them watch as he drew and quartered them when they were captured. That had enforced their loyalty, and they served him well now.

"They're heading straight west?" Philip Plumm asked sharply looking at one of his he felt anything for the death of over a third of his command in the two clashes that had occurred he gave no sign.

"Aye milord." The man said nodding his head not looking him in the eyes as he knelt in front of him.

"Where in the world are they going then? I thought they were trying to get back to Fairmarket but if they're heading straight west, that takes them away from the straight line back to Fairmarket from here."

The man didn't answer, knowing his Lord would not appreciate a lowly scout's thoughts on that matter. Inside however, he was wondering if the Stark-led army was simply leading them around for some reason. Over a week had passed since the fall of House Vypren's castle and the northerners had been very cagy about seeking battle, yet never tried to pull away entirely or return to Fairmarket.

Lord Plumm thought for a moment then he nodded decisively. Turning to one of his knights he ordered, "Get the men

ready for a forced march. The Northerners have marched all day and fought a battle as well. If we can move fast we can catch them off-guard and exhausted."

The knight looked hesitant. "My Lord, Lord Lannister said we were not to try to fight a pitched battle merely slow them down enough for the main force to catch up."

"We're not fool, we're going to try a night attack. If we can attack them by night and destroy their supplies, we'll force them to either retreat straight back to Fairmarket, which means Lord Lannister might be able to get ahead of them with the rest of the army or simply besiege the town and wipe them out that way."

At the moment Lord Lannister was two days south and a little east of the former Lolliston Castle, and if he tried he might be able to get in front of the Northerners by simply marching for Fairmarket on a straight line.

Lord Plumm honestly didn't think they would be able to accomplish that, the Northerners were too Seven-damned **fast** on the march, and for all his youth the Stark boy had proven to be a wily tactician. Still, the Northerners had been having all of these small skirmishes almost entirely their own way, oh there had been one or two excellent ambushes that claimed a dozen or so of their men here and there, but on the whole it had been the Westerlanders that had been slowly bleeding lives.

They desperately needed to pin these Northerners down, then bring up the rest of their army and crush them as Lord Lannister had said. "If we need to take a chance to do it, I'm certain Lord Lannister will understand."

OOOOOO

That night the northern army camped out in one of the small copse of trees that dotted the Riverlands. Despite not being large enough to be called woodland, there were still more than large enough for the army to hide in.

Everyone was tired, including Meera and her scouts except for Ranma who was in his tent. He was ready for bed but he needed to go over his plans. Ranma didn't want to show it, even to his friends, but he was getting worried. While the idea of splitting up some of his force and trying to create little holding actions here and there to slow the Northerners down wasn't exactly revolutionary, Ranma had hoped that it would take a while for Tywin to think of it. In fact, he had hoped that Tywin would try to march to Fairmarket straightaway, which would allow him and his army to attack the Westerlanders supply line and then force the Lannisters to retreat to their fortification on the other side of the Kneeling Man ford.

Lord Tywin hadn't even tried that, and what was worse he was keeping his main force on the move yet always to the **south** of Ranma and his men enough to keep them from marching on the Red Fork. *He knows I want to try and get around him, then try and cross the red Fork somehow* Ranma thought, frowning as he looked at the map. *Has he realized what I'm trying to do, or does he just 'know' that I don't want to face that fort he threw up on the other side of the Kneeling Man's ford?*

*Worse, we haven't been able to break off contact with the scouts that have been tailing us. I can't break off the next attack group if they'd be spotted right away!* He reached down absently, rubbing Fenris on the muzzle while the giant direwolf rumbled in pleasure, uncaring of his human's worries.

Ranma continued to look down at the map, thinking hard as he went over the information that the scouts as well as Lord Shawney and the rest of the Riverlanders who knew this area had told him. *At the speed we can go, we're within four days of the Red Fork from here if we head straight for it, but Tywin is within two or three days travel with his main force and he is within our line so could cut us off with a large enough force to hold us in place for the rest of his army, damn it! I need to do something, Jon's attack is important, but it can't do enough damage on its own without follow up attacks, not right away. At least the first phase is working, but even there, I can't afford to...*

Just then Fenris sat up, his ears twitching and he growled his teeth bared. Ranma looked down at him, their minds instantly linking. At that moment he heard what Fenris had heard, the jingle of harness, and movement from the south. But Ranma had put his tent up at the southernmost edge of the camp...

When the implication of that hit him Ranma instantly grabbed up Ice and ran out of the tent shouting "To arms! To arms!"

Ice in one hand he turned just as a dozen riders rode out of the surrounding night making right towards him. Ranma didn't hesitate, Ice coming around in a smooth arc to smash through one man's lance cutting deep into his horse and leg before continuing on as Ranma turned in a full circle while jumping into the air. His next blow came in at head height, slicing a man's head clean off armor and all before his leg lashed out at a third rider slamming into the man's

shield with enough force to shatter the shield and the arm that had been holding it flinging the man out of the saddle with a cry.

Behind him Fenris howled aloud, before ripping and tearing at another horseman and horse. All around them the horses heard that terrible howl and skittered away in terror, something that affected even the mounted attackers elsewhere. But further away in the camp the attack continued, overwhelming the men on watch quickly and getting into the camp itself.

On the outer edge of the camp the defenders however were slightly more rested than the rest of the army, having bunked out while their fellows had made the camp. They held just long enough for many of the rest to grab up weapons and shields. Most of them however were still unarmored, and a ferocious melee erupted all over the camp.

"The North and the Riverlands!" Ranma bellowed, charging towards the nearest clump of men. "The North and the Riverlands!" He didn't know how many attackers that there were, the firelight from the fires of the camp wasn't enough to tell, but he knew that this attack couldn't possibly be that large, or else his scouts would've warned him that such a force was nearby. *That means this is just another kind of holding the attack... they'll go after our supplies!*

Putting one man down, Ranma spotted Meera and Arya coming out of their shared tent, and shouted, "The supplies! Grab some men and guard the supplies!"

No normal ears could've heard that bellow through the clamor of battle and the screams of the wounded and dying, but Arya was linked with Nymeria who was guarding her back tearing savagely into any of the attackers that tried to circle her. Thanks to that she did hear, and she shouted back an acknowledgment grabbing Meera whose trident had stuck in one man's armored stomach. "Come on!" she shouted, pulling at her. "Leave it, we need to get to the supplies!"

Arya raced on through the clamor of battle, killing any man who came at her, but ignoring most of the clumps of combat around her to get to the supplies. She grabbed as many men as she could along the way, and by the time she reached where the supplies were stored in the center of the camp she had a good fifty men, most of whom were unarmored but armed. They took the main force of attackers who had pushed through the camp to the supply train in the rear, and Arya led the way howling like Nymeria. "King in the North! King in the North!"

Roger and a few of his men had been bumped down near the horses. Over a dozen of the attackers had attacked from up out of the dark nearest the horses intending to scare them off. When Fenris howled however, their own horses shied and tried to bolt despite the best efforts of their riders, and they were forced to spend precious seconds trying to get them under control.

This allowed Roger and the rest of the cavalymen to bolt upright and get back into the saddle. Roger himself bellowed "The Rills, the Rills for the King in the North!" as his ki-infused ax flew around, shattering one shield and slicing into a knight's chest before coming back around to parry a sword blow with so much strength that he nearly threw that man out of the saddle, allowing Roger time to get up into the saddle of the nearest horse.

Beside him Hathan and his squire were both in the saddle quickly, with the boy following his knight closely as Hathan slew three knights in quick succession, their horses still shying as the howls of the direwolves rebounded around in the fire lit night. Hathan's next ki-enhanced blow decapitated another man who was wearing what looked like better armor than most in the firelight, though Hathan had no time to notice as four more came at him, forcing him on the defense until another man was able to get into the saddle and relieve some of the pressure.

Arya's Fang flew left and right, slicing into two men before she leaped up on top of another man's horse pulling his head back and snapping his neck with a wicked wrench of her arm. Then she urged his horse into another man's horse, Fang flashing out to bury itself deep in the man's armored side right where his plate armor joined along his side. She wrenched it out with difficulty, then turned still on horseback and shouted orders, trying desperately to organize the defense of the supplies.

Patrek's voice soon joined her, and he led a force of Mallister men into the attackers from the other side, getting in front of them now and pushing them away from the bags of supplies. "Form shield wall!" he bellowed "Form shield wall, Seven-damn you!"

The sergeants took up his bellow, and soon enough there was a ring of shields around the supplies. With more and more men from the camp around them joining the battle that signaled the turn of the tide.

Nearby, Merry hid in her tent, shuddering a little as the sounds of battle reached her from outside but knowing better than to rush out just yet. In one hand she held a holdout dagger Alayaya had given her and which Ranma had trained



her in somewhat during their voyage up to White Harbor. She gasped when the tent flap was flung open, and two men wearing unfamiliar colors rushed in, looking over their shoulders fearfully.

One of them looked at her, and Merry gulped. Since she had been in her sleeping bag (which was really just two small but heavy blankets stitched together) she was wearing her night shift, which was rather small on her these days, clinging to her like a second skin.

The man smirked at her evilly. "She mus' be some kind o' camp slut, still with the battle goin' agin us, she might make a good shield!"

While the other man turned to watch the entrance to the tent the first man reached for her, but Merry struck out with her dagger cutting into his hand. "Don't touch me!"

"YA bitch!" the man gasped, then gasped again as Merry's knife came back, slicing into his forearm, which began to bleed heavily. "Stupid whore!" He grabbed at her, but Merry retreated and a moment later the man collapsed to his knees, the blood running down from his forearm in an unending stream. "What the..."

Merry held up her blade watching as the man bled out from where she had cut one of his primary arteries. The other man however turned to her, his longsword raised. "You fuckin' cunt, ya killed me mate, I gonna gut ya like a fish fer that!"

He moved forward, smacking Merry's blade out of her hand. He pulled his blade back to stab her but then gasped as a sword point burst out from his armored chest. The blade receded then a hand grabbed his body by the shoulder and flung it out into the night. "Are you alright Merry!?"

Merry nodded, staring at him with relief. "Thanks to you, Ranma."

Taking her at her word Ranma nodded, though he couldn't stop himself from noticing how her nightshift clung to Merry, emphasizing her budding curves. He gulped a little flushing as he looked away. *Damn, Merry isn't a little girl any longer is she?* "Um, ya might want ta get dressed before ya come out, okay? I don't want a riot on my hands on top of everything else."

Merry gasped, covering herself with her hands though she also smiled a little smile at how Ranma had noticed she was growing up. *I promised Daenerys that I wouldn't do anything but it's still nice to know I can affect his Stark self-control.* "Of, of course!"

Nodding at that Ranma left the tent, sighing slightly with relief. He began to bellow orders again and soon began to instill some order in the chaos of the continued clamor of battle. The attackers didn't break off however, grimly staying and fighting to the last man.

Ranma didn't know this at the time and wouldn't learn it for a few months, but this was because Lord Plumm had died in the first few moments of the battle, along with three more of his knights thanks to Roger and Hathan. With him and most of his commanders dead there was no one left to order a retreat, and Lord Plumm had long since either elevated men who showed initiative or crushed such if the man wasn't the right sort, IE noble.

Thirty minutes after the battle had begun it ended, with Edd killing the last man standing as he tried to run off.

Ranma let the point of Ice fall, grounding it in the ground at his feet as he sighed sadly looking around the fire-lit camp, hearing the shouts of the sergeants calling their men to order, over the screams of the wounded and dying. *Thank the old gods that the fires didn't get out of control and that the attackers didn't think of using it.* He looked at Patrek and the others who were nearby. "Get a count of the wounded and dead." He ordered simply. "Let's get this camp organized again."

Behind him Merry came out fully dressed now, looking around at for her helpers and began to shout her own orders. "And someone find maester Martyn."

It turned out that Martyn was dead, killed in his tent by one of the men who had snuck in before the cavalry hit the outskirts of the camp. He and two of his chosen helpers were dead but the majority of the supplies were still intact. Merry quickly began to organize the wounded into the same system she had run back in Fairmarket, splitting the injured into groups of severity and working furiously to save those she could while one of her helpers made the passage of those they couldn't save as easy as possible.

The sun was peeking over the western sky before the camp was back to normal. Once again the commanders gathered together to go over what they learned. Meera reported first. "They snuck up on some of the guards on the

southern edge, killed two of them, I found their bodies, their throats were slit from behind. They then snuck some of their men into the camp from that side. The rest of the guards didn't notice." she went on grimly shaking her head. "But there were only a few men inside the camp before you shouted your warning, Ranma."

"It was bad enough." Merry replied sharply, her eyes showing her tiredness as she leaned against Fenris. "We lost at least 690 dead, and another 29 won't make it through another day. I've made them as comfortable as I can, but another 203 are injured, 70 so severely I'd recommend that we send them back to Fairmarket, and twenty more are so injured that we can't move them."

"Do all you can Merry." Ranma said patting her on the head gently sighing sadly at the look of grief in her eyes from, well, being human really. *She can't save everyone, but Merry doesn't seem to have realized that, has she?* "How many of the sergeants did we lose?"

"Only two thankfully." Rickard replied to that question. "Both of them were on the southern side of the camp, and they and their men died there to the bastards who had snuck in before you shouted your warning."

"How many of the attackers escaped, do you think?" Asked Dacey.

"Not many." Roger replied shaking his head. "They stayed and fought for some reason even when the game was blown. Surprising, I didn't think that the Westerlanders were that fanatical."

Ranma shrugged unconcerned at that, pulling at his ponytail thoughtfully as an idea occurred to him. "Get me my map," he said thoughtfully. "This might work to our advantage."

Everyone looked at him in surprise, but Luke who was standing respectfully behind Hathan rushed off to do his bidding, and came back with his map quickly. "Show me where we are on this again?" Ranma asked.

Nursing a broken arm Lord Shawney pointed out where he thought they were, then called over one of his chief scouts to make certain. Eventually Ranma nodded. "That's what I thought, good. I think it's time to break off the second force. Given the size of the force that hit us I bet they used all their forces nearby on this. And after an attack like this, even though we beat it off there's no way that the Westerlanders will realize how badly they hurt us. Even if they do have scouts still watching us we might fool them if we also send off our most severely injured up to Fairmarket."

Merry smiled grateful that Ranma was taking her suggestion even if he was doing it for more pragmatic reasons than she had put it forth for.

"Daryn pick out your men from those who can swi..."

"No." Daryn said shaking his head.

"What?" Ranma asked looking up and him in shock.

"I'm good at this sort of role, but I'm also injured." Daryn said. "I should stay with you."

"True, if your injury gets wet you risk getting it infected." Merry said, nodding her head.

Ranma thought for a moment then nodded. "That's a point. I'll send you with the wounded to lead their guard then. Dacey in that case you're in charge. You've got the most experience in leading infantry, sorry Roger, Hathan, but that's true."

Both men nodded equably, though Dacey frowned. "I'm not certain I'm the best for this, I'd prefer to put Arya in charge. You two don't seem to realize it but you Starks have built up a tremendous well of trust among the armsmen, even the Riverlanders now especially after this last battle."

"No chance of that." Arya said waving her hands in the air wildly. "I'll be the first into battle, that's fine but I'm not about to lead other people. I don't have the experience, the age, or the temperament. You've got all three Dacey."

"Are you calling me old, girl?" Dacey glared at the younger one girl who smirked back at her.

"Enough." Ranma laughed amused at his sister's attitude. Still, eventually Arya would be leading other people. This attack had shown that she had the temperament to do it if she tried. It had been Arya gathering men and leading them to the supply area that had really saved the day and would allow Ranma to continue with his campaign. "In any event, pick out your men then lead them straight west, then find a place to hide out until we're well away. Daryn, you'll head north for Fairmarket with the injured, while the rest of us will head straight south for a day, then northeast

drawing off any attention."

"We'll be down to a bare four thousand men total if we send off enough of a force with Dacey to do any good." Patrek, who had quietly become Ranma's aide-de-camp since Jon had left, warned. "I'm not arguing against it, I'm just telling you that we won't have enough men to perform any miracles."

"We don't need miracles, we just need Lord Tywin's attention firmly on us. That we can do." Ranma smiled, clapping the other young man on the shoulder.

Within an hour the army was once more organized and ready to march, with Merry frantically running every which way, trying to organize the injured, their stretchers and their caretakers. Taking care of the injured from this latest battle had nearly run through the army's medical supplies, but despite that Merry refused to go with them, sending off two of maester Martyn's more senior helpers to watch over them.

"With maester Martyn dead, you'll need someone here, and while I'm not fully trained, I'm the best we've still got!" She replied firmly to Ranma's subtle attempt to suggest she go with them.

At the look and the younger girl's eyes Ranma backed away his hands in the air placating her. "All right, all right Merry, I won't push."

Rickard and Patrek organized the supplies, giving Dacey enough to let them head off. She, the remaining wolfsworn and four hundred men broke off and headed west within the hour. The rest of the army with Ranma, Meera, Patrek, Silas and Rickard still leading them headed straight south, to once more prick the lion's tail.

Ranma didn't push the army very hard that first day heading straight south, and they stopped and put up camp almost within sight of castle Lolliston again. He let them rest for the rest of the day and into the night, before moving off again. Thankfully, Lord Plumm had indeed used all of his men in that night attack leaving only a few scouts, none of whom were inclined to try and get the army's attention. So it was easy enough movement for that day and the next, where they were in sight of the Red Fork.

At that point Ranma's scouts warned that they were beginning to run into more and more of their opposite numbers. One of them however, was able to break through and come back. "They've got a major camp up there my Lord," he reported staring over at Ranma and his own Lord, Shawney. "I saw a lot of banners, including the Lannister lion."

"Gooooo..." Ranma smirked. "In that case, I think it's time for us to go east again."

"Northeast, or just east?" Silas asked.

"We'll mix it up, but we want to move east regardless. We want to give Dacey and her crew at least four days to get over the Red Fork, let alone to actually get to where they can do some good. And we need to keep Tywin's attention completely on us, on what he is trying to do to us. So much so he isn't worried about his own defense."

Over the next five days the army backtracked slightly then marched east, but almost immediately they began to run into more blocking forces. For now however, Ranma and his army did not seek out battle, trying to wend their way through them. It got so bad however that their options were slowly disappearing. Meera's scouts, with strict orders to avoid action, had found that Tywin was closely following them, his army broken into smaller groups, each of which could move faster than the total could. The one Meera's scouts' reported was larger alone than Ranma's remaining men. And Ranma and his officers knew there were more out there, each one moving in a slightly different direction in an attempt to catch or at least take away some of Ranma's choices on where to lead his army.

Eventually Ranma had to make the decision to punch through one of the holding forces quickly rather than going around it. Meera found the one in the worst position, but even so, it cost his army over two hundred dead, and slowed them further with even more injured. Still they kept going with Tywin and the others on their heels.

*Tywin thinks he's almost got us, that we cut it too fine when we turned away from the Red Fork. Ranma mused while loping along at the front of the army, Fenris beside him. Good, or rather it will be if we can keep from actually being caught. That however was going to be a tall order now that they were practically retracing their steps, heading further east towards the Ruby Ford. The line is set, now we just need to keep out of the lion's jaws long enough for the trap to spring.*

OOOOOO

While Ranma and Tywin were conducting their gains, Daenerys and her force had reached the Ruby Ford after the carpenters built enough barges to get the small force down the river. It was slow and very irritating going in terms of

river travel, yet it might be worth it in the long term considering this way allowed them to build the barges, which could be useful later, and to stay away from the Ruby Ford for long enough for Ranma and his force to drag every scout Tywin had after them.

Daenerys had also used this time to thoroughly exhaust both of her dragons so that they were willing to remain hidden in their carts for a few days after their arrival. Her own presence would come out quickly, but the dragons, they were a hidden card for now, or at least, both she and Ranma hoped they were. Since Tywin was with his army and away from anyone who could send him rumors, this was a possibility they both thought worth pursuing for a time.

Nonetheless, Rhaegon began to act out barely a few hours after they boarded the barges. By the end of the day Sunfyre had joined him. However Daenerys chanced upon a solution. While warging with them she sent the growing drakings the image of the two of them from her perspective hiding in the carts prepared for them, then superimposed it with one of the direwolves stalking a bear through a forest.

After that the two dragons had thankfully realized what was going on and settled down somewhat, another sign they were much more intelligent than any of the books Daenerys had read when she was younger. She idly wondered if it was a side effect of her connecting mind to mind with them, but she certainly wasn't complaining either way. Though Rhaegon still grumbled occasionally, he did so while hiding in his cart, and Sunfyre seemed content to laze about for a few days after having been worked so hard for a few days prior to that.

As they came close to the Ruby Ford they began to see both more signs of habitation and of the presence of an army. Several dozen riders began to follow the barges down the river, and one or two of them cheered seeing the banner of House Mallister. About a day after that they reached the actual Ruby Ford, an almost mile-long area where the Blue Fork met the Green Fork. Both rivers slowed down here and were not nearly as deep as normal for most of their length, the water of the Ford coming up to only knee height on most men.

The ford had been created by the Riverlords long ago, though the name 'the Ruby Ford' had only been given it after Robert's Rebellion where he fought Prince Rhaegar. Rumor (and pro-Baratheon propaganda) said Robert slew Rhaegar with a massive blow from his warhammer, which had shattered his armor, sending the rubies that had been inset into it into the water of the ford. Jason said that was accurate, having been there in that battle with the Riverlands forces arrayed behind Lord Tully. He then went on to say that the rumor refrained from mentioning how people from both sides stopped fighting to try to dive into the water to pick up the rubies.

That was rather beside the point at the moment however.

Smalljon was on the lead barge, with the banner of House Umber flying next to him alongside Jason Mallister and his banner. He looked on the defenses thrown up on the northern side of the Ford and smiled approvingly. Several lines of ditches and several bulwarks had been thrown up, combined with five raised platforms further back from the line and what looked like four catapults set up to hammer any force coming across the Ford. It was an impressive display.

"Very nice." Smalljon murmured. Then he shouted aloud as men from the defenses came out to greet them. Many of them wore House Umber colors, and the banner of house Umber, Greatjon's banner, and the Stark banner flew on a camp he could see in the distance behind the defensive lines. "My compliments to whoever designed this place!"

"That would be me!" Said a young man, coming forward. He was dressed as a worker, and would have disappeared into the crowd if not for his voice, which was one that had been trained for war. "Vincent Ryger at your service! You would be Smalljon correct? Lord Jason needs no introduction." By that point the men had reached the edge of the defensive area, and he was waving then forward to help pull the barges to the side of the Ford.

The barges clattered together, grounding on the Blue Fork section of the Ford, and the men began to haul themselves out while more men from the defensive lines came forward to help them.

"Well met Vincent." Said Jason, leaping over the side to land knee-deep in the water of the Ford. He moved forward clasping the younger man's arm warmly. "I should've known you would be the one to have designed the defenses here. Your father always did say that you preferred to think up construction projects rather than riding or hunting."

"Not so much anymore, alas." The younger man replied laughing and Smalljon took a moment to watch him. Vincent was dressed simply like any normal armymen would in camp. His hair was a light brown color, shaggy at present with a scar cutting across his chin which might be why he hadn't grown a beard. His shoulders were decently wide and his hand, when he held it out to Smalljon to shake looked calloused, though Smalljon couldn't tell if that was calluses from sword exercises, or from something else. Either way Smalljon approved of what he saw.

"How many men do you bring with you my Lords?" Vincent asked.

"A little over 1,700, the rest of my House's men are marching with Lord Stark at present, doing what they can to make life uncomfortable for the Lannisters."

"Something I could wish we would all be doing." Another young man who had come up said darkly. "I am pleased to say that I count myself among Ser Edmure's friends, and it pains me to sit on the defensive like this while he is kept captive by those treasonous bastards in King's Landing! I would rather have us go on the attack with you my Lords. You'll have to convince the other Houses however, which is a tall order my lords."

"My older brother Tristan, my lords." Vincent introduced him.

While this discussion was going on a cloaked and hooded figure, with a luxuriant beard, came up with another, much smaller hooded figure leading two horses each, causing Smalljon and Jason to nod at it, Jason chancing a glance at the servant for a moment before nodding. "Where are Lord Wayn and the others? I would have thought your father at least would be here."

"Our father has allowed Vincent and I to command our men here. Indeed if not for the other lords insisting he be here, I doubt he would have left the comforts of Willow Wood at all, but our seat is too far away from the ford to make a good command position. He and the other lords have commandeered an inn nearby, I'll escort you there now if you wish. Could you ask your men thought to follow my men, they will guide yours over to the camp the rest of the northern army has set up?"

Vincent nodded agreement. "We are still two separate, 'unallied' forces my lords, as much as my brother and I would prefer otherwise." He nearly snarled the words for a moment before calming down. "The other lords have been most particular about keeping most of your men away from the defensive line, though obviously that hasn't worked over much."

After the newcomers nodded agreement to that he went on. "As I said, it will be a tall order to convince any but my brother and I to act against House Lannister. Lord Wayn and Lord Roote parlayed the current nonaggression agreement we have with the murderous scum, and they control the majority of the men here. Our own House is weak as you well know lord Mallister, and of course our father is... ambivalent about backing Lord Brynden thanks to 'past wrongs'." Vincent and Tristan both looked like they wanted to spit for a moment there. "That despite our uncle's work to regain Lord Tully's trust in our house. I'll be astonished if you can get any further than Lord Brynden or Lord Umber has."

"We will see." Jason said smiling thinly. He was actually going to enjoy this Jason realized, on top of the effect of her actual presence watching other lords run into Daenerys and her powerful personality would be interesting. He didn't know when it had happened, but somewhere along this journey he had gone from being a skeptic even antagonistic towards her, and shifted into a supporter somehow. He was still very leery about the connection she had with her dragons and the dragons themselves, but no more than he was about Ranma and his family's connection to their direwolves.

Tristan and Vincent both looked on in confusion as the servants who had brought up their horses pulled themselves into the saddles of the two remaining beasts, never letting their hoods fall. Both young men's intrigue was further roused by seeing a flash of a hand that was far too dainty to belong to a man from the second figure. Watching Smalljon and the other servant take up unobtrusive positions on either side of her Vincent decided to wait and see what was going on here.

Tristan smiled at the intrigue and asked lightly. "Would you care to let us in on the secret my Lords?"

Smalljon laughed. "Trust us, you'll get the joke eventually and I think it will be all the better for waiting."

With that the five of them began to move through the defensive works while behind them the lead the rest of the men into on loading and moving their stuff to the northern camp. A few moments after they left the last bulwark behind they met up with Brynden and Greatjon who had come out from the northern camp.

"Smalljon!" Greatjon bellowed. "We've heard all about how the Freys fell, ha! I wish I could've seen it! What did that old windbag look like when he realized that the Twins had fallen?"

"I think he nearly had a heart attack frankly, he looked like a frog that had swallowed a boulder!" Smalljon replied. When Greatjon pulled his horse up alongside his son's the two large men reached across and pounded one another on the back with blows that would've broken a lesser man's bones.

"I agree with Greatjon." Brynden quipped, smirking slightly. "I wish I could've seen it too. Actually no, I don't wish that."

I wish I could be a fly on the wall when news of the Twins' destruction reaches those Freys that are already serving with the Lannisters or worse married to them! Their howls of agony would warm my heart."

With that he turned to the third person in the group from the Blue Fork, one eyebrow raised in amusement. He bowed his head slightly, then he ignored her for now joining with the others to inveigle Smalljon to tell them about the battle in the Twins.

Smalljon did so, keeping their attention firmly on him as well as all their watchers as they rode on. None of the Riverlanders noticed when two carts began to move in their wake, with several young squires racing alongside them. They soon came to the inn that had been commandeered as the home for the lawyers wildly held the Ruby forward. "Of course," Tristan said shaking his head in amusement, "none of them are happy to be here."

"That's true enough." Brynden replied shaking his head. "I had forgotten how set in his ways Old Wayn is, but then again he's as old as my brother, and almost as feeble. Both in mind and body..." He went on, speaking under his breath but still audible to those nearest him.

"Jason!" said a voice as they entered the inn's interior. Lord Ryger set up from where he had been sitting at a table, where he was going over some kind of paperwork. "I'd heard your banner was seen coming down the river, but I didn't think it would actually be you. Last we'd heard you had sent your son off to Fairmarket, while you stayed behind."

"Events forced me to march to war myself Donovan." Jason said smiling thinly at the other man. They were not exactly friendly, indeed they had only met a few times and Donovan had always been rather bitter about the punishment handed out by Lord Tully for his House's backing House Targaryen.

From a nearby table Lord Roote also stood up. He was a small fat man, who looked much more like a merchant or banker of some kind than a lord. This fit house Roote to a T, considering they had never been a powerful House until awarded Harroway, and after that they had become more merchant than lord.

Old Wayn did not get up from his chair by the fire, he simply looked at them coolly. "Jason." he said nodding. He was an elderly man who might have been tall in his youth, but who was now stooped with age. He had a long beard, and deep rheumy eyes, and unlike the other two he didn't wear armor or a sword, instead wearing good if faded linen doublet and hose.

"Elistares." Jason replied, nodding back just as coolly.

"While it's nice to see you" the older man went on, his tone giving his words the lie. "I have to say that if you're here to join young Brynden in trying to convince us to take the field against the Lannisters you won't have much luck. The agreement we've reached with Lord Tywin is that so long as he stays on his side of the Ruby Ford we won't take the field against him. The Lannisters are too strong, even with your Northern army with us to take in the open field. And besides, while there might be some question as to the Lannister boy's right to the crown, it's not as if the Starks have any claim on it either! I'm not willing to fight for them, but neither am I willing to fight against them, not without a lot more reason than I've already heard."

"So says a man who hasn't seen their predations on the Riverlands first hand." Ser Halmore Blanetree growled. He was a tall, spare man, with a series of scars running down one side of his face that looked recent, and a burning rage in his brown eyes.

"We've already had this argument Ser Halmore." Lord Roote said, waving one somewhat pudgy hand as if to wave away the knight's words. "And while we sympathize, we have to think of our own people first. And while there is some question about the boy-king's right to his throne, there is just as much question as to who began the battle against the Lannisters when they began their march. If you, the Vances and the other hotheads hadn't begun the war, the Riverlands could have remained neutral, and the king might even have returned your precious Lord Edmure."

"As much as I hate to admit it, Lord Roote is correct. We need to think of our own people, and until there is a clear case of who is in the right here, we will continue to follow Lord Tully's last command to us, that we follow our own consciences. I'm sorry, but there you are." Lord Ryger said, sounding as if he really meant it.

"My husband and I thought you might think that way my Lords." said a female voice. "That is why I am here."

Vincent and his brother exchanged a glance, wondering where this was going to go while their father leaned forward wondering as well.

"And who would you and your husband be, miss?" said old Wayn now looking at the hooded form that had spoken with surprise.

Daenerys raced her hands pushing back her hood to reveal her face and features. Beside her the other cloaked figure did the same, revealing an aged, lined face, one that more than one man had seen before. "I am Daenerys Stark-Targaryen, wife of Ranma Stark, King of the North and lord Tully's representative until this current crisis is dealt with." The words 'and Lord Tully's grandson' hovered in the air for a moment, unspoken, before she went on. "And I'm here to convince you to join your banners with ours for the sake of justice and your oaths to Lord Tully and his house."

Over the next several days Daenerys went to work on bringing the lords of the eastern Riverlands over to their cause. It was not, alas, as easy as she had hoped. It gave Daenerys her first real experience with the world of politics, that is, the need to juggle various people's demands/needs with what needed to be done. Worse, for three of the five lords here, her legitimate claim to the throne mattered not at all, nor did Ser Barristan's siding with her, which should have added more legitimacy to her and Ranma's cause. It appalled her that the lords, in particular Roote and Wayn, were so self-serving, so blind to the long term ramifications of doing nothing, though admittedly for very different reasons. Eventually however, she was able to charm, browbeat or otherwise convince the various lords to side with them.

Wayn was the hardest to convince. He was old and very tired of war. He had no direct heir of his body, his three sons all having died in the War of the Usurper. He was **tired**, and had no desire to see his men off to die in another war. Daenerys however convinced him to defend his House's land and not stop allied forces from crossing them. Further she guaranteed his brother and nephew would be allowed to return home from Riverrun, where they were currently serving, his brother as steward his nephew as a page, immediately after the Lannisters were driven out of the Riverlands.

For a very different reason Roote was also hard to convince. Given the fact that they didn't know if the houses near the Trident had been coerced or join the Westerlanders willingly, Daenerys refused to guarantee anything behind the return of Harroway, but even that had conditions. Since it was a town, Daenerys wanted to make certain Harroway had crown representation in the future. Eventually she convinced him that if Darry had followed Tywin willingly their lands would become House Roote's in return for concessions in the running of the town.

Lord Ryger and Ser Blanetree were the easiest though they had very different motives. Ryger saw Daenerys, her dragons and her marriage to Ranma as vindication of his father, the former Lord Ryger's, decision to follow the crown. Daenerys didn't think in that manner, but for some very complex reasons, and while very willing to repay House Ryger for its service couldn't truly give them much, which angered him.

On the other hand, Blanetree she could do something for, which neatly led to a solution to Ryger's angst. Their house had been on the other side of the Blue fork, right in the Trident on the side of the river away from Harroway. Their people had mostly escaped over the Ruby Ford, though Blanetree and his men had been mauled in the retreat from the battle at the Kneeling Man ford. While not having many men to add to the cause now, the loyalty of the house to their Lord Paramount had to be awarded, and Daenerys had promised them House Vypren's land and money enough to rebuild its seat, assuming that Ranma's attack on it had left enough of it standing.

While Daenerys was discovering the joys of politics on a small scale Domic and Alayaya went to work. With Brynden's aid by the end of four days the two of them had rooted through both the northern and Riverlands forces here, pulling out what information they could not just about the various house's readiness for war which helped Daenerys in her discussions, but other bits and pieces of information that would help in the long term.

But their main task was to ferret out anyone passing on information to anyone else. They found several spies from Lord Lannister, and Domic even caught two couriers well out from the Riverlands encampment. These were men who were good enough at sneaking about in the forests and woodlands to get away from the army and cross the ford before travelling down to where the Lannister Army wasn't camped on the other side of their fortifications. Their skill at sneaking however did not translate to skill with weapons' craft, and Domic killed them both when they tried to run away from him when he came upon their small hideaway.

Thanks to their efforts the dragons had been ensconced in the northern camp with no one save the northern army the wiser for several days, and the northerners weren't going to share anything with the Riverlanders. This was because the portion of the northern army here had come to resent the Riverlands nobles, rightly blaming them for stopping the army from crossing the Ruby Ford and going to their King's aid. And more than one armstrong had realized that the dragons were a powerful token, and should be played with the most amount of surprise to get the most out of it.

Now the dragons were watched by the majority of the youngest pages led by Cley, who Ranma had sent with them,

when Daenerys could not be with them, which alas was most of the afternoons. Since none of the spies had access to the northern camp in the first place, they were relatively out of sight, though Danny started to hear some rumors about giant bats for some reason after she allowed the dragons out to fly at night.

Unfortunately even, Brynden, Alayaya and Domerick didn't know all the tricks and they missed a few spies. Most particularly, they missed the fact that Lord Wayn's steward, who was the most powerful person in that house given Lord Wayn's declining health and mental acuity, had been trying rather desperately to poison the old man against Daenerys. Ser Crenlock Shett was a rather large man, almost of a size with Smalljon in height though not in breadth, he looked as if he could have been used as a gigantic coat rack in fact, and his hair was completely gray.

He was used to having it all his own way, since he had been running Lord Wayn's keep and lands more and more in the past few years. Of course for most of that time he didn't have anything much to report to either of his two masters, Lord Lannister and Varys, but the stipend they both paid him and the money he was able to launder allowed him to keep his mistress in Gulltown very happy indeed.

Unfortunately, Crenlock's ability to control Wayn's actions was based upon there being both no crisis and having access to him while decisions were being made. Since Daenerys' first move had been to insist that only the Lords be present during their discussions, she had been able to dominate the discussions without Crenlock being able to interfere.

It was that desperation, and the knowledge that both of his couriers had been found that caused Crenlock to start poking his nose around, though not his own of course. He had six trusted men, men whose loyalty ostensibly was to Lord Wayn, but who were truly loyal to him. He had them listen to rumors and watching for anything unusual, while he began to think about ways to remove Daenerys.

Right now his hands were worrying at one another, and he was furtively glancing from side to side. He'd lost quite a few contacts the past few days, and he knew that most of his fellow spies had been found out thanks to the Summer Island whore and that damn northern bard working with Bryndan, whose intelligence Crenlock had long suspected was rather higher than he was happy with. But that was but a patch on the real reason he was nervous, because one of his men had gotten a young Northern page drunk, and found out that Daenerys had far more going for her than just her last name.

"Dragons, the bitch has two dragons, young yet but, gahhhh!" He said, his tone low but almost manic, and very much afraid, his eyes on the door to his office. It wasn't really an office, he'd simply commandeered the room that had belonged to the innkeeper's young daughter. It was a small threadbare place, worse even than Crenlock's room back in Castle Wayn let alone the magnificent apartment he kept in Gulltown. He hadn't been there in months, not since old Wayn had been forced to divest himself from Castle Wayn and come forward with his men. "We, we need to act, and I know of one way to turn those dragons on the fucking northerners..."

Unfortunately, the guard on Daenerys was too much for any subtle plan Crenlock came up with to work. Smalljon and Ser Barristan never left her side save when she was asleep in the room she shared with Alayaya, and Ser Barristan had retained the services of a crannogman as a food taster. The ladies room was also the furthest along the second-story passage of the inn, only reachable by walking past all the others, which included the room Smalljon and Barristan shared, whose door was always open. So he was forced to go with a brute force approach, one that was much more of an all or nothing proposition than he would've liked.

So Crenlock, knowing it was only a matter of time before he was found out, couched his bet. While two of the men who were loyal to him would carry out his assassination plan, the other four left early in the night with five very good horses, heading toward the Kingsroad then down toward the Trident and beyond that into the area of the Riverlands controlled by the Lannisters. There he met them on his own horse, having ostensibly been sent off by Wayn back to his family's keep to check on things.

This was a route that was too long to have been used up to this point to send spy messages along, but going in that direction allowed him to get away from the Army in a direction that the Northerners weren't watching as closely. The defenses in that direction of the earthworks wasn't nearly as built up either, since they would have a lot of warning of any Lannister incursion coming up the Kingsroad.

The men Crenlock left behind moved that very night. They moved around the inn to the back, where they stood directly underneath the window to the room that Daenerys and Alayaya had taken over. While one of the men stood there his fellow climbed onto his shoulders reaching up for the windowsill. With difficulty the assassin pulled himself up, and opened the window, which Crenlock had stealthily unlocked earlier that day.

Daenerys and Alayaya were not in there at that moment. Daenerys was downstairs talking to the other lords and



having an evening meal, while Alayaya was out and about with Domic. This allowed both of the men to hide themselves in Daenerys' room, closing the window and pulling the blinds closed as well. One hid in a corner behind the door between the inner wall and a wardrobe, while the other man hid between one bed and the wall.

The two men waited there in the dark of the room for he didn't know how long, until eventually he heard a set of three footsteps and a female voice murmuring followed by a chuckle. The one nearest the door heard his target murmur "Good night Smalljon, Ser Barristan." Then watched as Barristan opened the door first, glancing inside. Both held still while the veteran's eye's scanned the shadows, not even daring to breath for a moment.

Then Barristan was pushed to one side, a female voice murmuring "Oh give over my lord, I doubt that there is a horde waiting in the shadows waiting to jump out at me."

"You never know my lady, assassins can find you at the most astonishing of times. And as queen your safety is not something I'm willing to take chances with."

"Carry on then Ser."

"Thank you milady, I will."

The assassins held their breaths even more as Barristan entered the room, glaring around him before turning toward the door, but didn't find the assassins, who were both wearing black and gray clothing that let them hide very well in the black of the room. Just as they both felt that Barristan was finished his inspection, the man moved with far more speed than his age would suggest. Jumping to one side, his sword came out of its sheath before thrusting into and through the chest of the man who had been hiding in the corner. "Assassin!"

At that cry and the scream of his companion, the other assassin bolted up from his own hiding place, rushing toward the doorway where Daenerys was standing holding a small candle for light. With his sword stuck in the first assassin Barristan couldn't turn to face the second man, but Smalljon quickly grabbed Daenerys, pulling her out of the way. Even so the second assassin had reacted so quickly, and the room was so small, that he had been able to get close enough for his long dagger to slice into Daenerys' arm despite the speed of Smalljon's response.

Stumbling from Smalljon's pull Daenerys winced as the pain of the slash to her arm hit her, clamping her hand down on it. However her mind was still working, and she growled "Alive Smalljon, I want him alive!"

Smalljon, who had just smashed the second assassin's knife out of his hand with blow from his gauntleted fist, snarled, but complied, lowering his sword while bringing his unarmed hand around again, catching the assassin on the chin. His blow lifted the shorter man off his feet, throwing him across the room to slam into the opposite wall. "You never said he had to be in one piece Daenerys."

By this point Barristan had finally wrenched his sword free of the dead man's chest, rushing over to his queen. "Are you alright milady?"

"A new scar for the collection perhaps, but it might be best to send for a healer as well as someone to take our prisoner to Brynden, I want him squeezed, and squeezed hard." Daenerys replied smiling at the man who, she was swiftly realizing, had just saved her life. "Thank my shield, and if I ever question you again about being too paranoid, feel free to ignore me."

"I will hold you to that milady," Barristan replied, smirking behind his beard as Smalljon laughed while shouts from below indicated the uproar had been noticed.

OOOOOO

Jon and the men he led didn't have any kind of baggage train because in the territory they were going even mules would have slowed them down. The Whispering Wood was not named that because the woods were easy to get through. After all, a lot of the Riverlands had scattered copses of trees and foliage. The Whispering Woods however was as dense and as unclaimed as almost any forest south of the Neck.

To Jon and the Northern mountain clansmen with him however, it was just like coming home. House Grell had long lived on the outskirts of the Whispering Woods, their armsmen were used to moving through its verdant foliage. So Jon led his force as quickly as possible, because they had quite a lot of territory to cover. Though Ranma hadn't really given him a date or anything in which to take their target, Jon felt that a month and a half was the maximum amount of time he should allow.

None of the men were armored as they moved, that would simply have worn them down, and would have made

noise. The jingle of chain and the stamping of feet could cover a surprising distance even in a forest. So their armor and weapons were carried on every man's back, along with each man's food supplies. They added to this by stopping occasionally in the midafternoon to send out hunters, and because there are only 700 of them they were able to sustain themselves in the Woodlands.

Several days after they left House Grell territory smoke in the distance indicated they were coming close to Riverrun, and Jon led them even further to the west putting more distance between them and the city just in case. He doubted that the Lannisters had any scouts on this side of the Red Fork, but he didn't want **anyone** to see them, regardless of who they served. Rumor could carry to Lannister ears just as much as a scout's report after all.

Nearly a week after that Jon opened his eyes, coming out of his warg state with Ghost. He stretched grumbling slightly as he got out of his bed roll at the edge of his force's camp, having unknowingly rationalized that in the same way as his brother. *So that is the Tumblestone, joy.*

Jon had sent Ghost ahead of the rest of his command to see if he could find and follow the Tumblestone which they would have to cross eventually someplace well down the course of the river. Or rather up, considering they were heading towards its source. Now however he knew why there weren't any farmers near the Tumblestone as there were near the Red Fork or even the other rivers in places. The land around the Tumblestone was nasty, and even just a few days away from Riverrun the river itself was a deep frothy nightmare of massive stone boulders jutting out from a fast current. *I hope it gets easier as we go along, or...*

It didn't. As the curve of the river slowly turned westward it got deeper, and thankfully the rocks began to slowly disappear worn away by the current over time, but the current itself was still massively fast, too fast to attempt any type of crossing. Eventually Jon called a halt, and he, Ser Desmond, and the mountain clan leaders, Torag and Muldan of the Wull and Flint clans respectively, went forward to view the Tumblestone for themselves.

Here there was a slight curve in the Tumblestone. Here you could tell the river had receded somewhat from its highline, indeed the river only took up about half the gorge it had cut out of the land here. Yet the current still looked more than enough to overwhelm a man in chain mail, or even a normal man in leather.

"We'll never get men across that," grunted Desmond, sounding almost but not quite pleased. He had after all thought this idea was folly back in Fairmarket.

"Our men can't swim," said Muldan, spitting to one side, his mouth a sneer under his full beard. "Where we come fr'm, swimmin' can't be done." There were rivers and the occasional deep pool in the mountains, but they were freezing cold year-round, not quite cold enough to freeze, but more than cold enough to kill anyone who went into them for any length of time. A few mountain men could stay afloat, diving into those pools was often used as a challenge to prove one's courage, but there was a vast difference between that and facing this kind of current.

"We don't have to get everyone across, just one person to set up a rope line." Jon pointed across the river. On the other side there was a large boulder jutting out of the side of the river, with a tree growing at a diagonal next to it. "If we can get some ropes across to that we can make a makeshift rope bridge, one below, two above. Why do you think I've been carrying so much rope all this time?" The northern army actually had commandeered enough rope to supply a war galley when they were in Seagard, and about half of it had been split up among the men with Jon.

More than one man looked a little queasy at the very idea, but none of them were going to say anything that could be taken as cowardice in front of their fellows. "Who?" said Desmond, still looking skeptical.

Jon shrugged philosophically. "Me. I'm the strongest here, and I can swim." The other officers protested this, saying that as commander Jon shouldn't risk himself like that. But Jon refused to listen, knowing he had the best chance of getting across without being swept away by the current.

The rest of the Army came up while Jon tied a thick line of rope around his waist and then over his shoulders. The end of it was being held in the grips of several of the men, as well as Ghost holding the very end of it. The direwolf was watching his master worriedly, but did not argue or try to convince him not to go. Jon patted him one last time on the head then slowly climbed down the side of the gorge and into the water below.

Almost immediately Jon realized that he had underestimated its current, and he had to stand there for a moment, wrapping his arms around a boulder for a moment as he got used to the current. Slowly Jon moved forward deeper into the Tumblestone. Even as strong as he was Jon was almost carried away several times, and despite the best he could do by the time he got across Jon had moved down the riverbank about fifty feet from the target boulder. He was also exhausted, as if he had sparred with Ranma for an entire day.

The men who had been holding the end of the rope however had followed him along and they cheered as Jon, looking and feeling like a wet rat pulled himself up out of the water to lean gasping against the far side of the crevice. He waved at them wearily, then turned to climb upwards.

Moments later Jon was back at the boulder, tying it off. Two more ropes were flung over, and he grabbed from both tying them up to two different trees, then looping them around the boulder just in case. This way the three ropes made a very crude rope bridge, with one rope at the bottom of a triangle for a person's feet, and two on either side for their hands.

With that done Jon leaned against the boulder, wearily watching as Desmond began to organize the men. Over the next few hours the men came across slowly, with only ten on the rope at any time. Despite the ropes they still lost several men who lost their footing and were unable to hold themselves up on the ropes long enough for their fellows to grab them. At one point, one man falling had produced a chain effect, taking four more of his fellows into the water below. Burdened as they were with their packs none of them surfaced again.

Eventually however the entire force was acrossbar Ghost. Desmond looked over at Jon, who had just stood up, looking across the river at his bonded direwolf. "Are you going to go across and carry your pet over?" the knight asked dubiously. Desmond had yet to realize how deadly or intelligent the giant direwolves of the Starks all were.

"No, I'm not that strong, and he's not that small." Jon replied dryly, shuddering inwardly at the very idea for many reasons. "No, I think Ghost will have to get himself across." Leaning once more back against the boulder Jon stared across at Ghost their minds connecting through that strange doorway that was the warg ability.

After Jon got his thoughts across Ghost shook his head, as if pitying his human. A second later Ghost moved, biting through two of the ropes and letting them fall away. They were quickly pulled in by the men on the other side, since they could be of use later that done Ghost bit through the last of the ropes then grabbed the end of it with his mouth, rushing forwards and leaping out into the gorge and into the water.

Ghost was actually quite a bit stronger than Jon hence his confidence but much to Ghost's chagrin this did not equate to a greater ability at swimming. Jon had to help him, pulling him across the river with several other men. The power of the direwolf's jaws and the men pulling on the rope allowed him to get across despite having been carried away slightly.

Once his animal had joined him, looking very wet and very irritable Jon turned to his officers. "We'll continue up the Tumblestone on this side of the river for now, I want us to do at least two more leagues today, then we'll pause for the rest of the day."

Later, while the rest of the men were resting doing the things armsmen needed to during quite moments such as checking their equipment and other matters, Jon once more read Ghost's mind, and the direwolf moved off through the woods. A direwolf at full lope could cover more leagues in a few hours than a man on horseback could cover in a day and could certainly move through the woods far more easily. Even stopping to hunt at one point didn't slow him down. This way Jon used his bonded animal to find the trails they could follow as well as scout out the area for enemies.

Luckily there was still no one around. This area of Westeros had nothing whatsoever to draw people to it, no resources, no arable land, not even much game, it was very much like most of the North in that manner though obviously the weather was different.

Jon's force kept following the Tumblestone for another week, then split off when the area they were travelling too changed from hilly to mountainous. At that point the mixed force stopped moving during the day, and moved through the woods at night with the mountain clansmen in the lead following the trails that Ghost would find them the day before.

In this manner they soon came out of what Desmond and his men called the badlands and into more settled territory. The next day, with the rest of his command hidden among a group of trees and rocks Jon, Ghost and his officers went forward to allow Desmond to get the lay of the land and determine where they were in relation to Wayfarer's Rest.

After a moment Desmond nodded. "We're further up into the hills and mountains than Wayfarer's Rest is, we'll have to go northeast for a time I think."

"You think?" Jon asked.

Desmond shrugged. "I've only been to Wayfarer's Rest a few times, and I've never been here before. That is my best guess, but that's all it is."

"In that case, I'll go forward with Ghost." Jon held up a hand forestalling Ser Desmond's protests. "Can you name someone else who can move as quietly and as quickly as I can?"

Desmond and the mountain clan leaders growled, but knew they couldn't. It just seemed strange for their leader to be doing so much of the scouting but they couldn't argue with the fact that he was the best they had at it.

With that Ghost and Jon were off once more, but they were back that very day, and Jon was grinning viciously. "You were right Desmond, we're somewhat further up into the mountains than Wayfarer's Rest, but we're only within a few days of it! And better, this continues for another day." he said gesturing around them to the hilly woodlands dominated by trees and rocks. "After that we'll be in the open, but we'll be so close we can rush the keep from there."

Jon's words proved prophetic. Another few days' travel, with every man now moving as quietly and silently as possible through this hardscrabble territory brought them to the edge of the mountainous area on the western side of where Wayfarer's Rest sat at the front of the passage through the mountains the River Road followed into the Westerlands. They rested there throughout the rest of the day, with Jon, Ghost and several dozen others on watch just in case someone had spotted them.

No one had, though Jon didn't know if that was because of their cover or because of complacency on the part of the Lannister forces that had remained here. Regardless, Jon's raiding party rushed out of their cover that evening, falling upon the Lannisters patrol nearest them, slaying them quickly and almost silently before rushing on to their target, the way clear for now.

Ahead of them the keep's main gate wasn't even closed, but the defenses had been upgraded somewhat. Around the central holdfast a new stone wall was going up, though only the first few feet of it had been completed anywhere along its length, and there were large gaps in it too.

Jon vaulted this wall while shouts of alarm at last began to be heard from the top of the keep's wall, where several dozen men had been patrolling with torches. "The North!" he shouted, now that the time for subterfuge had passed. "The King in the North! Winter is Coming!"

The men guarding the entrance into the keep proper were still gaping as he fell upon them swords flashing. One man went down with a gurgle his throat slit, while the other backed away rapidly holding the stubble of a hand that had recently been holding a longsword. Ghost slammed full on into a third man, taking him down to the ground and then ripping his head off with a mighty jerk of his jaws.

That was when it began to go wrong. Tywin had left more men here than Jon or Ranma had thought he would and though they didn't outnumber Jon's forces, they were much closer in parity than he had expected, and after that initial shock wore off they responded quickly. Men boiled out from deeper with the keep, slamming into Jon and the outriders of his force trying to regain control of the of the keep's gate while more of Jon's men poured in behind him.

Jon was forced to duck under a flail then fell backwards to avoid a broadsword blow coming in from his other side. One sword caught his opponent's blade guiding it past him while his other short sword thrust out, punching through the other man's chain mail guarded chest. Then another blade nearly took him in the side, but Jon dodge that by the skin of his teeth, feeling it skitter across his breastplate for a moment.

For a moment it was all Jon could do to defend, holding the doorway as more of his men came up, taking out the men that had gotten past him before he could reach it as well as from several small camps set up on the other side of the keep. A vicious melee was happening all over what had obviously been planned to become a courtyard all around him, men dying on both sides in the torchlight.

Arrows also began to fall from above, answered quickly by the archers among Jon's men, who had taken position along the rubble of the planned outer wall. Other Westerlander armsmen tried to break off and rush them, but were stopped by a force under Desmond. The element of surprise was gone, and now it was down to just numbers, steel and fury.

Ghost came out of nowhere, biting into a man's leg and tearing it off in a welter of blood, the man's screaming in agony. Not lingering over that man Ghost moved forward, head-butting another man backwards into three of his fellows. This gave Jon time enough to move back a half-step setting himself for the next charge.

Ten men came at them in a rush, but Jon darted forward again, getting in among their blades before they could

respond, his shorter swords serving him in good stead. Two men died, one with his throat cut neatly the other with his intestines bleeding out from an equally neat cut below his breastplate then Jon stepped back, dodging a cut from one side blocking another from the other and kicking out at a third.

One man went down under Ghost, his blade skittering across the ground before the direwolf leaped away, dodging a spear. He then lashing out with a forepaw shattering it to the man's visible shout of dismay. "Monster, a white-furred monsteGAHHH!" At that point he had no life left to scream as Ghost's forepaw came back, smashing his face to flinders despite his helmet, while he dodged a blow from his other side.

This man wore the full plate armor of a knight, but this availed him not at all. Ghost dodged a blow from his large broadsword, then his head darted to one side, striking almost as quickly as a snake, gripping the man's arm. With a wrench of tortured metal he twisted, ripping the man's arm out of its socket despite the plate armor covering his arm and shoulder. The man cried out in agony echoing the other man's death scream, even as Ghost turned to jump over a spear thrust, lunging forward over the spear to take the spear-wielder to the ground, his fangs seeking his throat. "AGGHH, m-monster! Monster!"

The two of them held there, killing over two dozen men in the next few moments, while all around him the men who had been camped outside the keep were slowly overwhelmed despite the archers on top of the keep helping them as best they could. Soon the fear that Ghost engendered in the men facing him began to tell, and the men trying to get out of the keep Instead they fell back no doubt intent on fortifying its interior.

Jon however wasn't about to let them have any respite. He shouted aloud one short sword held up above his head. "Rally to me, rally to me!"

All around him mountain clansmen gathered, their short hatchets and broadswords bloody, their eyes afire with eagerness. "In and at them, boys!" Jon growled. "Keep up the pressure!" All the men around him nodded grimly, and Jon and Ghost led the way howling, "Winter is Coming!"

OOOOOO

Hours later, Jon winced slightly as he stalked into the small prisoner's area to stare at the small number of prisoners among the Westerlands armymen they had taken. He kept his wince well-hidden of course, for what he had planned right now that would be a hindrance. Ghost padded beside him, and Jon could tell that the prisoner was staring at the direwolf in horror.

At Jon's 'suggestion' Ghost hadn't yet removed the blood that practically coated his muzzle from nose to neck as well as his paws. The blood stood out starkly against his white fur, making him look all the more terrifying. Not that Ghost cared about that, direwolves were surprisingly fastidious creatures. He desperately wanted to find some water to get his fur clean, or a few moments to lick the blood off in a pinch. Now Ghost began to growled low in his throat moving forward to sniff the man who was chained to the wall.

"Now Ghost, I said you can't eat him." Jon's said mildly then went on, looking at the prisoner staring into his wide terrified eyes. "Not yet anyway. Of course that might change if I don't get the answers I wish. So tell me... friend... why are there so many supplies here, and why were there so many of you armymen here? I would have thought that Lord Lannister would want every man he could get up with his army on the other side of the Red Fork by this time, I know my brother you see."

After only a second's frightened staring the man began to gabble. Jon held up a hand. "Calmly my friend, calmly. As long as you tell me the truth the answers don't actually matter, I just want the information. But don't try to lie. I don't like it when people lie to me and there are a dozen other prisoners I'm going to be questioning after you. And anyone of you who lies well..." Jon sighed sadly. "I haven't been able to feed Ghost well lately on the march, and he's given feeling a might hungry."

OOOOOO

The next day dawned bright and cheery despite the bloodshed and carnage that had occurred the night before. Jon sat on the parapet right over the keep's gateway, Ghost curled up next to him as Jon honed the edge of one of his short swords, thinking hard about what he had heard from the prisoners he had 'interrogated'. The news that even with House Blackwood having pulled their men back to Raventree Hall months back, there was still groups raiding the Lannister supply lines was excellent, as was the timing of his raid in one way, having taken Wayfarers Rest right before another convoy was due to go out.

It had explained both why there were so many supplies here, and the number of men the Lannisters had kept here.

The losses among his own troops had been severe, sixty of the archers dead, along with two hundred mountain men and seventy-seven men of House Grell, not even counting the hundreds of wounded. He had barely three hundred men fit to defend this place.

That bit about a few of the raiders wearing Stark colors was interesting. Jon wondered if they were survivors of the men that his father had sent out with the force under Lord Dondarrion and the Red Priest to destroy the bandits raiding along the Westerlands and Riverlands border. *Still, my job isn't to hunt them down and see if they would like to join up with us, my job is to hold Wayfarer's Rest. That might be a tall order in the long run if Tywin responds too quickly to Ranma's strategy and sends enough men back to reclaim this place.*

*Still, we've got that group of Westerlands stoneworkers here, and I bet they'd be willing to work for us if we promised to pay them and, you know, not torture them.* Jon smirked remembering the act he and Ghost had put on early that morning. *Indeed they will probably be most eager to work for us. And I don't see any of them trying to bargain a price for their services.*

A moment later, Jon's thoughts turned somber. *If the worst occurs I want that outer wall at least partially completed everywhere along its length, and enough stones brought in to close the entrance to the keep entirely. We've got enough supplies to last out a siege, we just need to make sure that the defenses are up to that task as well. And, I want to start building some catapults too. That way even if Tywin simply retreats down the pass unwilling to get bogged down in a siege here we'll still be her able to hurt his army.*

Jon stood up, staring to the north and east. He wondered what was going on out there, wondered if Ranma had bitten off too much than even he could chew and a dozen other things that could affect not only what occurred here, but the course of the war in general.

Ghost bumped his head against Jon side from where he was laid out next to him. Jon nodded understanding the message and turned resolutely towards the staircase down from the keep's crown. He had work to do.

OOOOOO

Stannis had not been pushing his army very hard from the moment they set out from Duskenale. For one thing, the troops he had taken off of the royal navy's war galleys needed training in land tactics and fighting in larger groups. Devoting half the day to that training of course slowed the army down. It time was well spent though, since even now only two weeks out from Duskenale their progress in their training was visible. They could now hold a decent shield wall at least in practice, and obeyed orders rather well.

He had also taken the time to begin building siege equipment near Duskenale. The further towards King's Landing you got, the less there was woods from this direction. He wouldn't have the ready source of timber that a force coming up from the south would have in the Kingswood. When this had first been ordered however, several of his lords had protested.

Stannis had replied stating, "I **want** us to move slowly, I **want** the Lannisters and Renly to soften one another up for us. We do not have the numbers necessary to take the combined Reach and Stormlands army my lords, but Renly is no general. I have no doubt that his losses will be high in any kind of siege battle, indeed I have no doubt he has already taken severe losses." Stannis's eyes did not flicker over to where Melisandre was standing, by this point he had trained himself to not let that happen.

Melisandre's visions had told him of a battle in front of the walls of the city, and of a Rose being badly burnt. He didn't know if that meant that the army had taken losses which included the men of House Tyrell in particular, or if it meant the Rose Knight Loras had been hurt in some fashion. Either way, it worked to Stannis' advantage to let his enemies continue to fight it out between them.

"And this way, we can reduce Stokeworth and Rosby, letting the troops gain valuable experience using our siege weapons and in siege warfare before moving on to the city. Remember my lords, it isn't who takes the city or even the throne, it is who can hold on to it." And that didn't even consider his wife's plans.

"I mean for us to be the ones to hold onto it. With the Navy supplying us, we would be in a good position to wait out any other army that tries to retake the city, and if the Queen can be made to confess your sins, both the Lannister and the Stark forces will have to pull back. Making peace with the Starks might be difficult at this point given certain recent events."

And here are Stannis couldn't stop himself from glaring over at Melisandre. "But when given the opportunity and so long as we can free Edmure from his captivity I have no doubt that they will be willing to retreat to the North in return

for peace in the Riverlands and the Lannisters no longer having any claim on the throne." After that there no one questioned his orders further, and the army continued its slow way further south towards Rosby and then Stokeworth.

Rosby was the first to fall. Having sent most of their men to the capital, there were few left to protect the castle, and it fell in a single day. After putting together the siege engines from the parts made back in Duskendale his archers were able to sweep the walls for the precious few moments that it took to bring up a siege tower, and then his men were across. After that it was all over, though Stannis and his lords had a hard time controlling the men enough to take prisoners even so.

They succeeded in this of course, but not as many as Stannis had hoped. Worse, none of the prisoners were from House Rosby, which was a pity, as was the damage done to the hall when someone set a fire in the dining hall. This forced Stannis and the rest of the men to bunk out in their tents again.

That evening Melisandre walked into Stannis's tent. "Did you know we captured one of the fake priests of the demonic Seven?"

Stannis looked up from where he had been resting in his field chair, a canvas and wood affair that was very light and easy to move just like everything else in his tent. In that area he and Rannar were very alike, they refused to allow themselves creature comforts on campaign when their men could not. "Yes, what of it?"

He did not comment on Melisandre's calling a follower of the Seven a demon worshipper. To followers of R'hllor, all other gods were demons, and their followers either dupes or willing demon worshippers. Though Melisandre was the first follower of R'hllor Stannis had ever met that actually believed that.

"I wish to sacrifice him to R'hllor." Melisandre said bluntly. "The sacrifice of a demon worshiper like that would give my visions much more power and possibly clarity." Melisandre was becoming increasingly frustrated by the need to interpret her visions these days rather than simply watch as events unfolded. Symbolism was something that she used and understood of course, but interpreting her visions through the lens of such was a different story.

"Are you mad woman!?" Stannis bellowed, getting to his feet and towering over Melisandre despite her own formidable height for a woman. "Most of my army still believes in the Seven! They're willing to ignore you and your R'hllor worshiping fellows, but there's a reason why I've never pushed for them to convert as I have, just as I've stopped you from creating any more Shadow Warriors since that first time, it wasn't just a logistical decision."

Carrying those large wooden boxes that the Shadow Warriors had to stay in during the day would have taken up valuable space in their supply train. For something made out of shadow they had a significant weight to them, just as if they were the men whose soul had been sacrificed to make them.

"I understood that, and I understand that men are weak and will believe whatever faith they were born into despite the truth staring them into the eyes. I agreed then and agree now with the need to wait and slowly reveal the truth to them. But I must have a more powerful, more significant sacrifice to power my visions."

"You never needed a sacrifice to power your visions before." Stannis retorted.

"I know." Melisandre said calmly, moving further into the tent. She sat down on Stannis's chair staring up at him. "But something has... **shifted**. Reading the future is no longer like reading a tapestry, it is like... like reading a gigantic ball of yarn made up of thousands of different colors, while you are only interested in following a few threads. It's even worse trying to scry far away events. The chaos of the moment of **now** is affecting the distance from which R'hllor can send my vision. If you want precise information, I must begin to sacrifice people and use that power to further my ability to scry."

Stannis ground his teeth, looking away for a moment as he thought. The information Melisandre could provide him about distant lands was invaluable in shaping his long-term strategy, and could even be extremely useful on a short term level. They were why he was in no rush to claim King's Landing, he knew that the food shortage had begun even before the true siege, and had no wish to deal with fighting his way through a hungry populace which may or may not be on his side. They were also why he knew that he had no fear of being attacked from behind or the flank, that the lion and wolf were still snarling at one another up in the Riverlands.

*But are they worth the loss of trust in me that will occur if her powers are rubbed into my army's face?* There were enough rumors about Melisandre's powers already. The army as a whole seemed to be ambivalent towards them, and there was no septon amongst the men of course. The healers with his army were all maesters, and such men tended not to believe in any kind of faith. But the men did, especially the levies and the armsmen from the Stormlands. One or two of the Lords were also firm believers, and they were watching Melisandre like so many

hawks.

"No," he said finally, the word coming out with reluctance, but certainty. "No, I cannot afford to create the internal enemies such a sacrifice would cause to spring up." He held up the hand as Melisandre began to speak. "I know that your visions could possibly weed out such, but I can't protect you from everyone in the army that might be willing to attack you after such a move, or attack me because of my backing you. Unless you can assure me that you can sacrifice him elsewhere and make certain that not even the rumor of it could get back to the Army, I cannot allow you to do that."

Outside the tent Ser Seaworth moved away from the tent's side, certain the discussion wouldn't go anywhere. When Stannis made a decision trying to change his mind was like trying to get water from a stone. Yet despite that, Davos was frowning heavily as he walked off, trying to figure out if he was happy that the Red Witch hadn't convinced Stannis to go through with her plan, or unhappy that the reasons she hadn't been able to were so prosaic rather than simply the fact they were disgusting.

*Pragmatism and the need to keep morale up is all well and good, but I would've preferred him to simply say no, I will not be party to evil like that. Pragmatism can too easily swing the other way, and when that happens will Stannis still be the man I swore allegiance to? And when that happens, will my oath to him still hold?*

Back inside the tent Melisandre scowled, but after a moment she spoke up hesitantly. "If I can think of a way to sacrifice him without it seeming so, would that suffice?"

"What do you mean?"

"The false priest in question is old and very feeble." Melisandre shrugged. "Such a man could have a heart attack and go at any time. I could hasten such, and still use the power of the demon worshiper's death to power my ability to see current events further away than I can on my own. Future events would take more power and a true sacrifice to the fire of R'hllor." she finished sternly. "We will need to do so at some point."

"That point is not now." Stannis replied firmly. "As for your suggestion, such a decision can wait until after we take Stokeworth and have turned toward King's Landing. At that point I'll need to know precisely what's been going on down at the city, which might require your visions. If so, you may have your sacrifice, but not before."

Melisandre scowled, but nodded her head. "It shall be as you say, Azor Ahai."

OOOOOO

Willas stood up from where he had been sitting in the hall of Old Oak, castle of house Oakheart as one of the servants entered. "My lady will see you in the solar my lord, please follow me." Willas nodded, trying to keep his weariness from his face and body language.

It was hard. His men had crossed the Golden River almost a week back and kept right on marching making for Old Oak as quickly as they could. To call it a retreat might be a little too harsh, but in his head at least Willas knew that was what it was. After the battle in the apple grove Willas no longer had enough men to take on the Westerlands forces in the area, and knew it.

His total losses amounted to half of his heavy cavalry, they had been lost in the ferocious melee among the apple trees, their heavier armor and weapons unable to defend against the numbers or mobility of their enemy. Their sacrifice however was all that had allowed his force to retreat in relatively good order, thus his heavy infantry hadn't suffered nearly as much, only losing about 100 men all told, though a further 70 had been so badly wounded they had died of their wounds later in the march. The levy force, the light infantry that had actually been part of the battle had lost half their number along with nearly all his local guides and several of his own scouts. He hadn't lost many archers or light cavalry but that was scant comfort.

On that same note was the fact that the Westerlands forces had pursued him across the Golden River. They were no longer attempting to head further into the Reach, seemingly intent on wiping out his small army. This didn't stop them however from ravaging the lands they marched through, and this side of the river was now feeling their depredations as well, though not to the extent of their initial victims. Smallfolk could tell the way the wind was blowing, and hundreds of families had already fled before they finished crossing the river.

*Still despite my losses if this conversation goes the way I wish it, I might be able to reverse my fortunes.* Willas thought to himself grimly. If it didn't, well he was prepared to remove Lady Oakheart and commandeer her men as the heir of the Lord Paramount of the Reach, regardless of his father's initial respect for her position.



Willas was led through Old Oak up to the solar on the fifth floor of the main keep. By the time he was ushered in, his maimed leg was performing its familiar refrain of pain so when the lady Oakheart ushered him into a seat Willas collapsed into it rather less gracefully than he had hoped.

Lady Oakheart sat there, and besides waving Willas into a seat didn't seem to register his presence. Instead she was reading slowly throughout a raven message, which looked quite a bit longer than most messages by ravens were. From where he was sitting Willas couldn't see any of the words, but whatever it was it was engrossing to the woman across from him. She had light brown hair like her son Arys, though it was touched with hints of grey here and there. She was small, almost delicate, yet pleasant to look upon with a comely face, and deep, intelligent eyes.

After a moment Lady Oakheart set the message down, then looked across at Willas, though her eyes were didn't seem to be registering him, simply staring through him at something else. After a moment she shook her head focusing on Willas at last. "This," she said tapping the message. "is a letter from Princess Myrcella, who apparently is traveling with the northern army. She sent it from Seagard. It's an apology of sorts and a thank you."

Myrcella had actually written that message while on the ship. She had wanted to send it off from Winterfell, but none of the ravens there trained to search out anything beyond the Neck but the Eyrie, Highgarden, Seagard, Riverrun and King's Landing.

In it Myrcella spoke about Ser Oakheart, thanking his mother for his service to her, detailing a few of the fun times they had, and her personal feelings about the man, who had acted at times as more than a knight, almost a father to her when her own was lacking in that regard. Then Myrcella described events in the city during the battle of Two Truths. Myrcella went into much greater detail than she had ever had before save with Ranma about how she had been forced to run away from the mob, how Oakheart had helped her over the fence and stayed behind, wounded sorely by that brick to the face to give Myrcella and her friend enough time to get away.

"She thanks me for my son's service, as well as telling me more about how he died in far more detail than the queen regent had. She then goes on to say that she is with the Starks by choice, and that she knows Joffrey is not legitimate."

That wasn't all Myrcella had said on that topic. She had stated 'I know no one will believe me, I know it will be my word against his, but he is a monster above and beyond his bastard origins. Even you would not believe me if I told you why in this letter, it would simply be his word against me, but he is a monster! A beast in human clothing! He has not changed in the years since he was a young boy who disemboweled a pregnant cat in order to pull out her unborn children and show them to our father as if it was something to be proud of. He was glad our brother died, I could see it in him!'

Lady Oakheart had met all three of the royal children in the past having gone to tourneys in King's Landing many a time to see her son in action and though Joffrey had never impressed her one way or the other Myrcella had always been a sweet, gentle, and observant child. She had no idea what Joffrey could've done to be called a monster, but with the accusation of incest being thrown around plus the last bit about him being glad Tommen was dead, Lady Oakheart was very much afraid she could guess.

And if that was the case, her family would never serve the Lannisters again, who were keeping that beast on the throne. Indeed, she was now more than willing to take the field against them, though she hoped to meet Myrcella in person and discover what act Joffrey had committed that had turned his sister so against him. "What would you wish of me and mine?"

An hour later Willas walked the interminable route back down, then out of the keep to where his commanders were waiting in the hall for him. "Well?" asked Ser Graceford. "Is the lady willing to pledge her men to our aid?"

"Her men will leave with us on the morning. 2000 all told, 400 heavy horse, 600 heavy infantry, 200 light horse, and the rest are scouts and archers."

Graceford whistled appreciatively while Toulev simply smiled grimly. "That more than makes up for our losses my Lord, though we might still be under strength in comparison to the Westerlands forces."

"I doubt it." Willas said disagreeing with a shake of his head. "I think they were hammered just as badly as we were in that apple grove, if not worse. Certainly the raiders they were using were. In all likelihood this will give us force parity. And Lady Oakheart shared with me that Lord Crane kept half of his force at home. We'll be able to get at least another six hundred men from him when we turn northwest."

Willas stared around at his troop leaders, his eyes hard, his face set in a grim line that none of his family had ever

seen him wear back in Highgarden. "We're going to hunt those Father-damned fucker's down, then after we slaughter them to a man we're going to march up into the Westerlands and take the war to them on their own ground. I will allow for nothing less." Both men nodded grimly, agreement plain on their faces.

OOOOOO

While Ranma was leading the lion around by the nose, Dacey and the rest of the wolfsworn and their raiding force had marched straight west, moving further and further away from the main Northern forces and the scouts from the Lannister forces that quickly began to shadow it once more. Thanks to the chaos of that night battle, and the fact that there was another force heading straight north with the wounded and the Lannister losses in that fight, they got away clean.

Still, Dacey forced them to keep moving westward away from the rest of the Northerners and therefore away from any interest from the Lannisters for now before striking out south towards the Red Fork. It didn't matter after all where along the Red Fork they intersected the River. They weren't about to go for one of the Fords anyway, they were going to swim across.

When one of their scouts reported that the Red Fork was in sight, Arya and Nymeria moved forward with the scout to look at the River. They hid along the bank for a moment as Arya looked across into the distance. From here they could see the smoke of the castle of Riverrun in the distance to their southwest and Arya decided they were too far west. If the Lannisters had any scouts on the other side of the river they would be concentrating on Riverrun and besides, it would put them closer to the supply lines they were supposed to raid.

Keeping well back from the river edge they followed it east, becoming more and more nervous with every day because that was the same direction Ranma had traveled, and they had no idea where his army or the Lannister force was at present. Thankfully Ranma had led the Lannisters well eastwards of their original position which was even further east than Arya and her force's present position.

Soon after a few days careful travel they were well enough away from Riverrun to attempt to cross, and Dacey ordered the men to stop and build a large makeshift raft which would carry their armor and weapons across. Despite the fact the Red Fork was a slow, lazy river for most of its course, the bottom of it was deep and muddy. If a person put a foot wrong in even chain mail getting him unstuck would be strenuous, noisy and dangerous work.

The following night Arya, Nymeria, and Dacey moved forward. Arya had divested herself of her chain mail, her helmet and shield, leaving even Fang behind. She only brought along a very sharp stiletto that she stuck between her teeth as she reached the river bank, gently easing herself into the river. Beside her Nymeria whined, but Arya's glare over her shoulder silenced the direwolf who hesitantly moved forward into the water as well with nary a splash.

Dacey waited for a moment then moved forward himself, her own weapons left with Roger and the others. Not only as the leader of this expedition but as the only other wolfsworn who could swim, she had to go with Arya on this. When she entered the water she made a little more of a splash than Arya or Nymeria, but not much of one despite being so much larger than Arya, who hadn't grown much since they had left Winterfell.

The two Northerners and the direwolf made their way across the river as quickly as they could without splashing too much. The Red Fork was wider here than any portion of the Green or Blue Forks they had seen on the march, but it was also much slower, and therefore they could swim it. Even so, when Dacey had nearly stuck her foot into the deep silt of the bottom she had trouble extricating herself. And in the center it was well above even her head.

Eventually however they did make their way across, pulling themselves up onto the river bank. Arya wordlessly pointed in one direction while Nymeria moved straight ahead, ignoring her wet fur for ranged out for several hours, finding and killing five men who were watching the River, as well as a few more further away who were heading towards Riverrun along the River Road, which was a little too close for their comfort.

As the noises of birds and other animals waking up began, Arya and Nymeria met up again quickly joined by Dacey who nodded. "I think we're good."

"For now anyway, I am really not happy with how close the River Road is to this place, we need to get the men across and over the road as fast as possible, we can hopefully find someplace to go to ground nearby." Arya said. Dacey nodded agreement and they moved back to the river.

Back at the river Dacey stood out in full view from the other bank, waving one hand up above her head. As they watched Daryn, Roger and the others came out up from where they had been hiding moving towards the river. They had all removed their armor already and quickly carried up the makeshift raft.

Roger through across a rope, which Dacey and Arya grabbed, with Nymeria grabbing the end of it in her jaws. While the men made their way across in groups the three of them pulled over laden raft over, with Roger and Hathan on the other side to pull it back the other way. They did this several times before the first group of men were across and took over.

They took over the work on the raft and Arya stretched her arms above her head, shaking her head. "That was irritating. How many days do you think we have before we get to Bracken land?"

"We'll have to keep heading south for a few days even at our best speed to get well away from the River Road before heading west to enter Bracken land. Remember their land is southeast of Lannister fortifications at the Kneeling Man's Ford, we're northwest of that now, I think." They checked with the local guides, Shawney and Mallister men who had come with them for this because they could swim. All of them agreed that was likely.

Arya nodded, then moved over to where her equipment had been laid out. She pulled out Fang testing the edge while she smiled grimly. "Four days straight south, let's move, I hate how vulnerable we are here."

Dacey raised an eyebrow at the young girl, amused that despite her protests about not wanting to lead she was so forward about giving her opinion but nodded and began to organize their men. Within an hour the raiding force was marching off, exhausted from a hard day's work already, but needing to get away from the River Road as far as they could before resting.

The small raiding force continued to travel forward, hiding however they could during the day, mostly up in trees or down and among the fallen leaves, though at one point they had to hide their entire force on an abandoned farmstead to avoid Lannister patrol, which was much more difficult. Nonetheless, they were making excellent time and Arya was almost positive that no one had spotted them yet.

Soon enough they turned further west, and entered Bracken land, finding a former riverbed to hide in during the day. Here there were even fewer patrols than elsewhere, with most of the House's strength devoted to the siege of Raventree Hall. Still, those there wore the tabards of that family, which was enough to tell them they were at their destination, which didn't even consider the fact that for the first time since they had left Fairmarket they saw smallfolk around.

Everywhere else the smallfolk had fled ahead of the Lannister forces, here only a few families had done so, with the majority of them fleeing to Riverrun. Most however had enough faith in their lords to remain where they were, though several of them had paid for that. The Lannister army had not been kind even on the lands of their ostensible allies, the burning and pillaging was just not authorized there.

Even so the smallfolk here did not travel at night which allowed Nymeria, with Arya riding her mind, to scout all over the land in a single night, the speed of the direwolf only matched by its stealth. Nymeria was even able to get close to Stone Hedge itself, a large castle that was at least a quarter again the size of House Vypren's former seat.

Arya could see through Nymeria's eyes, and more importantly she was somewhat better than Ranma at interpreting the information Nymeria's nose took in. It was something that she had practiced with in Winterfell whenever she could, while Ranma had to concentrate on other things.

A direwolf's nose was even more sensitive than a regular wolf's which put every breed of hunting dog in Westeros to shame. Circling the castle, Nymeria could tell in a vague way how many people there were inside it, and the number shocked Arya. There were the scents of only a bare hundred and fifty men in there, and two dozen females or so. That astonished her so much that she nearly came out of her trance. Nymeria could tell that even over the smells of steel and leather that all the men stank of, like most armsmen did.

Arya kept Nymeria there, moving around Stone Hedge throughout the rest of the night then helped Nymeria find a den for the day before opening her own eyes to stare across the riverbed at Dacey. "I think we need to wait on hitting the supply lines for now." She blurted. "Nymeria found out something, something that might let us take out an even more vital target."

Over the next few days Nymeria and Arya scouted out all around, while the men stayed put, trying to not be noticed, and succeeding.

Meanwhile Arya watched through Nymeria's eyes as the men of House Bracken went out from Stone Hedge once to take what looked like a lot of foodstuffs from the local smallfolk, gathering it into the keep. The very next day a group of armsmen wearing the tabards of various Westerlands houses arrived with several carts. They left that same day, their carts now laden with far more supplies than the House Bracken men had gathered in. Two days later, while the

men around her were getting restless, Arya and Nymeria watched as a large group of Lannister men arrived from the southwest, with several dozen laden carts.

"The stuff the House Bracken armsmen brought in must be just fresh bread and other things like that." Arya explained to Dacey and the others. "House Bracken must've already gathered as much foodstuffs as they could into the keep, and Stone Hedge has also become a major point along the supply line from the Westerlands. Ranma was right, the Lannister army can't live off the land very well, if at all! We need to take it, now!"

"Our orders were just to raid the supply lines, not try to take a castle on our own." Dacey protested. "Even a hundred men could hold that keep against us if they were prepared, and you said they were much more alert than the men Vypren's seat had guarding it."

That much was true. The Bracken armsmen were much more experienced, and they patrolled the walls day and night, and not with torches to take out their night vision either. The towers were also manned, and they did have lights inside, but the archers in them would be easily able to spot any attacking force coming out of the farmlands around the keep, which was the other issue: there was very little in the way of cover anywhere around Stone Hedge. The Bracken keep had been besieged several times, while Vypren never had. All in all it was a much tougher target despite the defenders lack of manpower.

"Yes, but I think the gains are worth the risk!" Arya argued back, practically growling as she stood across from the older woman, the rest of the wolfsworn moving backwards slightly to let the two women argue it out. "If we raid the supply lines, we'll only be able to do so much damage before they assign too many men to protect their supply convoys! If we take Stone Hedge and Jon's taken Wayfarer's Rest, they lose the two most important points along their supply line, and you know Ranma's going to be coming from the west, they'll either have to fort up and starve or retreat out of the Riverlands south."

Dacey scratched a small scar on her arm for a moment, thinking while staring hard at the younger girl. "That's all well and good, but do you have a plan that might let us do that without being mauled? It won't do any good if we take Stone Hedge without enough men to hold it."

"Yes, I do!" Arya replied, now actually moving closer to Dacey so they were almost standing chest to chest, or rather stomach to head given the disparity in their heights. "We use the same trick the Lannisters tried to use at Fairmarket, only modified a little. Also remember, there'll be hostages to be taken in there as well, if we can get into the castle itself, I bet the defenders will surrender." Arya went on describing her plan, and eventually Dacey nodded, realizing it actually was workable.

Later that night, Dacey, Arya and Nymeria moved out with a few of the local guides. They moved through the scrubland that marked this area of Bracken land they moved north, intending to cut off the road leading to Stone Hedge from the fortifications at the Kneeling Man forward. They had all spread out, which made it easier for them to move silently with Nymeria well ahead of the Arya and the others.

For now the two northern girls, or rather one woman and one girl were alone as they moved through the brush, silent and quiet is only the wolfsworn could be after months of being trained for times like this by Ranma. That thought made Dacey pause for a moment, wondering how long Ranma had been planning to have the wolfsworn act as... she didn't know the word for it really, special raiding force? The fact of the matter was that all of their training had put them on a pedestal well above any normal opponent they could face, though the real, long term implications of that hadn't truly sunk until this war. They had become a tactical and strategic resource, not just warriors several cuts above the norm.

However Dacey pushed that thought to the back of her mind, she had something else she needed to do right now. The two of them were now moving through the night closer together now thanks to having passed through a bit of brush and were now into a small copse of trees. And the other scouts were well out of hearing range, there would be no better time for it. "For someone who didn't want to be in charge Arya you pushed hard for this change in our plans."

"It makes sense," Arya shrugged, keeping her own voice low. "Stone Hedge doesn't have the manpower to face us in an open battle. If we can get inside we win. We win a lot more than we would if we were just raiding the supply lines."

"I know that, and I agreed with your reasoning or else we wouldn't be out here right now." Dacey said slowing her pace down and reaching out to touch Arya on the shoulder to slow her down in turn.

The Mormont woman's voice was a whisper in the dark of the thicket, but intense and stern for all of that. "But I was the one given this command, I am in charge. When we go into battle, I need all the men to look to me. I can't have

them up pause even for a second wondering whose commands they should follow or who they should look to for orders. **Don't** challenge me like that again, not in front of the troops."

Arya's bared her teeth reflexively at the admonishment in Dacey's voice and she knocked the older woman's hand away from her shoulder growling. It was a very wolf-like sound, which made Dacey scowled. She had been afraid of this. Arya crouched, almost as if she was about to lunge at Dacey, Fang forgotten at her side.

However Dacey was much faster than most would assume looking at her, and while she wasn't up there in strength in terms of the wolfsworn, neither was Arya. Arya found herself lifted out of the air and slammed back against the tree behind her. "Control it." Dacey growled in her ear. "Don't let the wolf in that far! You're human girl, remember that."

Arya growled a little, but she slowly got control of herself. After a moment she nodded shakily, waving off Nymeria, who had appeared out of the trees growling deep in her cavernous throat at the site of her bonded human being manhandled by the bear woman. "Sorry." Arya grunted. "I've been warging with Nymeria too often lately. Jon and Ranma warned me something like this might happen, but I didn't believe them. Sorry."

"I don't need an apology, girl." Dacey said backing away and cuffing the younger girl in the back of the head. Arya grinned, having always enjoyed have Dacey simply treated her like a young boy rather than a young woman to tell the truth, regardless of her status as a Stark. "I said the plan was good, and it shows that you might be ready for command whatever your reflex reaction might have said. But if you want the command, you can't just challenge me like a wolf would challenge the alpha for the leadership of the pack. Humans don't do it like that understand?"

"I just needed to be reminded." Arya muttered, nodding her head. "And I'm *not* ready, I don't have the situational awareness you need to be able to give orders in battle, I didn't do that when the Lannisters attacked that night no matter what anyone thinks. I simply shouted at people and gathered them to me, after that I didn't try to organize them or anything."

"That sounds a heck of a lot like giving orders in battle to me." Dacey replied dryly. "If you think you can do a better job, we'll transfer the command to you, tell the men about it, and be human about it, not like a wolf. And you're cutting back regardless on your warging times with Nymeria."

Arya nodded, drooping a moment in weariness. Crisis averted Dacey moved off again through the copse of trees with Arya and Nymeria following behind.

At one point the trail they were following at a distance might have been barely used, but since the Lannister forces had begun to dig in on their side of the Red Fork that had of course changed. Now it was pitted and rutted with use, all of the nearby plants having been chopped away. There were very few places along its edge where an ambush could succeed now, but Dacey and the others persevered. They found a place eventually, where the drovers would stop about a day and a half is out from Stone Hedge.

There wasn't much cover there, but the northerners were good at this game. Certainly better than the Westerlanders, especially here in territory they knew they and their allies controlled. It wasn't like the bad area nearest the Mummer's Ford, where there was still cases of brigandry. So there were only twelve guards, and five drovers. Following them even during the day was child's play for Nymeria and Arya, even without Arya riding Nymeria's mind to it.

A little while after the next the convoy arrived at the watering hole, the Northerners and their Riverlands allies came out of the scrub brush all around, dropping down from one or two trees that were near the watering hole, or in Dacey's case bursting out from the small pool of water.

Dacey's claymore also came up out of the water, gutting a man who had just been about to drop a waterskin into the water. His body fell to the side, and Dacey absently kicked it away from the water so that it wouldn't pollute it before charging forward. Roger and Hathon came in from both sides, leading ten of the Northerners apiece to make certain that there wasn't any way the defenders could get away.

However instead of being armed with swords or anything within edge, all of them were armed with long clubs which made the battle a little more difficult than it would otherwise have been. But only a little. The man who had been marching alongside the wagons fell quickly, and then a few Northerners leaped up onto the wagons, knocking unconscious the drovers before pushing them off the carts.

Two men on horseback at the back of the small party tried to turn away, but Nymeria was there snarling. The sight of a monstrously huge wolf and the sound caused both horses to rear up in abject terror, throwing their unprepared riders off. One landed awkwardly on his neck, then fell limp, and the other one found itself facing Nymeria face-to-face as his horse ran off. A second later only both horses were hit by arrows from a few archers who hadn't

participated in rest of the attack. Horses after all would return to the herd, and that could give the game away just as easily as anything else.

"And now we strip them or all you strip them," Arya said, growled, somewhere between irritated and embarrassed, looking away suddenly. "I don't think any of them have anything that would fit me."

It turned out that none of them had anything that would fit either Arya or Dacey. For all that she was a warrior and had been trained as such for most of her life Dacey still had feminine curves and a generous chest, far too much of one to even fit into either the guard's armor or wear the drovers clothing and look like anything but a woman. Arya of course didn't have any chest yet, something she was glad of. But she was also short, far too short for any of the clothing they had just taken to fit her.

So both women hid in one of the carts at the back of the convoy, Nymeria barely fitting between them, rumbling discontentedly at the tarpaulin over them. Arya tried to shush her bonded direwolf, succeeding for several moments at a time while the convoy wound its way down the road towards Stone Hedge.

Each of the convoy's carts had five men lying under the tarpaulins. The rest of the raiding force were waiting near Stone Hedge, hidden here and there in small groups three to ten men strong, ready to rush forward the moment the castle's gates were taken.

On the front cart Roger and Hathan were sitting together. Roger wore the uniform of one of the guards, whose colors, a blue rooster on a yellow background, was from one of the Westerlands Houses, a Knightly House if he was remembering it right. *Though why any self-respecting knight would put a rooster on their banner is beyond me.* Hathan on the other hand hadn't fit anything the guards had so he dressed up as one of the drovers instead.

"A thought occurred to me just now." Roger murmured, as they began to see Stone Hedge in the distance. Hathan grunted, which Roger took to mean he could keep speaking. "What if the guards in Stone Hedge know the guards on the convoy? We only watched one convoy after all, it could be the same guards every time, or it could be a set amount of guards all of whom the Bracken men might know."

"That is not a thought I want to hear at this moment." Hathan said, breaking his habitual silence, reaching across and thumping Roger on the shoulder. "You were all for this plan when Arya came up with it, you could have said something then."

"Yes, but it didn't occur to me then. Did you notice the bit of tension that started between Dacey and her, rather interesting I thought. The little wolf has grown up quite quickly."

Hathan grunted noncommittally. "She's still got a bit of growing to do."

"Yes, but the plan was good. The details, they are not pleasant to contemplate."

"You mean the part where it might be the two of us against over a dozen archers on a four-story tall wall?" Hathan murmured, the cart having trundled on during their discussion.

"Exactly that detail, yes." Several moments later, that moment happened, as they came close enough to hail the archers up on the wall. Roger did so, the only one of them who didn't have a distinct northern accent, hence why sitting in the front cart.

A few of the archers actually waved back, then both men held their breaths as the portcullis slowly began to open and the cart began to trundle into the gate area, which was barely a cart's length long. It was only a few seconds before the portcullis at the far end of the gateway began to open, but even so for both men they stretched on like years, the murder holes above them so potent with threat. Yet none appeared.

The inner portcullis and the gate there opened allowing the convoy through the gate area and out into the courtyard of the castle. As the last cart trundled under the portcullis a dozen servants began to hurry towards them from the stables, and even a few guardsmen were also moving towards them from the barracks area. There it began to go bad. One of the guards said "Here, you're not Lawrence, where's the regular lot?"

At that the men in the carts all boiled out, with Dacey and Arya being the first. "Winter is Coming, traitors!" Arya shouted.

Immediately the men on top of the wall turned and began to fire. Several of the Northerners went down to their bows, though a few others also pulled out their own longbows and fired back, taking out a few of the defenders, since the wall lacked any cover on its interior.

Nymeria bounded out of the cart, causing cries of dismay and fear, which were exacerbated a second later when she began to howl loudly. After which she joined Arya, rushing over towards the gatehouse.

That was the signal for the rest of the Northerners outside the castle to start rushing the gate. Seeing that, several of the archers on the wall turned and took them under fire, but the Northerners and their Riverlands allies rushed on.

Arya and Dacey slammed into the inner doorway leading into the gatehouse, taking the archers stationed there from behind. Fang slew the first man who turned, slicing his leather armor from side to shoulder in one swift movement before coming back to sliced through another man's arm as it was hastily raised in defense, Fang's edge glowing slightly blue. Dacey barreled in after her, her claymore out and piercing one man through the shoulder causing him to scream aloud while she turned to her next opponent.

Outside more of the Northerners had fallen to the bows of the Bracken men, but the first two groups from outside the castle had raced into the courtyard, their own archers firing back against those on the wall while Roger and Hathan led the charge forward over the bodies of the nearest guards, ignoring the screams of the servants as they scattered. Roger shouted, "I'll hold the door to the keep, you head for the barracks!"

Hathan didn't bother replying, simply veering off at the head of a dozen men. He winced as an arrow slammed into his shoulder and almost penetrated his ill-gotten leather armor, the only type that could fit under his disguise. He lamented his plate armor's loss for a moment then he had no more time to do so as the men in the barracks boiled out. However for the most part they hadn't been wearing their armor either.

Hathan dodged one man's blow who was wielding a heavy axe that almost looked as large as Roger's, before punching the man hard enough in the stomach to make the air whoosh of his lungs while he blocked another blow from someone else's sword with his own longsword held in his other hand. He tried to thrust forward to catch the other man, but he was too used to his own weapon and misjudged his lunge. The greatsword he wielded from horseback had to be left behind with the rest of the men after all it would have stood out in an infantryman's hand.

He felt his armor rip along one side, the leather parting as another man tried to open up his side, but Hathan had twisted away at the last moment. Hathan's arm came back, his own sword slashing the other man's leather armor and cutting deep into the area between his shoulder and neck. "The Mander, the Mander for the King of the North!"

Roger was having similar difficulties, only worse. There were five men who led the charge out from the keep. There were only six other men with them, but the five in the lead wore the plate armor of knights, and the men behind them also wore chest plates of the better sort of armsmen. Roger and his men met them in the open area right before the keeps doors, and the defenders held for a precious few moments as the doors slammed shut behind them.

"Old God's damn it!" Roger bellowed even as he blocked a blow from one man's greatsword changing its direction enough to come up inside the man's range and slamming his elbow into his gorget with enough force to crumple the plate there and crush the jugular beneath. That man fell and Roger let his own blade fall to the ground, grabbing up the man's greatsword, coming around with a blow that blocked another man's greatsword pushing him to one side.

Around him three Northerners were already down, for only one of the Bracken men, but more Northerners were racing forward while more and more of them entered the gate, which was now firmly in the Northerners hands. "Surrender!" Roger yelled, going chest to chest with one of the other knights and then throwing him backwards in a show of strength that no one but another wolfsworn could've matched. The man actually left the ground for 15 feet before slamming into another man carrying him into the now closed gates of the keep.

That gave the other Bracken men pause and Roger raised the greatsword pointing it at them. Behind him Arya and Nymeria came up, blood on Fang and her fangs. "Surrender! You will be well treated, you and your charges inside."

Even with the sight of the monstrous wolf baring down on them they didn't surrender and the battle in the courtyard continued, with another knight falling as Nymeria bore him to Earth, while Roger cut an armsmen almost in two with his borrowed blade. For some reason however he couldn't push his knife energy into the edge.

Above them in the keep a few archers began to fire down at the Northerners in the courtyard, their fellows having already been swept from the walls. The battle was particularly vicious in front of the barracks, and Hathan took a mace that cracked several of his ribs and a cut to his thigh that only a last-minute turn kept from taking his leg off entirely. His return blow however split the man from shoulder to crotch despite his plate armor, and by that point Nymeria and Arya were there, having left Roger and Dacey to guard the gate of the keep.

The northern and Riverlands archers raced up to the castles walls, half of them looking out while the other half began

to fire into the keep from a much more equal position despite the fact that they were open to return fire. Several more died then, but they also silenced the defenders in the keep.

The last group of Northerners entered, a force of five that had been working on a small battering ram. Once they entered, Dacey and Arya ordered the portcullis closed. This castle was not like house Vypren's seat, there was only the one outer gate, and it was now firmly in the Northerner's hands.

Dacey turned from the entrance to the keep with Roger, moving over to see to Hathan. "You lead the attack inside." she ordered, looking at Arya. "Remember, we want prisoners and we don't want this to turn into a slaughter."

"A little late for that." Arya murmured, wiping Fang on a dead man's tunic, the man had not even had time to pull on his armor. "Still I understand what you meant."

She moved over to stand in the open in front of the keeps doorway, shouting aloud. "Open your doors and surrender, we don't want to slaughter here! You will be well treated if you surrender now, but we can't guarantee your safety if you keep fighting!"

For a moment she seemed to hear an argument going on, a man's voice and a woman's voice arguing shrilly, the woman's voice demanding that they surrender while the man said they could hold out. Hearing that, Arya shook her head and gestured at the men carrying the battering ram. "Knock it down."

She then looked over at the rest of the men who were waiting around the keep's gate. "After me." She growled, her teeth bared almost like Nymeria's, who was standing behind her, as tall now at the shoulders as a horse. "And if any of you even think of killing a servant, I will gut you and feed you to Nymeria."

With a true bonded's ability to get the timing just right Nymeria turned with her teeth bared in a snarl. The Riverlanders and Northerners all nodded, the thought of taking a little bit of revenge for their dead friends disappearing from their minds for a moment. It wasn't anything personal, they were just men. But even that the best of men, after they had just seen friends die, could commit acts that they wouldn't normally.

It only took five swings of the small battering ram to smash the gates of the keep open. Stone Hedge's defenses had been so good that an interior defense hadn't seemed a priority. Arya and Nymeria entered quickly, cutting down two men who had been trying desperately to stack some furniture in the way with a group of male servants who backed away hurriedly.

One of them even screamed so loudly Arya stopped for a moment. "Are you a man, or a little girl?"

The man actually had the courage to look insulted for a moment while the rest of the Northerners raced inside.

"Never mind." Arya grunted. "On your knees and your hands above your heads and stay that way." With more northern barbarians entering the servants surrendered quickly, showing much more sense than the remaining defenders.

There were only about fifteen or so of those remaining defenders, led by an old knight with white hair and a walrus mustache that reminded Arya, after she pulled Fang out of his stomach, of Lord Manderly. But the man obviously hadn't had even a quarter of that Lord's intelligence if he thought they could've held out. She glared over at a statuesque woman standing in front of three daughters of various ages ranging from older than Arya to one who was younger. The younger girl was watching her avidly, her eyes wide and staring.

Arya knew that look, she had seen it in the mirror often enough and she wondered if maybe she'd just found another girl who wanted to be a warrior rather than any of the roles her genders set for her. For now however she couldn't take the time to find out. "Lady Bracken?"

"I am she, and you are?" The lady almost contrived to sound contemptuous, but there was a bit of a tremble to her voice that told Arya how terrified she was.

"I am Arya Stark, granddaughter to your Lord Paramount and brother of his current representative." Arya replied bluntly, watching the woman pale slightly. "This castle is ours now. You and your daughters will be well treated, so long as you make no attempt to escape, both you and your servants."

"And what will happen in the future?" said one of the daughters, moving around her mother to face Arya squarely, more self-assured now that they weren't about to be raped.

"That will depend on what happens elsewhere." Arya said shrugging. We'll hold this castle until we're relieved, but



you can bet your house will be punished for backing Lord Lannister."

"The crown." Lady Bracken said cool coldly. "We backed the crown and the crown's representatives. Lord Lannister is the current King's grandfather, and the evidence of Lord Edmure's treason was telling."

"And it gave your husband the chance to do what he always wanted, try to move against House Blackwood." Arya replied sarcastically. "Besides, evidence is always compelling if you only see one side of it! I'm not here to discuss politics with you, you're not intelligent enough and I don't care enough. You may retain your rooms, but there will be guards on the doors at all times, and the servants will only interact with you when guards are present. Do I make myself clear?"

All the women there nodded, cowed slightly by Arya's wild eyes, although the youngest was no longer staring at Arya. She was staring at the direwolf that had padded through the doorway behind the strange, short warrior woman. She pulled at her bigger sister's dress and pointed. "Can I have one of those?"

Arya laughed, shaking her head and rubbed at Nymeria's muzzle for a moment as she came up directly behind Arya. She winked at the youngest girl, then moved off leaving the family to themselves while she placed guards outside the room and then ordered another man to drag the body of that old knight away.

Thanks to Arya's bloodthirsty threat there hadn't been any kind of slaughter among the servants, though the defenders hadn't been so lucky, killed to a man. They only took 22 prisoners among the armsmen of the house mostly from the barracks, but only two servants had died, one when he tried to attack a Northerner from behind with a kitchen knife, and another from a heart attack when the Northerners had barreled into his room.

By the time the sun was starting to lower, the Northerners were ensconced in the castle, their injured were being seen to by their own men and the servants, and the walls were more defended than they had been before the attack. Stone Hedge had fallen and with it and Jon's assault though Lord Tywin didn't know it, his army's supply line.

OOOOOO

Loras sat outside of his tent, watching in the distance as catapults once again began to fire on the city. From where he was sitting he could see over a dozen of them, mostly of mid-size for the breed. They fired rocks the size of a man farther than an archer could shoot. They slammed with thunderous force into the outer walls of the city, but their thick stone withstood the punishment with ease.

The same could not be said for the catapults, a few of whom were hit by return fire as he watched, the defenders much larger pieces of rock, which were larger than the catapults boulders slamming into or around the catapults with devastating results. The trebuchets of the defenders were incredibly accurate for some reason, and much longer range than anything the army had been able to build thus far. They had their own trebuchets being made near the Kingswood, but they were weeks away from being completed.

While the men around the catapults went to work trying to repair what they could, Loras turned away in disgust, wincing as the move aggravated the wounds on his shoulder and neck. His wounds were nowhere near healed, but already Loras could tell that he would be scarred for life. Indeed when he looked in the mirror Loras could only remember how many jokes he had heard or taken part in talking about Sandor Clegane and his burned face. *Not much fun on this side of joke, is it?* Loras thought darkly.

The loss of his good looks was not the only thing bothering the Knight of Roses, more worrisome was the fact that since he had been injured he hadn't seen his lover Renly. He had seen his father often, practically every other day, but Renly had not stopped by. Despite being king, Loras knew that Renly could've made time to see him if he wanted to. No, Renly was deliberately avoiding him. That hurt, that hurt a **lot!** *And what does it say about our love that when I'm injured like this he doesn't find the courage in himself to come and see me? Was our relationship that shallow?*

Filled with dark thoughts Loras took one last look at the city in the distance then moved back into his tent determined to drink himself into a stupor.

OOOOOO

"The fire of the defensive catapults is amazing my lords," said Lord Risley, who had been put in charge of the siege equipment along with Lord Cafferren, who was in charge more of building them rather than using them. "We lose one or two of our own every time we use them despite trying our best to move them after each launch. No matter how hard we try, the trebuchet's can range on them anywhere around the city."

"We've battered portions of the wall, but we haven't done enough damage to cause a breach." Renly murmured. "We know that the siege is working. There is no way that the defenders can keep feeding themselves and the smallfolk, and eventually the smallfolk will turn on them but it galls me to have to sit here and wait like this. Do we have any further news about the second echelon, or where my brother is?"

"Your brother seems to have turned aside from a direct route to the city, your majesty" said the leader of their scouts, Lord Steadmon who was also in charge of gathering information from the smallfolk settlements that were well away from the besieging army. There weren't many smallfolk courageous enough to remain on their land so close to any army, but there were a few. It was that aspect of his job that allowed Lord Steadmon to keep a tab on where Stannis was in broad terms. "He's making for Castle Stokeworth my Lord, should be there within another week or so, he's going very slowly for some reason."

"Interesting," said Renly murmuring to himself, "I wonder why he's moving so slowly?" No one there, not even Randyll knew the answer to that one and Renly shrugged his shoulders. "The second echelon?"

"They should have reached the edge of the Kingswood by now and coming up the Kingsroad my liege, I estimate another one or maybe a week and a half before they arrive." Mace said, knowing his second son Garlan would be pushing them hard.

"Good. That will give us enough men to both keep the siege going and turn to engage Stannis if need be."

"You assume that he is going to fight us your Majesty?" Said one lord from the Reach.

"Yes I do for two reasons." Renly replied, smiling thinly. "Stannis is a prideful man, and very certain about his rights. He will not wish to bend the knee to me, whatever the size of our army, or the fact that all know he would make a horrible king. He believes himself our older brother's heir, and he will act upon it. Moreover, there are the rumors of his changing to fire worship to think about. Madness!" Renly shook his head. "Sheer madness! Could any right thinking follower of the Seven consider such a thing?"

There were firm headshakes all around. The Faith of the Seven had the most hold on the people of the Reach, even the lords there believed in some of its tenants if not all of them. What rumor said about the Red Witch horrified them.

"No, Stannis will fight. Oh, I'll try to parlay with him, but it's doubtful it'll get anywhere. Best to assume the worst after all, and plan accordingly."

OOOOOO

At the same time that Jaime was leading the defense of the city against this latest assault, the small council were meeting to discuss other problems. "The food situation is becoming grave your majesties." Petyr said, for once simply stating the truth without having any ulterior motive. "Your decision to cut rations even further to the smallfolk my Lord has had a hugely detrimental effect on morale in the city."

"It had to be done." Rupert replied his face like stone for a moment. "If they're not involved in the siege, they don't need to keep up their strength like those who are."

"The city is still receiving some food, but not much. The Lyseni pirates are after all pirates, and their various captains have set up a black market to make some money on the side, selling food to anyone who can meet their price." Varys said. "I have moved to take control of that and I've done my best to keep the prices down, but even so I know that some of the pirates continue to trade directly to the smallfolk who can pay for them. The smallfolk have begun to prey on one another even more than usual in order to get the money to pay for food, but that is like an animal eating its own tail. Eventually they will turn on us if we don't start allowing more food to pass on to them."

Rupert frowned rubbing at his face. The fact of the matter was you could not prepare a city for siege. It was simply impossible, unless the city had been built with that in mind. King's Landing certainly had not been, and this led to problems. The food was only one factor, the shanty towns built up outside the walls had been another, but that had been solved by this point. But that left the sheer numbers of smallfolk, the general clutter of the city and the fact the walls demanded nearly all of his men and the gold cloaks to defend them. The Red Keep had its own garrison, as did all of the food depots, but Rupert was beginning to fear he would have to move the food someplace else. Once that news spread, well...

The Queen and Joffrey both frowned too. Lord Serret had forced both of them to cut back on their own food, as well as the rest of the court here in the Red Keep and to say that had been an unpopular decision was putting it mildly. Still Cersei had understood the reasoning, and with her backing even Joffrey had been forced to accede to Rupert's

demands. Of course they still ate far better than the common soldiers let alone the smallfolk, but at this point that wasn't saying much.

"If the Pirates are willing to sell foodstuffs to us, would they be willing to turn their coats entirely?" Cersei asked. "I know you said before that such would demand too high a price Varys, but at the moment we are in a cleft stick."

"It would depend upon what the so-called 'Prince of the Inland Sea' has been offered." Varys replied shrugging his shoulders. "As the sale of foodstuffs have been from single captains here and there, I haven't been able to discover whether or not the Saan is even aware of them. If he was, that could be a clue that he could be persuaded to change sides, but I don't think we have enough time to wait for that. I do know Saan is friendly with the Onion Knight, who is Stannis' right-hand man, so his breaking with Stannis is unlikely in any event."

"Nor is food the only thing that is harming the morale of the smallfolk my Lords." Varys went on. "While the Faith might have backed us initially, the Most Devout's ardor has since cooled dramatically. Lord Renly is proclaiming his own position as a defender of the faith, and promising to bring in enough food to feed the entire city if the gates are open for him. It's a shrewd move on his part, and it is slowly gaining momentum among the smallfolk, despite mine and Varys best efforts to combat it in various ways."

"Which doesn't even consider the atrocities of the one the smallfolk have taken to call by the Vile One." Around Varys the small council members all sat forward, this was something new.

At this Varys smiled thinly, but there was no humor in it. "For the past two weeks, possibly more, there have been murders committed in the city, far above the norm of everyday city life. Some of the victim's bodies have been mutilated in horrible ways, then left out on the roads for anyone to find. Whores have gone missing only to be found dead, used in a horrible manner then their bodies abused further before they too were left like so much trash. This is happening all across the city my lords, not just in Fleabottom, and it is effecting morale of every class of smallfolk.

To one side Petyr very carefully let no trace of his thoughts show on his face, merely looking attentive while inside he squirmed, cursing himself for getting into bed with the devil and Cersei and her brother for bringing said devil into the world. He had thought that he could redirect Joffrey's urges into whoring, he had been wrong. Oh, he took up that too, even saw it as a way to prove he was his father's son by showing how good he was at rutting, but afterward, he always 'played' with the whores he found, beyond simply giving them to his men. And he sometimes simply grabbed a random person off the street to torture for pleasure.

*Thankfully he knows how to keep his identity secret, the clothing he wears and not actually talking while outside the Red Keep, plus having his guards always wear different sets of armor, none of which have anything that could identify them. And while it's disgusting, helping to feed Joffrey's appetites have allowed me to insinuate myself into his power base, which gives me some measure of protection against Serret, and that makes it all worth it.* Petyr very carefully squashed the small voice in his head that another person would have called his conscience when it tried to argue against that sentiment, but he couldn't quite silence it entirely.

"I have not been able to find any clues as to his identity, but rumors make him some kind of noble with a group of ten men at most who follow his every commands, partaking in every dark deed. They are also able to move around the city freely, disappearing during the day to come out at night and prey upon the smallfolk. The rumors have even given him a name, the Vile One."

Joffrey's eyes narrowed, having hoped for some more powerful name. The Vile One was interesting, but he wanted to be known as the Cruel, or the Deadly. Those had some kind of power to them that the Vile One lacked. *Still, no one can control rumor to that extent*, he thought philosophically. The idea that his actions could have a negative effect on him or his family never occurred to Joffrey. The smallfolk were animals, animals he as king owned. They were there to be used in whatever manner he wished to use them.

"I want that stopped." Rupert growled. "We have too many problems already with keeping the smallfolk under control for that kind of villainy to be added to the ledger. I want this Vile One found, then I want him executed in public." He paused for a moment, thinking hard. "As for the food situation, I'll meet with Jaime and he and I will devise some way to defend the barracks along the walls, making the walls and the gates in particular able to defend themselves from internal attack. After that, we'll talk about moving all the foodstuffs we can to the wall and the Red Keep as quickly and circumspectly as we can, as well as the forces we have defending them. I doubt we'll get away with it, but the defenders need to keep their strength up, and as I said earlier, the smallfolk don't. We can win back their loyalty after we win the war."

"We should also ask the High Septon and the council of the Most Devout to move up to the Red Keep, it's certainly more defensible than the Grand Sept of Baelor." Petyr spoke up, understanding what Serret was planning for.

"Agreed." Serret answered grimly, shaking his head at the necessity of planning for a smallfolk rebellion. Most of those around the table were wondering how bloody it would become, though Joffrey was simply thinking morosely that he would have to cut back on his playtime.

Over the next four days, the defenders of the city got to work, destroying several hundred houses that were near the wall on the inside to create open fire areas, building up defensive walls around the trebuchets, and manning them, while secretly moving the food in the supply depots to the Red Keep and to the walls in small lots. All but the last were noticed by the smallfolk of the city, but that was enough, and small scale riots began to spring up throughout the city. They grew larger over time.

OOOOOO

Since the last clash Ranma and his forces had been heading westward towards the Ruby forward as fast as they could. Their speed however at this point was much less than it had been initially, they had a lot more wounded, and the army in its entirety was exhausted from the constant moves marches and battles. Their morale was still high however, and their trust in Ranma was absolute.

Despite the morale of his force still being high however, Ranma knew this was the make or break moment of his entire campaign, the gamble of all gambles. They had to keep ahead of their pursuers now, the army could not afford to be stopped or even turned aside, they were too low on food and energy. Luckily the chance he had taken by seemingly forting up a few days before paid off, having sucked in all the small forces that could get in front of his army.

Two days after that battle the army marched over the crest of a small hill and left behind a small copse of bushes and trees and suddenly Ranma knew that his gamble had paid off. Because at that moment, while marching at the back of the column, Ranma could hear the cheers begin. Suddenly the men weren't so weary anymore, like racers who had just spotted the finishing line they summoned up some last vestige of endurance.

Ranma looked at Rickard and Patrek, who were riding beside him. Rickard was nearly drooping in the saddle with weariness after the past few weeks but the older man laughed quietly shaking his head. "It would appear as if your wife did it Ranma," he murmured shaking his head. "I didn't think she would honestly."

"I had faith." Ranma said laughing and reaching up to slap the other man on his thigh before racing off. Soon enough he and Fenris were at the front of the column.

About twelve leagues ahead of them directly on this side of the Ruby Ford there was an army camp, with the grey wolf on white banner flying over it at the front, and several other banners alongside it including Umber, Tully, and all the houses from the eastern side of the Green Fork. Ranma laughed. In all honesty, he had thought that Danny would only be able to get a few of the houses from the eastern side of the Riverlands to agree to stand with them, he had not been impressed by what Brynden had told them of Roote or Ryger, let alone Wayn. But the only banner that wasn't there was House Wayn. That was amazing.

Ranma turned to his men, a wide grin on his face. "Alright you louts! Let's get a move on, I don't know about you, but I hear a damn good meal calling my name!"

The soldiers all around him laughed, and the troops marched forward with a will as they began to hear the shouts and cheers of their fellows and even the new Riverlands forces. Units of light cavalry began to ride toward them from the camp, circling the northern host where shouts and greetings were exchanged. Watching that Ranma fell back to the end of the column, ordering Lord Shawney and Rickard to take command and to keep the men moving while he fell further and further back to meet up with Meera.

"You're not going to come forward with us to meet your lady?" Rickard asked one eyebrow rising in surprise.

"We need to make certain that the Lannisters aren't doing anything surprising, who better than me to do it?"

"You need to learn delegation Ranma." Said Rickard seriously reaching down to grip his 'nephew's' shoulder. "Tell Meera to do it, she's proven her worth over the last few weeks, and you know I didn't want her with us. You cannot risk yourself like that any longer unless no one else can perform the job, and in this case Meera can. Besides, I think you and your lady should have some time together after so long apart."

Rickard didn't say that because he was a romantic. He didn't want to come out and say it, but he and he thought the other lords would very much like to see Daenerys pregnant already. Yes, he knew all the reasons why she had to be with the army, but in the end he felt that as a sign of stability you couldn't beat solidifying the line of succession.

"There are others that have been separated from their loved ones for far longer than us, uncle." Ranma said though the words came out weakly as he really did want to see Daenerys. He had missed her dearly of the last few weeks.

"But none as important as you and the queen, and again you cannot continue with this habit of risking yourself without truly good cause. Being in the forefront of the battle is one thing, leading the scouts from the front, or simply scouting around by yourself at night could also be excused considering your skills with that wolf of yours at times. But not now, not when everything is riding on the next battle, especially not since you've set the whole campaign up like that."

Ranma sighed but nodded, and waited with Rickard for Meera to catch up with them.

That was much easier than he had expected, because Meera was already coming up with the last of her scouts. She waved her bow at him, shaking her head when she saw Ranma waiting for her. "The Westerlands scouts fell back, I think a few of them got around us enough to spot the rest of the army."

Ranma nodded then when she joined them gave Meera her new orders.

Meera sighed but turned waving her hand again as she ordered the few scouts in site to fall back into the scrub with her. The last week or so had been hard on her men even in comparison to the rest of the campaign, and they had taken serious casualties. In total she only had fifteen or so trained scouts left, when she had started out with over a hundred, though thankfully half that number were missing not because they were dead but because they had been wounded and ordered to retreat to Fairmarket with Daryn.

Ranma walked at the head of his army into the combined Riverlands/Northern camp, exchanging greetings with Greatjon, who reached down out of the saddle to grasp the younger man's arm. "Damn lad, I can't believe you managed to do it, but you did!" Ranma grinned back at him then nodded greetings at the Riverlands lords and the two younger men who were probably their heirs, standing with Smalljon and Ser Barristan.

However his eyes were all for Daenerys, who was already hugging Myrcella, the two of them standing in front of a small tent. Daenerys turned to him, her violet eyes clinging to his face for a moment before she shook herself then deliberately stepped back into the tent. Merry, not noticing Daenerys look at Ranma followed her, still talking, one of her hands making a slashing motion as if describing something.

Ranma was almost in a daze as he followed her, waving his hand occasionally to acknowledge other greetings or cheers. These quickly turned into wolf whistles as the rest of the army noticed how out of it he was and where he was walking.

He entered the tent and found Daenerys and her two little ones there. Both of the dragons raised their heads, staring at him for a moment then lowering their heads once more. Neither of them had warmed to Ranma as they had to Fenris, to Sunfyre and Rhaegon Ranma was simply their mistress's mate, not their friend in his own right or anything of that nature.

But that lukewarm welcome was more than made up for when Daenerys practically leaped into his arms, her arms going around his neck and pulling his mouth down to hers. After that Ranma rather lost track of time, only coming back into himself when they pulled back from one another their foreheads resting lightly against one another. "Hello, my lady." Ranma said, his voice coming out deep and throaty, his blue eyes shining with love and other, baser emotions.

"Hello my husband." Daenerys said, a tremble in her own voice as she nuzzled into his neck, her lips slightly bruised from the force of their kiss. "I realize I should be asking you what you've been up to and where the wolfsworn are or how well you think this campaign is going, but for some reason..." she laughed, "I am really having trouble caring about all that right now."

Those words brought Ranma back to himself for a moment, though his arms for some reason were refusing all his brain's commands to let Daenerys go. "We should get out there, make some show at least of still being in charge of ourselves rather than our hormones."

At that point Myrcella spoke up from one side, her face flushed from the passion she had just witnessed, as well as her own desires which had nailed her feet to the floor despite her best efforts to turn and leave the two alone. "I doubt that the army will care if you two spend some time together in here, so long as you can, um..." she blushed even deeper. "K-keep the noise down?"

"That isn't going to happen." Daenerys said shaking her head moving away unwillingly from Ranma, shivering slightly

as Ranma's hand's traced her sides for a moment before reluctantly flailing away. "It would set a bad example for the troops."

"Besides," Ranma put in, one hand tracing Daenerys's back for a moment before he too grudgingly moved away. "Daenerys tends to be loud in any case."

Daenerys mock-glared at him for a moment while Myrcella laughed, and Daenerys turned to her, glaring slightly. "As if Myrcella isn't already well aware of that, or is there some other reason why you always get a room next to ours?"

Merry flushed further, stuttering for a moment, while Daenerys laughed and Ranma merely looked bewildered. Daenerys reached out, pulling Merry into another hug then turned to Ranma, her arms still around the younger girl, who's company she had missed dearly. Turning to Ranma however, her voice and face became serious again. "How long do you think it will take the Lannisters to attack us?"

"Two or three days, maybe as many as four." Ranma said, shrugging his shoulders. "We'll have that time to rest the men who were with me, believe me they need it, and not just their bodies, their minds and gear have suffered as well. All of them performed above and beyond, and we'll need to make certain they know that. Even three days is going to be pushing it. It's not only my force that's been run ragged after all."

OOOOOO

Tywin was indeed gathering his forces together again, and had assembled his lords once more to give them their marching orders. "While I am displeased that our scouts have seen so many new banners, the army out for there simply does not have the size necessary to fight us on an even footing. At best they can only have 13,000 excluding the Riverlands forces who will no doubt surrender or turn their coats if we can smash the northerners and their true allies decisively."

For the northern host augmented by the forces of House Mallister that was actually a very accurate estimation. Given the various forces Ranma had split off since reaching Fairmarket and the losses his men had sustained, Ranma's army was a little over thirteen thousand. But as Tywin had said, the men Ranma had been leading personally up to this point had been run ragged, and would add little to his total strength.

"Moreover, the northern force we've been chasing are exhausted, they won't be ready for a pitched battle in three days or even a week. They will add nothing to the force already gathered. While we can field a force of 20,000 since we've continually made good our losses on this side of the Red Fork by pulling men up from our reserves down at the Kneeling Man's Ford." That had left the force at the Ford with a bare three thousand after the men at Stone Hedge had been moved there, but that would be more than enough to hold the ford given the defenses they had built there.

"That's true uncle." Daven said cautiously when no one else spoke up. "But they can still hurt us. Ranma has proven himself to be a wily tactician, and I'm leery of assuming that he is desperate at this point. This meeting between their two forces seems far too... lucky to be true chance. Also look at the place they've chosen to meet us, we can't flank them, which means we will have trouble bringing our numbers advantage to bear."

That was true. The area where the northerners had decided to fight was a small strip of land where the Red Fork and Blue Fork were only about half a mile apart before once more turning away from one another until they met at the Trident. Worse both rivers were deep here, so there was no chance of truly flanking the northerners. "Moreover, even in victory if Ranma hurts us too badly, we will become dangerously understrength to take on either of the Baratheon brothers."

"Not so much." Tywin disagreed though he nodded at it the younger man, respecting him slightly more for having spoken up. "Remember we still have all of the smaller guard forces in, Harroway, Harrenhal, Darry and the other castles near the Kingsroad, as well as the majority of our Riverlands allies besieging Raventree Hall. His lips twitched slightly at the younger man scowl as if he wasn't wishful to rely on such, though he understood the point. "With them we can make up any losses we might take among our army later on."

The other matter Tywin went on his voice and manner becoming much more serious is time. "This campaign is taking too long. If we give Ranma time enough to recuperate from the past few weeks, he may well cross back over the Ruby Ford and start another war of maneuver, constantly moving here there and everywhere trying to force us to break our army up again in an effort to pin him down. With the Baratheon brothers both moving on King's Landing we cannot afford to wait. We need to crush this Army quickly, and then begin our march southwards."

"While the northern army has had it almost all its own way, the portion we've been chasing have paid for it, and from what our scouts reported the other half is comprised mostly of levies that haven't thought any true pitched battle yet.

They are well armored true, and their weapons seem more uniform than I expect, but such men will break at the first sign of true blood."

Beside Tywin, Stafford spoke up as well. "Also consider that the eastern Riverlands houses made that initial deal with us because they didn't have the stomach for war. If they start to take losses, they may well retreat entirely. One sharp battle here, and the Northern/Riverlands alliance could crumble."

Tywin didn't like the man but he had a point. "Indeed, so that is what we will do. The second and third echelons are only a day and a half's distance if they force march to join us. I've already sent runners to them, we will gather our forces through the rest of the day and the night, then attack at dawn."

Tywin didn't know it, but even his thoughts had been influenced by the long, somewhat fruitless campaign so far, which his men had taken to call hunting the wolf. The northerners had never allowed the Westerlanders to pin them in place, and had won all of the small skirmishes, though they had obviously taken losses, particularly from Lord Plumm's night attack.

But the fruitless chase had ground on Tywin's nerves, particularly when he knew that Renly had reached King's Landing weeks back. His daughter and son were trapped in this hellhole, and here Tywin was, chasing after an enemy that would rather dance around and avoid battle than fight! No, Tywin felt it best to end this now, show the young Stark that there was a difference between small scale battles and real ones then move south as quickly as possible.

Actually, Tywin had underestimated the amount of time it would be necessary to allow for his army to come together completely. The two other echelons were still trickling in well into the evening of the next day, so he was forced to put off a battle for four days, giving the portion of the northern army precious time to recuperate from the past three weeks..

That wasn't good, but, Tywin reflected that the numbers and moreover the composition of the two forces were heavily in his favor. His scouts reported that the Eastern Riverlands houses only had added about three thousand to Ranma's army, the majority of which were infantry and archers, and only House Blantree's troops, of which there were a scant hundred, were veterans. Whereas Tywin's army was mostly comprised of veterans, and had a massive force of heavy cavalry with which to shatter the Northern line. Once that was done, his numbers would tell, and the Young Wolf would finally be brought to heel.

OOOOOO

Four days after the northern army reformed the sound of drums in the distance signaled that the Lannisters were preparing themselves for battle, and were quickly answered by the horns of the northern and Riverlands army. Ranma sat on Fenris' back on a small rise in the army camp, staring out through his spyglass at the Lannister forces that were preparing their lines.

He smiled grimly. *You seem to think bigger is better Lord Tywin, something I'd thought seeing your past campaigns, but I'm about to prove to you once and for all that quality beats out quantity every time.*

Without looking away from the view, he began to give out his orders for the coming battle. "I want the archers on either flank with the Riverlands forces to protect them. Smalljon, you and I will command the irregular infantry. We'll go forward to meet their initial charge, but I want every sergeant to know the signal for retreat, and when we do I want that retreat to be an organized one, not a rout."

Now he turned fixing, Smalljon with a glare. "Make certain they understand that. That will be the most dangerous part of this battle when we have to retreat through the pike."

Smalljon nodded grimly and Ranma turned to his friend's father. "Greatjon, you and lord Rickard are to take command of the heavy. Split them into two formations and station them behind the archers on either flank. Keep them back, I don't want them called in until after the Lannisters have been broken."

"You're making the assumption that they will break." said Ser Blantree dubiously. "I have to tell you that whatever you think you've seen, the Westerlanders do not lack for courage."

Ranma shook his head. "You haven't seen what a pike regiment on the attack can do, no one has really. Trust me, the Lannisters will break, or die. Patrek, I'd like you to be my signalman for this battle."

The heir to house Mallister paused, cocking an eyebrow as he seemed to read more into that question than the actual

words. He was right: Ranma had been impressed by Patrek, who had stood by his side in several of the battle they had fought already in this campaign. While his skills were nowhere close to a wolfsworn, he was decent enough, and better young enough to keep learning.

Eventually Patrek nodded and Ranma turned to Lord Mallister. "Jason, you'll be in charge of the reserves, they'll be your man and those of mine that have already been in battle these past few weeks. I don't want them committed too soon to the battle, so keep them back at all if at all possible. Whatever you do, keep your force between the front and Merry's hospital center."

Jason nodded, not showing any of his own worry. He hadn't seen the pike regiment in action yet either, in fact even Ranma hadn't, but he knew they would work. *You created a weapon for me Jon*, he thought to himself. *Now it's time to show Westeros what the word 'soldier' really means.*

"When do you want the crossbowmen committed?" Daenerys asked, once again wearing a concealing hood as she stood behind Ser Barristan.

"Push them forward with the hikes," Ranma said after a moment's thought. "They know what they're supposed to do?"

She nodded. "Lord Mallister, Ser Barristan and I have had been training them with the crossbows ever since the weapons arrived." Those men had been chosen from among the best of the archers from the Riverlands, and while they hadn't exactly taken to their new weapons the striking power of the crossbow had seduced them.

Ranma nodded grimly. He did not give any commands to any of the Riverlands lords that his wife had brought to their banner. He'd gotten to know them over the past few days, and agreed with Daenerys on her impression of all of them. Ranma liked Ser Blanetree, a thorough going professional warrior, but he had the sort of anger in him that would make controlling him tough.

He also liked Vincent and Tristan. The first, he had potential the kind of potential that Ranma was eager to put to work on various projects. Tristan wasn't a deep thinker, but he was loyal, and more importantly loyal to the Tullys, specifically Edmure, which was enough for Ranma. Their father though, Ranma didn't like him very much, far too self-serving and a bit of an ass-kisser, much like Roote only somewhat better at hiding it. Old Wayn, well he was old and tired, Ranma couldn't hate him, but couldn't like him either.

Ranma looked off into the distance as he heard the bugles of the Lannisters bellowing once more. "Let's get to it gentlemen, ladies."

With that they all raced off to their positions, though Lord Roote and Lord Ryger took a moment to pull Silas to one side. "Why is the youngster so confident? Do you know? I've seen his Pike regiment's doing their pretty marching, but surely he doesn't think that's going to translate into a battle."

Silas Shawney however laughed at his concerns. "There is one thing I've learned from watching Ranma over the past few weeks, it's never to gamble against him. Trust me, he'll win this."

OOOOOO

About an hour later the battle began. Archers on both sides began to pepper one another and the front of the infantry lines, while the Lannisters began to advance. Despite their advantage in numbers the Westerlands archers had the worst of it from the get-go, not just because they were advancing with their army into their opponent's fire, but because their bows were of such poor size and power in comparison to the northern ones. While the Westerlands bows were actually better for skirmishes, because the size of the northern bows made using them in dense forests a little more difficult, the northern bows simply had far more power and range.

Against the light armor of the infantry and the archers this was proving deadly. At long range of course even northern bows couldn't penetrate plate, but only one in ten infantrymen had plate armor among the Westerlands forces. More than one archer among them noticed that the armor of the Northerners seems to be of much higher quality than was normal for any infantry force, though many had already reported this.

The Westerlands forces advanced, those who had them holding up shields to block the arrows coming at them marching on waiting until they were in charging distance to pick up the pace. Halfway towards the northern army, the northern army responded, the irregular infantry moving out forming its own line of battle.

Behind the irregular infantry the pike regiments began to form from the clumps and clusters that they had been kept in



before this in order to not get even a hint of what they really were to the Lannisters. Even now the pikes were held dragging along the ground so that their true size could be discerned from a distance.

It worked too. Behind his army Tywin was once more set up on a small platform and he smiled grimly. *The Stark brat doesn't trust his levy forces to hold instead he's using them as his secondary line there, but he's underestimated our own numbers I think. If we can win the initial clash with the better trained armsmen of that first line coming out to meet ours, we might be able to sweep the board quickly.*

Moments later the two waves of infantry met, the Westerlands forces having the numbers, but not the training or the armor of their opponents. Ranma charged at the center of their forces with Patrek beside him. Fenris for once was not with his bonded human. He had stayed to help Daenerys keep her dragons under control when the sounds of battle reached him. Ice carved a bloody ruin while he roared. "Winter is coming!"

This shout was taken up all along the line, and for a moment the light infantry held their fellows. Then more Westerlanders came up, pushing through here and there and even encircling small clumps of Riverlands in northern infantry. The northern infantry began to give way grudgingly. At the center Ranma looked to his right as a bugle from the northern flank sounded, signaling that they were being in danger of being cut off on that side. He nodded at Patrek and said "signal slow retreat, then signal the light cavalry in on the northern flank."

Patrek nodded, his bloody sword falling to his side for a moment as he grabbed up the horn that had been riding at his hip, putting it to his lips and blowing out two long blasts then five more short one in quick succession. All around them the light infantry began to slowly give ground, but seeing Ranma still there, snarling at their enemies not a one of them broke.

With Smalljon holding the south side and Ranma holding the center the northern side was really the only flank that was in danger of breaking. Unfortunately Tywin could tell that just as well as Ranma. He ordered his men in on that side, almost breaking the infantry line there before the northern light cavalry smashing into them from their own flank. That part of the battle devolved into a general melee for a few seconds, but Lord Shawney, in charge of the light cavalry, understood the plan well enough to keep his force under control and pulled them back after the infantry line stabilized. He still lost hundreds of men however.

Even in the midst of his own battle at the front of the line Ranma could feel the sense the tide of battle, the balance of it. He and Patrek held the line for a moment, while around them the shield wall of both sides clashed, both sides taking losses as Ranma let his body move by itself for a moment while he concentrated on reading the flow of battle.

After another moment Ranma held up one hand and said "by the numbers Patrek!"

Ranma stepped forward slightly to one side guarding Patrek who fell back allowing wringing out his shield arm, wincing as the pain of a broken bone hit him. Even so he was still able to lift the horn to his lips. This time he blew one long blast followed by two short ones and another long blast.

Around them the light infantry forces of the Northerners, trained constantly drilled on the march down from the north and even more so when they were in camp on the other side of the Ruby Ford, responded with alacrity. Each group leader or sergeant as Ranma called them had been assigned a number. Now those with odd numbers fell back, much like when Daryn's force had been ambushed by the wildlings north of the Wall.

Yet at the same time the archers, who had been splitting fire along the entire front as well as against their fellows suddenly changed fire aiming only at the infantry along the front ranks. Men fell screaming as hundreds of arrows began to sluice down like rain into their ranks, the Northerners combined fire in one area of the battle proving disastrous to the Westerlanders.

Ranma grabbed Patrek shoulder and shouted in his ear in order to be heard over the continued clamor of battle and the screams of the wounded. "I think it's our turn my friend!" Patrek laughed, in the two of them fell back with the last groups.

On the other side of the battle Tywin grimaced angrily but then bellowed orders. "Their center is breaking, call up the heavy cavalry and get them in there! If we can break them, and their levy forces behind them, the Riverlanders on their flanks will break as well, and this battle will be ours!"

Orders went out to that effect, and the Westerlands infantry gratefully moved aside for their betters.

By this point Ranma and Patrek had reached the first line of pike, passing through their ranks like the rest of the light infantry. After they passed, the pikes closed ranks and Ranma stopped, handing Ice over to Patrek for a moment.

"Don't lose it." He said semi-seriously.

While Patrek raced on with Ice in its sheath under one arm Ranma reached down to pick up a pike and take his position with the rest. That sight won a round of cheers from many of the pikemen around him, who had of course been nervous. This was not only going to be their first battle for many of them, but all of them knew that Ranma's entire strategy was based off how well they would perform. That was quite a load on their shoulders, all of whom were smallfolk levies or had been before Jon molded them into the soldiers they were now: men who had been trained from the start to work together, to see themselves as parts of a unit, not individual warriors.

Ranma didn't have enough time to make a speech, nor did he have the inclination. He simply raised his Pike, holding it upright on his shoulder. All around him and all throughout the regiments the pikemen changed their grips to match his own, the flashes of steel radiating outwards for a moment. Ranma looked around and simply said. "Here they come boys, who will stand with me!?"

He was answered with a roar, and a moment later he bellowed "Pikes down!" That shout was taken up by all the troop leaders and sergeants, and the pike regiments of the North lowered their blades. "Prepare to receive!"

When the pike shafts came down, the Westerlands heavy cavalry was no longer faced with what they had thought was a weak line of barely trained levies armed with polearms, but a trained and prepared force who worked together and stood their ground with a level of discipline that had never truly been seen in the Westerlands or even in the eastern lands. The only comparison could be made to the Golden Company or the Unsullied, but even they didn't have the mix of weapons and armor of that the Houses Stark and Cerwyn had created.

A Pike regiment wasn't a simple line of pike, but a wall of steel made up of four rows of pikemen thrusting their pikes forward. Even if you got past the first row of Pike, you couldn't get past the second or the third or the fourth, you could get at the people wielding the Pike.

A pike had even longer range than a Lance wielded by a cavalry man, and now the Westerlands knights and mounted arms man learned this to their cost. Hundreds, possibly thousands died in that brief clash. Then it got worse.

"At the March!" Ranma bellowed, his pike out thrust, slamming into a knight with such force it penetrated his plate armor and threw him out of the saddle. His horse tried to bolt, but they were packed so tightly that the horses couldn't get away. Then all around him the pikemen began to follow Ranma's relayed orders and began to move forward, their pikes outstretched in front of them, hammering slicing and thrusting into the cavalry who were no longer trying to break their lines but were instead trying to get away.

However, the crossbow men had also gone to work at the same time. All of them had been ordered to follow the pikes as closely as possible and aim at any mounted man who was wearing better armor than most or was riding directly under a banner. Their rate of fire wasn't anywhere near what an equal number of archers could've done, but their quarrels hit with punishing force, penetrating even the best plate armor, which could've turned even the arrows of the northern longbows. The Westerlands lost over a dozen Knights, Heirs and more than a few Lords in that first few ferocious moments of combat. Heavy cavalry had always attracted such, and an in-battle assassination like this was an entirely new tactic.

Twenty minutes after they charged into the pikes the Westerlands cavalry broke. No, it didn't break, it shattered. One moment it had been charging forward certain of its power and victory, then their fortune had been completely reversed. The men were shocked, astonished at the brutal way their momentum had been halted, a fifth of the number had died in those first few moments. The horses were terrified by the smell of blood and the screams of the dying horses all around them, and dozens of their leaders were gone as well. They shattered, streaming away in ones and twos from the battle back through their own ranks of infantry

Behind them the Pike regiments marched on. Here and there the Westerlands cavalry messed up their own infantry's line, their horses out of control, or their riders so panicked they didn't realize they were now trampling over a few of their own men.

And then those lines of infantry were also faced with two pike regiments on the march. Even against infantry, the sheer number of pikes, the density of the regiment's front worked their deadly toll. Here and there men could get under the first line or even the second, but not the third or the fourth, and even in the few places that occurred, they ran into the men of House Mallister who Jason had ordered forward to guard the Pike regiments up close. And behind them were the archers, still firing at the Westerlanders, and Ranma's heavy cavalry, only about two-thousand, five hundred men, waiting to be unleashed while cheering on their fellows.

Tywin watched all this in shocked horror, and he suddenly realized, or thought he realized, what Ranma's goal had

been all along. *Stark wanted me to attack him here* he thought his thoughts cold yet shocked at the same time. *He didn't want to face me at the fortifications we threw up at the Kneeling Man's Ford, all that dancing around even his initial split of his army possibly was to entice me to come out and attack him. After all, the Young Wolf doesn't care what happens further south, he must've known I was feeling the pinch of time and would jump at the chance to defeat his forces in smaller lots. And he wanted to use those polearms against us. By the Seven, where did he get the idea for those?*

Even as he watched the sides of the Pike regiment sprouted even more Pike thrusting out on a diagonal protecting its flanks while its front crunched into his army's middle. The archers of the North had also won their dual with his own, forcing his own archers to fall back in disarray though his troops ranks with hundreds dead in comparison to only dozens on the other side. And Tywin could see panic beginning even at the outskirts of the army.

"Sound retreat." Tywin said his voice like ice.

"My Lord, we still outnumber them." Said Stafford.

Tywin turned, slapping the other man hard on the face sending him sprawling to the ground of the platform he had been using to survey the battle. "Fool! Those polearms have ripped the heart out of our army! We have nothing that can get through to the men behind them, the only way we can battle them is by exhausting them, surely those weapons are too long for them to be very quick on the march. No, we'll pull back entirely, then dare them to come at us on the other side of the Kneeling Man forward.

"That's days away from here my lord, but you're right I don't think those pike units we very good in in the chase. We'll still have to deal with the northern cavalry though." Lord Brax said, ignoring where Stafford had been sent sprawling.

"If we don't start to pull back now, we won't have an army left regardless. Do as I command." Tywin said coldly.

The Westerlands reserve force was comprised of about 3000 infantry and another two hundred heavy cavalry which Tywin had husbanded up to this point. Now they served as a rallying point for the rest of the army, falling back in good order and setting an example for their fellows, though many of the Westerlanders weren't in a position to respond. Even so, breaking off the battle was tough, made even harder when the heavy and light cavalry of the Northern army was loosed to do it's deadly work.

Beyond the general flow of the battle Ranma couldn't tell that much detail from where he was in the front line so he had switched out with Smalljon only a few moments into the pike regiments' advance. His going hadn't caused any sort of consternation, his joking shout of "you boys have got this, but I need to kick the rest of the army in the ass!" had actually won him a few laughs from the embattled men around him.

Now he stood on his own raised platform, frowning angrily. "Send a runner to Greatjon and my uncle. I want the cavalry to go around the edges of the pike regiments but I want them to be controlled. Tywin is keeping too much control over there, we won't finish that army off today."

Daenerys stood at the back of the platform, looking over it with her own spyglass hitting even now. Below her hands were Sunfyre and Rhaegon, pressed down lightly with both of her hands while Fenris lay in front of them growling slightly aiding her in controlling them. The sound of battle in the blood smell had reached even back here was getting to both dragons, and their instincts were urging them into the air but their time had not yet come. "We've broken them though, that army knows it's been beaten, and beaten badly. Should we use my dragons now, do you think?"

Ranma shook his head. "No, I don't want your dragons to be used in the field, not against a foe that's already beaten. Remember that our own men might come to fear them if we seem too eager to use them. We'll keep with the original plan for their debut."

Daenerys nodded grimly, remembering that part and inwardly happy for another few weeks to keep training her little ones on dodging. After all, they were so young their scales didn't offer much protection, and their wings would be extremely vulnerable to enemy archers. *Plus, they would have to come much closer to target men who could no doubt see them coming and dodge. Besides, Ranma's right, just think of how Lord Mallister would react.*

For his part Ranma was wondering how the rest of his strategy was going. "Now it all depends on what Jon and Arya have been able to do, and what Tywin's reaction will be. If Tywin retreat from that position on the other side of the Kneeling Man's Ford, we can harry him out of the Riverlands. If he doesn't," he looked down at Daenerys grimly, "Your little ones will be used against him there."

It would have surprised anyone else, but Daenerys understood why that thought horrified Ranma. Ranma didn't want

to slaughter his enemies, well not their men anyway, he would have no problem gutting Joffrey like a fish, or ripping Stannis' head off and tossing it into the ocean. But he saw no reason to extend that hatred toward the armsmen who were simply following their vows, or to the levy forces who'd had no choice but joining up. He wanted to break Tywin, he didn't want to slaughter his army to a man.

On a more pragmatic level there were two considerations. First, if Ranma could force that army to surrender, or even portions of it, he would immediately have a ready force of workmen for any projects he needed work on. In the back of Ranma's mind there was always the fact that he knew winter was coming, when food and transportation of said would be of paramount importance. He needed at least the two canal projects they were already working on to be finished before winter came, and he needed enough people to move out into the fields after this war and start farming again. This was especially true since autumn had been declared while he was baiting the lion.

Second, Ranma had learned back in Fairmarket that the Westerlanders had both suborned and reinforced several of the castles on the other side of the Red Fork and Trident. He did not want to get bogged down in the same kind of battles he'd been facing these past few weeks and he hoped that by letting Tywin go for now he would be forced to call in those small holding forces. Whether or not he would then seek battle again, or would still remain on the defense and force Ranma to use the dragons against him, or if the rest of Ranma's strategy took, Ranma didn't know yet.

Daenerys nodded grimly, and two of them went back to watching the rout continue.

**OOOOOO**

There was a dead body in a small alleyway in Fleabottom. This wasn't abnormal in the best of times in Fleabottom, and now was not the best of times. But what was abnormal, had anyone noticed it, was that this body didn't seem to have a mark on it, save for some blood around the mouth. It lay there in its own sick, and rats began to eat at it, unremarked by any. But soon, soon it would be important for thousands.

**End chapter**

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I have some five thousand words of the next chapter done, but I feel that I wasn't doing the next few battles/events justice in my head. The strategy and flow of this chapter were very hard to work out, but I think I did it justice. Arya started to shine here, and she will do so even more in the next chapter.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and please leave a review, the soup and salad of the writer.

## \*Chapter 14\*: Chapter 14

I don't own Ranma (would love to 'own' Kasumi though, heh) nor do I own the universe created by George 'Slowmo' Martin.

I know I said the next chapter of ATP would be updated this month, but my WW muse would not let me go, and I ran into some problems with the chapter, specifically, having too many people whose opinions on the last chapter's events I wanted to show, and very little knowledge on Kree warships. If someone who knows anything about the Kree could PM me I would be grateful. I would also like to ask anyone who knows anything about astrology to PM me as well.

Like to thank Antony444 for his work as a sounding board and a beta, though again we're still dealing with an odd 'space is missing' issue. Hope I caught them all, but with so many damn names the system doesn't recognize, it's tough to spot mistakes like that. Also think some commas disappeared somehow...

Now on with the violence!

### Chapter 14 Old Problems, New Players a Lion Brought to Bay

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"That was as unpleasant a journey as I had expected father." said Obara Sand. She was standing at the edge of the Bonewayay as the rock and dust of the road, if it could even be called that, wound its way out of the last bit of the mountains towards the ruins of Summerhall, once one of the castles of House Targaryen. In front of her the army continued to move its slow winding way out of the pass.

"It is not called the Boneway for no reason, my dear." Oberyng laughed as he stood his horse to one side, watching with his daughter as his army passed by. One or two of the mercenaries than made up that army looked up at him, and he smiled cheerfully at them, not incidentally hefting his spear in one hand. Those men that looked at him looked away quickly, blanching.

Once again Oberyng wondered if his niece and Viserys understood the nature of the army they had assembled. *The dregs of an entire continent, all brought together and given weapons and in some cases even taught how to use them. The boy-king at least should know the real nature of most of the mercenary companies. Arianne I'll give the benefit of the doubt.*

*Of course, he thought, smirking as more men looked away from him, these people might worship the money they're being paid, but will only follow someone who can speak their own language. And I can speak that language, oh yes.* Oberyng had been a mercenary in Essos himself when he was younger, and the lessons he'd learned during those years had stayed with him. By now every man in that column understood that he was not someone they wished to cross, not even the worst of them like the lieutenants of the Company of the Cat. Not after Bloodbeard, their former chief, had tried to remove Oberyng only to die himself.

Thankfully loyalty in the Company of the Cat went to whoever was the nastiest and the toughest. Oberyng had proven he was the toughest by cutting Bloodbeard down within two days of meeting him, and forcing the rest of the company to watch as he died on the sands of the Boneway well before they reached even Castle Wyl.

"Father," said Obara, bringing Oberyng's attention back to her. "Are we..." she paused, "Are we really going to..." she paused again, and Oberyng sighed.

He had hoped that all of his daughters would opt to go with the Princess, but Obara had decided to come with him. Hardened fighter she might be but she had never been on the march, and never took part in a war. "Yes," he said coldly, "we are. These are the Stormlands girl, the lands where The Usurper mustered much of his army, where the two Baratheon brothers have gotten their armies as well." He paused before going on. "Or at least a portion of them. Regardless, they will stand against our new liege Lord, and they stand between us and **vengeance!**"

At the word vengeance he saw his daughter stiffen her spine slightly and he nodded before leaning forward. "We might have sent out here as some kind of feint, but Viserys is a man with big ideas who has **no idea** about war. I'll admit that his first few targets will work, but they won't give him anything, oh possibly a stepping stone to more, but not important enough. We need to do some real damage, and that means moving quick and striking hard. We can't be bogged down, we can't let up, and we need to cut a swath that will be remembered for decades! If you don't have the stomach for it, tell me now. You can still be sent back to House Wyl."

"I'll do what needs to be done." Obara muttered.

Oberyn nodded. "Good." With that he turned away began to bark out orders for the army to keep going, it might be later in the day but he wanted to be well away from the pass leading into the Boneway before they made camp. Despite Summerhall having been a ruin for years, there were other threats nearby.

For one, Doran's spies had passed on the fact that House Dondarrion had decided not to take part in the current conflict, since its lord was missing in action. However, their traditional duty to protect pass might force whoever had been left in charge to make the attempt. Worse, they were still close enough to the small pass that led up to Blackhaven from the Boneway to make a sortie from that House deadly to their attempt to get out of the Boneway.

They would camp that night well away from the passage out of the Red Mountains and then they would move on. Oberyn had decided that his initial target would be the lands of House Wagstaff, which was the nearest house that wasn't part of the Dornish marches, then the lands around Grandview, of House Grandison. Wagstaff had a small holdfast, not a true castle, and had sent some of its strength to war in any event. They would fall easily, and their lands would give his army enough food and plunder to boost its morale after the hard march through the Boneway.

Oberyn wasn't going to siege Grandview though, that was too tough a nut to crack without taking severe losses. But the lands around it would be open, since they had sent a third of their armymen to join Renly's horde, and the smallfolk they captured there would be able to tell them a lot about the events in the Stormlands and Reach. With that information he could decide to turn towards the Reach or stay in the Stormlands. The second option would be his preference, but Oberyn was flexible enough to wait and see.

*Keep moving, keep burning the land, keep my army happy, and make everyone else very unhappy. And also stay close enough to the ocean to get back to it quickly if need out and away from the Dornish Marches and stay away from the Reach side entirely. We know that they kept most of their men at home, a force I don't want to tangle with. Summer knights most of them they may be, but they'll be well led, and I can't say the same for my lot, besides myself, unless our prisoners tell us something has occurred elsewhere that makes the heart of the Reach vulnerable it will be best to keep to the Stormlands. At least my orders allow me to do that.*

OOOOOO

Derik **Derik** Waters was a part of a gang, practically everyone in Flea Bottom was part of some kind of brotherhood or 'house'. It was simply the difference between survival and death, lone wolves didn't last long in Flea Bottom, or even the rest of the city. If you didn't have someone to watch your back, someone you could trust at least a little then you were dead. His gang was called the Bastard's Boys, since they were all bastards who didn't know who their father was, and in some cases their mother too. They were all ages starting from as young as nine to as old as thirty, with seniority denoting status among the gang.

Life in Flea Bottom was hard at the best of times, but since the siege began it had become even worse. Derik didn't really have the vocabulary or knowledge to understand why, food simply wasn't coming in. Nor was anything else. Iron for the smithies, wood for the almost constant construction projects going on everywhere in the city, leather for the leather makers, flour, wheat, charcoal, everything that made the economy of the city go came from outside.

King's Landing sat in the Crownlands like a giant lump of granite on a thin sheet of leather, distorting everything around it. Of course it also created things, but those things needed other things to be created from. So the economy of the city had simply ground to a halt slowly and of course being at the bottom rung Flea Bottom was always going to get the worst of it.

Derik didn't understand any of that, all he knew was he hadn't eaten anything beyond Bowls o' brown for a few weeks now. Worse the bowls were starting to look disturbing even to his Flea Bottom trained eyes. He had also been fired from his job down at the docks, and his woman hadn't been home in two days. When went to the brothel she worked at to see if she was still there for some reason, he'd been told that she had gone home on time two days back. He'd also been told she had a deep, racking cough as she was. A sick person had about as much chance of walking the streets of Flea Bottom as a fish did of flying.

So Derik Waters was angry, one of hundreds of thousands of people in the capital that were becoming angry and looking for targets take their anger out on. That was why he and thousands of others were here listening to a former merchant as he shouted exhortations against the royal family off of the Street of Flour

"This can all be laid on the feet of the Bastard King and his Bitch Mother," said the merchant, which elicited a roar from the crowd. "The Lannisters have always run roughshod over King's Landing! I'm not the only man here who can remember what they did during the Robert's Rebellion, and you all know what happened in the Battle of Two Truths!

The Lannisters shit gold, but all we see is the glitter on their blades, never the gold itself!"

That won another roar from the crowd as Derik and all the other men around him shouted and raged. Normally they would never have listened to a merchant, especially one who looked well-off. Now, if you looked close enough you could see that the siege had had an effect on him. His clothing was badly frayed in places and his body was far thinner than it had been judging by how loose it were on him.

"Robert might not 've been a good King, but at least he was someone we could relate to! At least he didn't shit all over us, at least he didn't burn us or butcher our children!"

That won an even louder roar and the crowd began to stir, every man there checking their makeshift weapons. Though makeshift wasn't really the proper word for some of the weapons, billhooks, meat cleaver's, all different kinds of hammers, awls, heavy saws. A lot of people in the city routinely used tools that could be used as weapons all too easily.

"Now Robert's brother is out there! Renly might be too pretty to be real, but at least he's an honest one, one who will speak up for the people! Now I say we open the door for him. Who's with me!?"

The crowd roared surging towards the nearest gate, with the merchant deep in it somewhere holding a very rusty yet still serviceable short sword. Derik found himself near the front of the mob but didn't have a problem with this. His blood was up, he had a cargo-man's hook in one hand and a rage to take on the world.

That emotion began to cool the moment the mob was within sight of the interior defenses that had been thrown up around the gates. Several buildings had been smashed to pieces to create a makeshift barricade shaped in a U around the gate facing outwards into the rest of the city. It was only two stories tall, and if the mob was armed with bows it wouldn't have been a very good position because there was only a smattering of cover on the top created by bits and pieces of rubble sticking out from the rest of the barricade. But they didn't.

"You are ordered to disperse!" Shouted a voice, somehow being heard over this sounds of the mob roaring forward. Derik wasn't the only one to see the dozens of bowmen on up there, who were quickly being joined by others as they climbed up the barricade's back.

Nor was Derik the only one in the crowd to begin to stop moving forward, having second thoughts. But there weren't enough of them to stop the press of bodies from behind, and however unwittingly that first group of rioters found themselves being pressed forward by their fellows.

"I said disperse, Stranger damn you!" Though no one in the mob knew it, the man shouting was Lord Harte. Having been stripped of his command on the wall, he had been given command of the interior defenses of the Old Gate. The bruises Jaime had given him at the Hand's behest for springing their most dangerous defensive trap too soon had healed for the most part. And he had taken to his new task with enthusiasm and creativity...

The crowd jeered, and a few men began to throw cobblestones up trying to hit the archers upon the barricade. They weren't close enough just yet though. One or two smaller stones hit among the archers, but that was all.

It seemed to be enough for the commander up there however who said "Fire!" Bows began to twang, and screams began in the mob as people hit by arrows. Yet that seems to only incense the mob further, and they rushed forward towards the barricades.

The archers fired as quickly as they could not even taking the time to aim, but the mob was simply too large for their arrows to stop. Somehow the gestalt mind of the mob seemed to realize this, and shouts and jeers began again as men all around realized that they would win through if they just kept pressing. They would lose dozens, but that didn't matter, it would always be someone else doing the dying.

That equation changed however when the mob reached the final block that would carry them up to the barricade. There Derik and a few others kicked over or smashed a few small jugs. Then they began to scream and that scream went on for the rest of their shortened lives.

Those small jugs contained wildfire. Wildfire ignited from even the gentlest tap especially if it had been left out in the sun for even a few moments as these had been. Before the mob had been spotted, they had been covered by small tarps, which kept the direct sunlight off them though they had done nothing to prevent the jugs from heating up even with the occasional rain shower. Those tarps had been removed before the mob was in sight, and now the wildfire raged.

It started slowly, the screaming in one portion of the mob rising higher and faster than the others, but it soon spread. There were dozens of those small jugs around, hidden in the nearest side streets towards the barricades all around each of the seven Gates. The wildfire spread so fast and so quickly that most of the mob couldn't even flee. The green fire was everywhere, consuming all in its path.

The Lannisters had once more brought fire to the city, decimating the first large-scale riot.

OOOOOOO

Tytos Blackwood frowned as he stood in one of the guard towers set to one side of Raventree Hall's main gate, watching as a little under half of the besieging army out there pulled out of their camp and began to march away. "What is going on now?"

"Those are Bracken colors there father." His eldest son Brynden muttered. "By the old gods, what could have happened to convince that traitor Jonos to pull his force back from attacking us?"

"Well it's not like the siege was going anywhere." Lucas, Tytos' next oldest son scoffed. "They've only made a few small attempts to storm our walls, simply digging in and trying to batter our main gate down with no success at all."

That was true, Tytos reflected. The attackers had only attempted to try and take the walls by storm twice, taking severe losses in their attacking forces each time. The fact the defenders actually had too many men to man their defenses made any assault like that difficult in the extreme.

"Their siege towers would be a problem if not for our catapult." Brynden reminded his young brother. "After we smashed the first two they seem reluctant to use them further, but that's no reason to get complacent."

"Brynden is right," Tytos said, speaking up for the first time and ending his son's argument. "We can't afford to get complacent. They are starting to tunnel out there, which means we might need to create counter-tunnels soon." That made both his sons nod grimly. Fighting in a tunnel like that would be deadly for both sides, and if the attackers could keep the tunnel open, their numbers would begin to tell.

Really thanks to the size of the castle's walls and his house's preparations prior to the beginning of the siege, that was really the only way the attackers could end the siege in their favor. They certainly didn't have as much food out there as he did in here, thanks to the aid of the smallfolk who were now protected by his castle's walls.

After a moment Tytos spoke up to lighten the mood. "As to what could cause Bracken to pull back like this, only an assault on his land or castle could pull him away from our throats. Somehow I think the wolves have come, and the lions and their allies are feeling the pinch."

OOOOOOO

"How did she get so big?" Bess Bracken asked, rubbing one hand down the side of the massive direwolf that so fascinated her.

Arya smiled at her, but did not stop in her work of grooming Nymeria. Here in the Riverlands all of the direwolves shed somewhat, though not nearly as much as Arya had expected them to. *They know winter is coming just as much as we do*, she thought before shaking her head. "They're direwolves, not regular wolves this is the size they're supposed to be, I think."

"But she's as large as a warhorse!" exclaimed Bess incredulously. "What would they eat in the wild?"

"Anything they want to." Arya laughed. "Ghost prefers moose, and Fenris has a liking for bear. My Nymeria seems to prefer deer meat accompanied by mushrooms for some reason. She'll eat mushrooms raw, though thankfully she seems to know instinctively which types not to eat."

"Really?" Bess laughed, taking a brush that Arya past to her. "I like chicken myself." Arya laughed and the two of them continued to work on the large direwolf's fur while she lay there grumbling happily at the attention.

Arya had decided to take a page out of her older brother's book: that the children of families that had broken their oaths or fought against them were not to be blamed for the acts of their parents. As such she had made certain that all of the Bracken ladies were treated well and had actually befriended Bess. The younger girl was simply fascinated by Nymeria, and had apparently been bugging her mother for over a year now to get her a hunting dog of her own. Her father wouldn't hear of it, considering hunting to be something only men could do.



The young girl had confided in Arya that she had long chafed at being forced to take lessons about etiquette, sewing and other things that were just uninteresting to her, and had tried her hand at many other things. She'd even gotten the castle's master-of-arms to train her a time or two until her parents found out and put a stop to it. Because of this and her general attitude Arya saw Bess as a kindred spirit and was doing all she could to encourage the girl, as was Dacey.

The two of them continued to talk while taking care of Nymeria, but soon enough it was almost dark out, and Arya escorted Bess back to her rooms in the top floor of the keep. She nodded at the two guards, both Mormont men, who made up a large portion of the northern portion of their men here. The Mormonts all knew how to swim, not well, but enough to get them across a river, something that couldn't be said of House Umber, Hornwood, or Karstark men.

Once inside the noble apartments, she saw Lady Bracken waiting for them. The older woman frowned at her daughter but Bess stared back not giving an inch. "I will speak to you later my girl." Lady Bracken finally said pointing imperiously toward Bess's bedroom. "To bed with you."

Bess growled a little, but nodded and moved off. The moment her daughter was out of earshot the older woman whirled back to face Arya who was still standing there, a faint smirk on her face. "It's bad enough you people took our castle and imprisoned us, now you're filling my daughter's foolish head with these idiotic ideas of yours!"

"How are they idiotic? I would've thought that you'd understand with Dacey and I here that a woman could become a warrior if she tried hard enough, or anything else she wished. The Mormont women have always been warriors as far back as anyone can remember. And winter is coming, you should be happy that your daughter wants to toughen herself up."

"I've heard the words of House Stark before, they didn't impress me then and they don't impress me now." Lady Bracken retorted with a sneer. "Just because you northern barbarians sometimes have to let your women learn the ways of war doesn't mean here in civilized lands that it's something we encourage. I demand you stop encouraging her!"

"My mother thought that same way, until I helped stop an attack that might have taken Winterfell by surprise." Arya said with a shrug. "If one of your older daughters had been strong enough to be a warrior, they might have also been smart enough to see through our disguises before we were inside Stone Hedge. And besides, do you really think you're in a position to make demands of me?"

Lady Bracken scowled but subsided when Nymeria moved up behind Arya, nuzzling into the short girl's hair from behind. Lady Bracken looked away for a moment then back at the young Stark girl. "What will happen to us anyway? You said you wouldn't allow us to be mistreated, and I have to say that you haven't **yet**, but what will happen to us if your side wins?"

"**When** my brother wins." Arya said smirking with a hint of teeth which caused the other woman to back away slightly. "When my brother wins, your House will be punished heavily. The precedent's already been set with the Freys. You'll probably be stripped of your Noble status, this castle and everything else. You personally might be sent into exile and your children taken by other houses, or into the Silent Sisters."

Arya was actually wondering if she could get away with taking Bess as a servant. Since she wasn't a knight she couldn't take a squire, but a page, maybe? She liked the younger girl, and encouraging another girl to rebel against what society saw as her role was fun as all get out.

"What if my husband surrenders, would that grant us leniency?" The older woman asked, aghast.

"Maybe, that's not my call. I doubt you'd be allowed to keep Stone Hedge even then, it's too good a castle. Whatever else you won't be in any position to continue this whole Blackwood/Bracken feud. You lot backed the wrong side, that's all there is to it."

"You know my husband will come for us? He'll have no choice but to try to retake the castle. Will you use us as hostages against that?" Actually Lady Bracken was more worried about such a ploy being useless than being used in the first place. The Lannisters were not the sort to care about hostages outside their own family.

"Maybe." Arya replied, shrugging. "It depends on whether or not he's in charge out there. If he is, we might and even if he sieges us we've got enough supplies in here to last us for years, and I doubt that any army trying to besiege us would even have weeks until my brother arrives to destroy them."

"Understand me." Arya went on, stepping forward into the older woman's personal space and staring up at her, her

eyes hard. "I'm personally disgusted by the fact that your family sided with the Lannisters after they had imprisoned my uncle, wiped out House Vance of Wayfarer's Rest and a few other houses along their way here. If you had just declared neutrality, or simply acceded to their demands for food in return for them not pillaging your people I would've understood, but your husband didn't do that. Instead tried to settle your old gods-damned petty feud with House Blackwood! I doubt when my grandfather told his lords to act as their own conscience dictates that he had that in mind! Whatever happens to most of your family, I won't give a damn."

Lady Bracken backed away, her eyes wide and fearful for a moment and Arya growled a little at her before turning away abruptly. "But at least my brother and I won't paint your daughters with the same brush as their father and the rest of your house. We're not like the Lannisters, we're not going to wipe out your family, but we will make damn certain that your family is never in a position to ever threaten the peace of the realm again."

With that Arya walked off, leaving lady Bracken staring after her. Later that day Arya and Dacey met with Hathan and Roger. Hathan was still convalescing and would be for weeks yet. Despite their training with Ranma none of the Wolfsworn had the ability to use their ki to enhance their healing ability, not even Jon could do that, and Hathan had taken serious injuries in the battle holding the entrance to the barracks.

Sitting down, Arya took a moment to smirk at Roger, who scowled back at her. Bess wasn't the only Bracken girl attempting to get close with one of her captures. The oldest daughter, Barbara was constantly trying to flirt with Roger whenever she could when the girls were allowed out of their rooms for meals. Roger however knew precisely what his wildling wife would do to him if he cheated on her, and rebuffed her advances at every turn. This strangely enough simply made her more determined rather than make her decide to switch her attempts onto one of the others.

"Any word from Edd?" Roger asked, turning away from Arya purposefully.

Eddy was easily the best of the Wolfsworn in scouting around, not in hunting, just scouting. And he had been sent to watch the road past the point where they had ambushed the convoy during that ambush just in case, and hadn't rejoined them for the actual battle. That way, if things went wrong in the attack he and his men would've still been around to attack the Lannister supply lines. Luckily that hadn't been necessary.

"Not yet, though he should pull back some time tomorrow. I can't imagine it would take longer than five days for word of what happened here to get to the Lannister forces at the Kneeling Ford." Dacey responded before turning to Hathan. "Are you done your survey of the supplies?"

"Yes, and I have to tell you taking Stone Hedge was a magnificent idea Arya. Not only were they using the convoy system up to the Kneeling man's Ford, but they were using it from Wayfarer's Rest to her. Apparently there are still bandits out there that take any opportunity they can to attack their supply chain. In fact the convoy from here to Wayfarer's Rest has to be guarded by at least 400 men at a time and even then is sometimes attacked." Hathan replied.

"We've got enough supplies here for us to last us for more than decades with our numbers, which would be enough for a force the size of the Lannister main army for at least a few weeks. Without this place, and without Wayfarer's Rest..." Roger shrugged. "They'll have to live off the land, and an army that size simply can't do it. Ranma was right about that at least."

"I could wish we could let Edd and his men out there, they could continue to hit any hunting groups or whatever." Hathan mused. "But we'll probably need all the help we can get her."

Dacey nodded agreement, and the conversation turned to the defense of the castle. Each of them would be in command, initially at least, of a different guard shift, so that 200 men were on the walls at all times, though obviously in a pitched battle more could be called up. The rotation would keep their men fresh for the fight.

It was just as well they had rested their men when they could, because early the next day Edd and his men fell back to the keep. As the rest of his men trooped through the gates he yelled up at Dacey, who was standing on the wall. "They're about two hours behind us, you should start seeing them soon! I'd estimate that they sent at least 4 or 5000 men, nearly their entire force from the Kneeling Man's ford! And they've got both grapnels and some makeshift rope ladders. I'd bet anything they'll start to make a makeshift battering ram when they get here too."

Dacey nodded grimly then turned to one of her men. "Get the others up here, I want as many men on the wall as we can get."

A moment later Arya raced out of the keep, pulling on her suit of lizard-lion armor as she went. Growling angrily Nymeria followed her, but remained in the courtyard by one of the towers rather than follow Arya out onto the wall

itself. There just wasn't enough room out there for her to move around, and Nymeria wasn't as good as Fenris was at using ki to strengthen her body's durability. "They're coming?"

Dacey nodded, not taking her eyes from the northern vista. "That's what Edd says."

Soon enough the attacking army came into view. Dacey wasn't very good at estimating numbers but the size of the army did seem to point to there being 4 or 5000 men out there. More than enough to wipe out her force in the open field with minimal effort, considering there was only about six hundred of them. *Attacking us inside a castle however, that's a different bard's tale*, she thought grimly.

Rather than surround the castle, the attackers kept marching straight up to it, with grapnels and rope ladders at the ready. Archers began to fire immediately as the attackers entered their range, causing the attackers vanguard to fall back and their own archers to come up. Soon an archer duel began at the front of the castle, slowly spreading out as the attackers did. At least a hundred men died in those first few moments, none of whom were among the men on the wall. The attackers didn't have any way to defend their men from high-angle fire while Stone Hedge was a large and well-built castle.

Even so a battering ram was brought forward, one of its ends still showing several dozen small branches covered with leaves. Dozens of men with large shields tried desperately to defend the men carrying it while they raced forward.

"Archers concentrate fire on the battering ram!" Dacey ordered. All around her the men along the wall and in the gatehouse turned their attention from the enemy's archers to firing on the men with the battering ram. Even with the numbers of men around them with shields, the attackers couldn't stand such a weight of fire. Soon enough the battering ram faltered under that fire, many of the men that had carried it going down. The attackers fell back in disarray, unwilling to face that level of fire, and the archers went back to sniping with their opposite numbers.

Elsewhere, men had raced forward with grapnels throwing them up here and there along the wall. The defenders cut these ropes quickly as they could, but they made themselves targets to the opposing archers and two men died doing so. Despite this however, all the ropes were cut quickly, and the attackers were forced to fall back. At the sound of a bugle the army retreated out of the range licking its wounds.

Arya frowned, absentmindedly checking Fang's edge after using it to cut one of the grapnels. "They must not have realized how many of us there were if they thought that would've worked."

"True, but the next time they'll come after us stronger and better prepared." Roger replied from the next to her.

"Who cares?" Arya said scoffing. "They can't take us by siege, they can only take us by assault and we've got more than enough men to make them pay ten to one every time they try. I don't think they'll be able to stomach that kind of exchange."

"That's rather cold of you, but true enough." Edd chuckled grimly, testing his spear's leaf-shaped head with a finger.

Two days later, the besieging army was reinforced further by the arrival of a force nearly as large as the first that had arrived, flying house Bracken colors. While the rest of his army set up camp all around him, the Lord of the castle came forward under flag of truce.

Edd, Roger, Dacey and Arya were all standing on the wall by the gate, watching as the traitor rode up. Edd looked at the others, nudging Arya's bow which was propped up next to the younger girl. "Hmmm?" He asked hopefully.

"I wish," Arya muttered. "I've got no patience for traitors. But he's flying a flag of truce. The old gods would not look on us favorably for breaking such."

Dacey and Roger both rolled their eyes at their friends' bloodthirstiness, waiting silently for Jonos to speak. Soon enough he did so, bellowing out, "I am Lord Jonos Bracken, lord of Stone Hedge. I demand to know if my family is still safe, and what I might do to secure their release."

As the leader of this assault, Dacey took it upon herself to answer. "I am Dacey Mormont of Bear Island. Your family is safe, and will remain such. We have no need or desire to use them as hostages at this time." In an aside she muttered, "Since I doubt you'd be allowed to honor any deal based off that."

The others all nodded, with Roger going so far as to reply. "Aye, the Westerlanders have never been shy about sacrificing hostages, especially those not their own. And the first force that arrived outnumbers Bracken's."

Dacey waved him to silence, speaking up to continue her reply. "As to terms to secure their release, that is impossible. You stand accused of treachery against your Lord Paramount and the Riverlands as a whole, aiding the invaders of this country for your own personal gain. Thus the only terms we are allowed to take from you and your family is unconditional surrender."

"Then I will take back my castle and family by force." Jonos bellowed belligerently, not responding to the insults, then wheeled his horse away.

He firmly believed he was on the right side even now, the evidence of Joffrey's bastardy was too thin in his opinion, and Edmure was well known as a hothead, so could have easily been led into some sort of treachery. And more practically, the Tully's power had been waning badly, else how could the Freys have gone so long with their power grabs unchallenged by their Lord Paramount? No, he had seen a chance and took it, there was nothing wrong with that.

"Love your idea of diplomacy Dacey," Edd remarked, smirking at the older woman. "Though I don't remember Ranma ever actually telling us we couldn't offer our own terms to the traitorous Riverlands houses."

"He didn't but I think I offered the terms he and Daenerys would have offered if they were here. Besides I was diplomatic. I didn't call him a son of a bitch, a gold-bugging harlot, or a Lannister whipping boy with rocks for brains." Dacey replied primly, causing the others to laugh, even as the besieging army began to prepare an attack.

OOOOOO

Stannis pulled himself up over the wall, while behind and in front of him his personal guard had gone, clearing the areas of the wall to allow him access. He pushed one man aside and roared out, "Ours is the fury!" while he brought the Lightbringer around. The sight of the flaming sword frightened his enemies, but a few of them were still brave enough to try and charge towards him along the wall. One died from an arrow to the side of the head from the ground outside the castle of House Stokeworth. Another was engaged briefly with one of his Flame Guard, but the third reached Stannis. The greatsword in Stannis' hands slashed into the short sword of the other man slamming it out of his hand and slicing him open from one side of his stomach to the other.

A kick to the dead body and Stannis was away, leading the assault towards where a corner tower would allow access to the courtyard below and the keep beyond. Behind him, more men came up the ropes, and there was a deep rumble as a siege tower slammed into the side of the wall of the castle. There was another roar as more men came across its wooden bridge, and Stannis smiled grimly.

He had given Ser Balman Birch, who had married into the Stokeworth family and who was the de-facto leader of house given the men they had sent to King's Landing, a chance to surrender, and two days to consider it. After that time passed his army had begun its attack. The castle had held out for four days, but that was only because Stannis wanted the castle to remain standing unlike Rosby, whose outer walls he had ordered pulled down. But Stokeworth was in the center of very decent, well carried for farm land, and he had ordered his men to tread lightly here, something he enforced in as draconian a manner as possible. While Stokeworth would never be able to feed even a tenth part of the capital's population, it would be able to feed his army and its own smallfolk easily enough for a few months.

A moment later he didn't have time to think about such things. There was a group of fifteen men inside the tower, and Stannis was all alone for a moment. Even the fear of his flaming sword wasn't enough to overcome the courage given by numbers and the men charged him. He ducked under one sword blade, while blocking a blow from a flail, before Stannis quickly brought his greatsword slamming into and through one man's arm into his chest piercing both before he pulled it out quickly to block an overhand blow from a mace.

"Clear the door my King!" shouted a voice behind him, and Stannis grunted, pushing hard against the haft of the mace then ducking aside from another blow from the mace before kicking out catching that man in the balls. Stannis grabbed the mace wielder by the head, pulling him up and using his body as a shield towards his friends as he pushed forward allowing another swordsman in behind him. The man in his grip gasped as one of his former comrades tried to shove his longsword through his body to get to Stannis, but it didn't work.

Stannis was able to move to one side of the doorway, still using the other man as a shield for a moment his own blade having fallen to the floor of the guard room as he simply protected himself while more of his men piled into the tower around him. Soon the last defender went down, and he tossed the body of his former shield aside before grabbing up the Lightbringer again. "Forward!"

A moment later Stannis was standing in the courtyard staring up at the keep. It's doors were closed, but that would

not last long. Already the main gate was being opened, his men were pouring in. He nodded to Lord Buckler, who had proven himself one of the better men Stannis had in close combat. He didn't know enough about strategy or tactics to make a decent wartime Hand, but as a leader in this kind of battle, he would do well. The two men nodded at one another, then Stannis bellowed. "Bring up the battering ram!"

Two hours later the battle was over, and the prisoners, what there were of them were being dragged out. The men anyway, the women were facing something far worse. Realizing this when he didn't see any maids among the prisoners being brought out of the keep Ser Seaworth scowled. *I'll hold my hand up to being a pirate, a scoundrel, even a murderer, but there are some things I won't allow if I can help it.* With that thought foremost in his mind, Davos grabbed a few of his House's men and entered the keep determinedly.

He found the women, the maids and other servants of the castle here and there in the keep where they had tried to hide unsuccessfully. Now the soldiers were doing what victorious armies due to the women of their enemies. Davos and his men put a stop to such as the moved through the keep, but they began to run into opposition when they ascended to the second floor.

There in the keep's kitchen they found a man who had just grabbed a young servant girl, who couldn't be more than 15 and threw her to the ground. His fellows all around were already undoing their breaches as the girl screamed beneath the first man.

"Get off her." Davos said, growling the words. When the man didn't obey fast enough, Seaworth bleakly thrust his sword into the man's back and through his stomach. The girl almost screamed again as she was suddenly awash with blood, but her screaming stopped as Davos pulled her would-be rapists body off her and tossed it to the side. Behind Seaworth his men spread out, daring the other men in the room to do anything.

From another room on the far side of the kitchen, which might've been the storeroom or some such, several dozen other soldiers poured out. All of them had their blades out, and their eyes were ugly as they moved toward Davos and his men.

Behind them Davos could see five other maids, two of whom had already been stripped of their clothing while the others looked as if they had been beaten. He glared at the men, and was about to order them to put up their blades in Stannis' name when the would-be rapists stopped suddenly, suddenly looking very worried.

"Is there a problem here?" said a voice from behind Davos and he turned, his eyes widening slightly. In the doorway stood twenty of the Flame Guard their hands on their swords, their shoulders marked with the burning flame that denoted their station.

The soldiers who might've fought Seaworth and his men backed off fearfully. Not only were they now outnumbered, but it was commonly thought among the regular soldiery that the men of the Flame Guard were not right in the head. Fighting them was a losing proposition.

After a moment the leader of this group said simply, "Lord Stannis and the lady have ordered that the womenfolk not be molested. This **will** happen."

Davos moved to the doorway and looked on in astonishment as the Flame Guard entered the keep purposefully. All of them, and their numbers were now up to 400. But behind them came an even worse force. Melisandre herself strode into the keep glaring around. *And if that doesn't do it nothing will* he thought, being careful not to meet Melisandre's eyes, better safe than sorry after all. *Strange, I wouldn't have thought Melisandre the sort of woman to care what happens to other women, but I suppose I could be wrong, about that at least.*

Unknown to Seaworth, Melisandre had plans for those women. Plans which would in time be just as horrifying to the women as what would have happened to them otherwise.

That night Stannis and the rest of his lords and most favored lieutenants slept in the keep. The upper halls hadn't seen much in the way of fighting and were very livable. It was nice to have a bed rather than a cot after so long in the field.

At her Lord's behest Melisandre tried one more time to scry current events without a sacrifice. She was at it for several hours, refusing to come away with nothing, until finally she got a vision. *The steel jaws of the wolf, ripping out a lion's guts. The blood from the wound sprayed everywhere, tiny drops of blood each becoming, as the vision changed, a richly armored knight. The next image was of a giant skull rising from a city which she recognized at King's Landing. Then suddenly the skull multiplied, spreading everywhere. Then that too changed, the skulls freezing as a giant hand of snow and ice suddenly appeared, and winter blanketed the land.*

She gasped, breaking out of the vision and stumbling away from the fire shaking her head for a moment. *The Great Other, his hand is growing stronger his arm longer as winter nears!* The rest she didn't understand, but that last piece was easy enough. She hastily grabbed up a robe draping it over her body, her skin glistening with sweat and her breasts heaving for a moment as she composed herself, her hands and legs trembling for a moment. When she was certain she had control of herself Melisandre raced out of her room to find Stannis.

At that moment Stannis was the only one of his lords awake, standing in the castle's study pouring over his map. He wasn't actually thinking about the physical map so much. No, he was wondering about the Reach, and their army, as well as what Melisandre and his own spies had reported about the dangers pressing the Reach from every direction. How loyal were they? How loyal were the Stormlands lords with Renly, surely they had learned by this point that Renly was no Robert reborn? What would the combined army's morale and disposition be? All those things would matter when they clashed, as they inevitably would.

He looked up as Melisandre entered, out of breath even from the short distance from her room to his at the end of the hall. The vision had really taken it out of her. Stannis frowned, watching her legs and hands shaking with exhaustion. "What have you seen?" He asked, pushing a chair towards her before he turned to the series of bottles two one side of the room.

Melisandre sat down quickly, and he passed her a cup of good brandy quickly. She gulped down the entire glass then put it down and began to explain the series of images she had seen.

After a moment Stannis sat as well, his face almost ashen. "The first vision is simple enough to understand, the war between the wolves and the lions continues, and the young Stark has apparently won a major victory. But the rest..." He shook his head, his face carved from granite. "Plague, a worst enemy than any army."

"It is not just that!" Melisandre said sharply. "Those bodies, unless they are burned to ash, when winter comes... When the power of the Great Other comes they will come alive! With an army of that size, nothing will stand against it."

Stannis thought that was an exaggeration. Even if he believed in this Great Other, the Wall had withstood the White Walkers several times in ages past, and they had not been able to move around it before. Still, he wasn't about to say that aloud, understanding that that was one of Melisandre's main objectives in helping him gain the throne.

Worse, the problem of the plague was real enough. It was a wonder really that King's Landing hadn't had one before this. Moreover, that danger was something he could grasp. It also forced his hand in a way. *I had hoped to let my army gain more training time, then send out overtures to various Stormlands and Reach lords that might be willing to turn their coats after seeing how incompetent my brother is in the field. But not now, I cannot trust Renly to be as ruthless as he needs to be to deal with a plague. I'll still send out various messages, especially to the Florents and others of the Reach, but they won't have nearly as long as I hoped to decide to switch sides...*

After several moment's reflection Stannis spoke aloud again. "Tell me Melisandre, how would you make a city burn?"

OOOOOO

Hearing the call from the lookout indicating he had seen land in the southwest Asha smiled widely, looking forward to the end of this particular journey.

The trip down from the north had been very nervous. Just because the captains decided to follow her initially didn't mean all of them were happy about it later, and it'd taken several more instances of smooth talking to make them keep following her. Even so she had lost two ships when they got to the Cape of Eagles. They had split off to join their fellows attacking that beleaguered land.

*Stupid of them* she thought now, not for the first time. *What prizes do they think to find in that area of fishermen, and farmers, there's nothing of import there! Nothing worth the Iron Price. Still, if I can get Rodrik on my side, this lot can go hang for all I care.*

A few hours later she was marching her way up towards Ten Towers, the seat of one of the greatest houses of the Ironborn. She was immediately admitted into Ten Towers, the seat of House Harlaw, since the guards knew her well, she had been here many times before in her youth. The castle was named that because the lord who had commissioned its construction had been a man of mercurial moods, and every single tower that was scattered across the castle looked different.

Asha paused for just a moment before she entered the largest tower, a massive spire that served as the castle's

keep, looking around at the other towers. She remembered playing tag and running around here in her youth, up and down steps and all around the towers. Asha often felt more at home here in Ten Towers than back in the castle of Pyke, though that wasn't saying much.

A few minutes later Asha was ushered into the Reader's, as he was known, study. He was of course reading when she was shown inside. This time however he wasn't reading one of the books which lined every inch of the large studies interior, instead he was reading a note of some kind. He looked up as Asha entered, setting aside the note with a small smile. "My watchers said that you returned with ten ships, well done! I thought that you'd only return with three or four at most."

"You knew I'd run into trouble." Asha said, making the question a statement as she looked at the older man.

Rodrik Harlaw was an older man of her father's generation, but that was about all he had in common with Balon Greyjoy. Where Balon simply looked as if he had a certain low cunning, as well as a lot of anger and arrogance, Rodrik looked like a scholar, which matched his voice. He could also make the usually harsh, dark tones of the language of the Iron Islands seem almost flowing. He was somewhat shorter than Balon, his hair was almost completely solid gray, and his beard was neatly trimmed.

For all that he looked like a scholar though Rodrik had and indeed was still a capable captain. His ship, the *Sea Song*, was well maintained and Asha had served on it under his command when she was younger. His hands, despite the fact that they were stained with ink, were large and strong, and there was a mace hanging from the back of his chair.

"Oh yes, it was obvious. I don't think your father set out to let you fail, but he certainly sent enough older captains, men who knew their own minds, along so he could be certain there would be some kind of assault on the North. Foolish, but if you'll forgive me Balon was never one for deep thinking. "

Rodrik took off the Myrish glass he needed to use to read with, setting it down with care then suddenly leaned forward. The affable old scholar disappeared, replaced by the intelligent and penetrating eyes of an Ironborn warrior who had lead his ship and family to becoming the most powerful House in the Islands despite Balon's Rebellion and everything else life through at them.

"This whole operation, the 'Rise of the Kraken', was an idiotic endeavor from the very beginning." he said bluntly. "If Balon was so determined to attack Westeros we should have attacked Seagard alone with our full forces. Then we might have taken the day, and we could have seen a time to come when the Ironborn might rule a portion of the Riverlands once again if we allied with one of the other powers, the Lannisters for preference. As it is we've not only woken the wolf and the fish but the lion as well, and I've no doubt pricked ourselves on the roses of the Reach."

At her raised eyebrow Rodrik shrugged. "I haven't heard anything from any of the other attacks, what does that tell you?"

Asha groaned slightly. A victory was shouted and lauded about, a loss... if you were the Ironborn there was nobody alive to tell about it. "How long would it take some survivors from Lannisport to get here? I've never been on that route before, I've always gone far out to sea to make certain I didn't see any of their naval galleys."

"If there were survivors of that attack, they'll be in sight of Harlaw within a few days, if they came directly here at any rate. I'd think that they'd be Blacktyde ships. Like myself Baelor was not happy about being forced to join the war. I think he'd take any chance he could to get away."

Rodrik stared at her, and Asha thought quickly. "How many ships can you give me?"

"I could pledge you another two dozen longships, eventually. It would take time to get most of them here of course, I had to hide them so that your father wouldn't find them. Up rivers, here in there all along my island. Why?" Rodrick's tone however showed he already had a shrewd idea.

"I need a victory, a big one, one with lots of reward for our iron price, with that I'll be able to command enough respect from the other captains, and we might be able to do something."

"Like what?" Rodrik pressed, shaking his head. "If Rise of the Kraken was the disaster we both think it is, what can we do? This is a trick question my dear. It only has one answer."

"You mean defend the islands? From who? With everything happening on the mainland, who is going to have enough attention to spare for us?" Asha asked skeptically.

"Everyone we attacked." Rodrik said bluntly. "We ourselves might not be important in the grand scheme of things, but

little pinpricks can add up, and as my analogy should have told you, I'm afraid that our attacks succeeded just enough to rouse our enemies, but not enough to destroy their ability to strike back. Never do an enemy a small injury my dear, remember that. However, we need more information about the other attacks and we need you to get your victory before we could decide what to do next. By the way, what captains came with you?"

Asha described them, and watched as Rodrik's eyebrows went up. "Really, the Kennings split? Interesting. I think you might wish to take the time to speak to Lord Kenning about that, it strikes me as odd. For now however, I can promise you several ships in the next several days. Until they arrive, my House is yours. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some correspondence to finish before dinner."

"Heh, I'll let you to your reading old man." Asha laughed, turning away with much of her humor restored. Over the next few days as Rodrik began to gather his ships, Asha did partake in Ten Tower's hospitality. On the third day she decided to take Rodrik's advice however, and journeyed to Castle Kenning, House Kenning's seat.

It was inland, but a river led up to it from the ocean, allowing her to use *Black Wind* to get there rather than journey overland on horse, something Asha was thankful for not being a very good rider. In fact she'd rather eat a horse than ride on one.

Letting Qarl in command of the ship Asha jumped out onto the small wharf which allowed access to the small keep of House Kenning. The door was opened for her, and the castellan of the keep, an older man with a fearsome set of facial scars, only one eye and a peg leg, showed her into his lord's sitting room bidding her wait there for him.

The room was much more spartanly furnished than the Reader's, and not just because of the absence of books or book shelves. There were several soft, comfortable chairs, a single desk at one end of the room, a lit fireplace on one wall, and several sconces for lit torches. But what caught Asha's attention was the tapestry hung on the wall directly across from the fireplace. It showed the banner of the house, a hand coming out of some storm clouds, one finger pointed downward sending lightning bolts everywhere.

Asha had seen the banner before, not only in the past month but before that, and yet its significance had never actually penetrated. The sign was that of the Storm god, the evil god in the Old Way, the enemy of the Drowned God, and the enemy of all those who followed the Old Way. *Why didn't I notice that before? Why in the Drowned God's name would anyone put that symbol on their houses' banners?*

"Our symbol shocks you don't it?" Said an older male voice from the doorway to the sitting room.

Quickly Asha turned, almost unconsciously letting one hand fall to her cutlass's hilt almost drawing it before she stopped herself. The man in front of her was old, older than Rodrik's generation, older even than The Sparr, and almost as heavily scarred as his castellan. He was missing one arm, and his remaining hand was missing a finger, his face also bore several scars, and though he had both eyes still they were rheumy with age.

The man cackled for a second. "Hah, a pretty thing ain't it? Hah, the Old Way's all about da glory of payin' the Iron Price, of fightin' and plundering, but the damned Drowned Men don't e'er tell who really pays the Iron Price do they? Ironborn don't grow old, we just turn ta flotsam. I be Lord Kenning girl, and ye be Asha Greyjoy, daughter of the Fool King and niece of Aeron Wethair, the madman who eggs 'im on in his foolery."

"I didn't come here to listen to you attack the Drowned Men." Asha retorted, quickly getting her balance back. "I came to ask you why two of your ships decided to follow me rather than Ralf Kenning. He was an experienced and well-known captain of the Iron Fleet, and your House usually moves in step, just like the Harlaws."

Lord Kenning cackled again, moving to stand so his back was to the tapestry, forcing Asha to look at it if she wanted to keep talking to him. "Ralf be a good youngster suppose, but not fer deep thinkin' nor were he high in the family, despite bein' a Iron Fleet captain. Or because of it, if truth ye want. Ralf not be knowing what's the rest of us know, he don't believe in anythin' he can't be seein' with his own two eyes."

Asha kept one hand on her cutlass, something about this whole situation was putting her on edge, but she couldn't put her finger on it. "What doesn't he know?"

"That magic becomin' back into the world." Lord Kenning replied bluntly, leaning against the wall right under his House's banner. "The Drowned Men, they beclaimin' it be the Drowned God's will, favorin' your father's action. The Drowned God not be the only one showing his power. The tales say the Stark pup be the Old Gods' champion, there be dragons again, whispers of shadows movin'." His tone was disparaging as he spoke of the Drowned Men, almost contemptuous.



Asha frowned, not at the man's tone, like most Ironborn she didn't care one way or another about the Drowned Men. Most Ironborn only gave lip service to the Drowned God and its priests, but didn't truly believe in anything but the Iron Price. That was especially true since the last rebellion ended so badly. What made Asha frown was that Kenning was speaking of all this as if it was fact. "How do you know all this?"

"Longships go as far as Essos girl. That means word be getting back to us 'bout lots of things, slow but certain. Me son were in Qarth a month back, he hear of and even see some of their mages in action. Driving men mad wit' a glance, castin' illusions ta turn friend 'gainst friend, turning water into poison in the cup between one sip and the next. Before this, the Warlocks belosin' more power and influence every year, but now..." Lord Kenning shuddered, actually looking troubled for a moment. "Now they be on the rise, and the whole city be fearin' their power."

"What does this have to do with two of your longships following me instead of Ralf Kenning?" Asha asked, getting back to the main topic. The concept of magic returning was interesting, but she wasn't a magic user, and she wasn't about to go and ask for aid from the Drowned Men.

"History be written by the winners, as friends of the Reader ye know this." Kenning responded. Asha was struck by the fact he used Rodrik's nickname without any of the contempt habitually shown it, but the old man went on quickly. "That was true eons ago as it is now. Now, with magic on the rise and yer father's blunder, it might be we have the chance to reverse things, but only if we can husband our strength, pay the Iron Price fer as high a trade as we can."

Asha frowned at the words not understanding them, but then she stared, her face frozen in shock as she understood, glancing between the man and the banner hung above him. The banner that showed the hand of the Storm God. She backed away her eyes wide as she gripped her cutlass' hilt. "You, you don't, that, you... you worship the Storm God!?"

In the religion called the Old Way, the Drowned God was the center of belief, the creator of the Ironborn who made them to reave and rape their way across the ocean, who had created the idea of the Iron Price, of taking what you wanted through iron and blood rather than paying the gold. It was the Drowned God who, when a man drowned at sea or died during battle on the sea, welcomed him into his halls beneath the ocean.

On Ranma's old world three of the world's most prominent religions made space in their theology for a source of evil like the Anti-Christ, Shaitan or Satan depending on who was doing the speaking. The Storm God was that figure to the followers of the Drowned God. The creator of storms, the bringer of lightning and the fury that sent ships to the bottom outside of battle and honorable death, he who snuffed out the living fire that warmed the Grey King, the first king of the Ironborn.

It was only the fact that Asha wasn't a firm believer in the Drowned God in the first place that was keeping her from going for Kenning's throat right now.

Yet instead of taking umbrage at Asha's words Lord Kenning laughed. "Kakakaka, that's right girl, but think of what I said the winner rights the history! The followers of the Drowned God won, and they wrote the history, o'course they'd make their enemy as black as they could! Use that brain of yours!"

Asha frowned, her cutlass half off as she realized what the man was saying, before slamming it back into its sheathe. "That, that still doesn't... do you have any proof of that?"

"Hah, none you'd believe, not if yer as bright as the Reader has always said. And truth be told, yer like Ralf in that, ye don't really believe in magic, despite me words about that do ye?"

Lord Kenning watched as Asha, rather reluctantly shook her head then laughed again. "Kakakaka! The truth might come to ye eventually, if ye be worth it. The Storm God be as much a god of battle as the Drowned God, but he be givin' favor where it due rather than just revelin' in death and giving naught but what the believers already have within 'em."

Kenning had not heard of the powers the Drowned Men had used to aid Balon in taking the Arbor, but even if he had Kenning wouldn't have cared. After all those powers came from death, the death by drowning for the penitents, or the vitality of the Drowned Men, and as such would have proven his point: that the Drowned God did not care about his believers only that it was fed by death. Of course in this it was not alone amongst the spiritual powers in the world.

It took a moment, but Asha was able to control herself. "You're right, any proof of that you could show me I wouldn't believe, and really it doesn't matter to me what the fuck you believe, so long as it doesn't cause division among the fleet, and your ships follow my orders. You say you're conserving your strength, what does that mean to me?"

"Bah, we've been keepin' the secret for millennia, hidin' in plain sight and only sharin' the truth with few even of our own family, and none who marry into it neither. Kakakaka, most believe our banner be's a challenge, and that fittin' the As to what it means, our ships be followin' you so long as ye don't lead them into unwinnable battles. And specially if yer be fightin' to defend the isles. We be sending three more ships with ye when ye leave Harlaw."

"Fine." Asha barked, now wanting nothing more than to get away from this man and his insanity. She might not really believe in the Drowned God, but that didn't mean she was immune to being in the presence of a self-possessed Storm God worshiper. "Since defending the isles is one of my aims, that's fine. I'll see your ships when they arrive in the port."

With that she turned, hastening away. It occurred to her as she did that she could share the secret she's just been told with the rest of the Ironborn. *Discovering a Storm God worshiper would probably win me a lot of points with the Drowned Men, and the Ironborn don't really need even that little a reason to turn on one another.* After a moment though Asha rejected the idea. Not only would that weaken her fleet, but she had no respect for the Drowned Men in any event, since as a group they had backed her father's idiotic rebellion. *No, best to ignore this frankly, it just doesn't matter now.* By the time *Black Wind* had reached the ocean she almost believed that too.

Back in his castle, Lord Kenning sighed faintly, standing on the castle's parapet as a storm moved in, feeling the wind picking up. "A storm be comin', all ye can do is ride it as best ye can, Asha Greyjoy, if ye be worthy."

OOOOOO

Ranma had recalled the heavy and light cavalry, wary of Tywin trying to set up a trap for them in the hours after the initial battle, not liking the fact he'd been able to keep his reserve intact and under control. The old lion was a cagey animal, and Ranma did not want to allow him any kind of victory to rally his men with.

As it was, the battle had been almost entirely one-sided. Going by initial reports Ranma and his men had thus far suffered a little under a thousand men dead, with only two dozen or so from the pike regiments. Those losses were mostly in the light cavalry under Lord Shawney that had shorn up the left side of the battle, and among his irregular infantry before they had fallen back through the pikes. The archers had taken some casualties against their fellows but not nearly as many as they had caused thanks to their longer-range and better armor.

Indeed, the incredibly low death toll among the northerners was at least partly because of the far better armor that House Stark had provided all of the northern infantry with. Even most of the archers had what Ranma's old world called brigandine armor. The trained armsmen who made up the irregular infantry had good chain mail and excellent helmets, while the pikes had chest plates over chain mail and equally good helmets. It made them even slower than they were made by their weapons, but it had served them well in battle. In comparison, the levy forces of the Westerlands were lucky to have leather armor or cheap scale mail. The armsmen's armor varied **widely** in quality, with House Lannister's men-at-arms armor matching that of the North, but many of them did not have helmets.

Worse, very few Houses emphasized the need to work together in battle when training their armsmen. Every Northman in the army had been drilled to work with his fellows, to guard one another's backs and to form a very damn good shield wall. Not up to the level of group training the pikes wielded, but still well above the training of their fellows. Tywin should have realized that given the battle of Two Truths, but Ranma was happy to have given him another lesson in training overcoming numbers.

Another 400 or so had been reported so far as injured though that number would likely go up in the next few hours. Merry had already fallen back to the army's camp and was dealing with the worst of it.

Despite the massively one-sided victory Ranma stared bleakly out over the battlefield, seeing the windrows of dead bodies out there as the crows and other battlefield vultures flew out of the sky. *Who was it in my old world who said that it was a good thing war was so terrible lest humanity become too fond of it? I think I understand that phrase better with every day this war lasts. Those crows out there are the only real winners here.*

With a sigh he turned to House Wayn's field commander, a middle-aged knight named Ser Dormer. He had been rather sheepish and seemingly ashamed at the fact that his men had been forced to remain back at the base camp but he had come forward quickly as soon as the battle was won. "I want survivors," he said staring at the other man. "Anyone out there who has survived is to be taken into custody, any injured whose injury isn't life-threatening is to be transported to princess Myrcella's hospital. Otherwise, give them mercy."

"Mercy?" The older knight asked, looking confused.

"Yes mercy. If a man is dying from a gut wound, or has had his spine severed or lungs punctured, then yes, it is a

mercy to kill them quickly." Ranma said bleakly.

As Dormer turned and raced off to his horse, Greatjon had pulled his own horse up beside Ranma in time to hear that and laughed harshly. "Don't know why you care so much about the soldiers of the enemy. Better to kill them all and have done with it."

"And after that none would ever surrender to us, or would ever give quarter to us in turn." Ranma said turning to him with a faint frown on his face. "You're not thinking Greatjon. Those men out there were simply following orders, or were simply forced into joining up. The armymen swore to follow their Lords, can we fault them for that? No, I want justice, not vengeance. We'll give them a chance, which is more than they gave the smallfolk of the Riverlands, before making them stand trial. They will serve Westeros more in paying for their crimes than dying today."

Back in Fairmarket, Daenerys had ordered the injured that were staying there after that battle to speak to the refugees who had flooded the town to learn all they could about the atrocities committed on the other side of the Red Fork. Ranma hadn't seen anything from them before they left, but he was gravely certain that when Daryn linked up with them again they would have enough reports to start figuring out which Lords and their men were most involved in the depredations on the smallfolk.

He explained that to Greatjon and then stared hard at the older man. "Do not mistake my penchant for mercy for weakness, Greatjon. Tywin and his family will pay dearly for their men's actions here in the Riverlands, for their treason to the throne and for starting this damn war."

Greatjon stared into the younger man's eyes than laughed, thumping Ranma on the shoulder hard enough to send most men to their knees. Ranma merely took it, as solid as a boulder. "You Starks, no give in any of you! Hah! I understand your point lad, it's just not the way anyone else has ever made war."

"Hah, then that already puts me one up on all of our enemies." Ranma laughed then went on seriously. "Could I ask you for a favor my friend? I'd like you to pick out one of your best men and assign him to following Myrcella around. I know I can't stop her from working on the enemy injured taken to her hospital, but I want to make certain she's safe. I've already assigned one of my family's men to it, but another guard wouldn't go amiss."

Greatjon nodded understanding this was a sign of the Young Wolf's trust in him. It had been obvious for months that both Daenerys and Ranma treasured Myrcella, regardless of her family or status. He turned to bellow orders to one of his commanders, who raced off in search of a man Greatjon had thought of immediately. By this time all the other lords and their troops commanders had arrived, and Ranma motioned to where Cley was waiting along with a few other pages with several jugs of wine and mugs.

When they had all been served Ranma raised his glass in congratulations. "Well done." He said simply, nodding at them each in turn though he did not nod at those lords that had not taken part in the battle, letting that simple difference serve as a warning to them in the future that trying to waffle in their loyalty would be noted and would not be tolerated. These lords were Lord Roote and Lord Ryger, who had kept all of their men back from the battle even after the outcome was no longer in doubt, just like Lord Wayn had ordered his men to do.

Both men looked suitably chastened, though Ryger also looked proud when Ranma did nod at his sons. Both younger men had fought with the irregular infantry alongside Smalljon, and according to him did fairly well.

"You all fought and led your men well today, however one of you has done that time and time again over the last few weeks. Patrek Mallister, come forward." Ranma went on, smiling faintly as he drew Ice from its sheathe, which Patrek had returned to him when Ranma had fallen back from the pike regiments.

Patrek did so, his arm in a sling. He winced occasionally, but looked game despite his wounds. "Your Grace?"

With a faint smile on her face Daenerys moved from where she had been controlling her dragons to stand with her husband, laying her hands on the hilt of Ice over his as she spoke. The two of them had talked about this in the days preceding the battle, and she wholeheartedly agreed with this. "Patrek Mallister, you have proven yourself an able warrior, a intelligent commander, a man of good heart and courage."

Ranma took over then, his eyes flashing with humor, even though his voice was still formal. "I ask you now in my name and the name of my wife Daenerys Targaryen, will you become the first of our River Blades?"

"Your majesties, I would be honored." Patrek said, going down on one knee, bowing his head.

Nearby Jason blinked and was about to object but Ranma turned to him, smirking slightly. "Don't worry Jason, he's

still your heir, nothing in the oath's Patrek's going to take will offset that and when you call him home to take up his Lordship, or to marry, that's still up to you too. This is just a way for me to keep him close, and to train him as well."

In front of Ranma Patrek smiled staring at the ground of the tent. He'd seen what the Wolfsworn could do in battle and had learned that all of them had been trained by Ranma before this campaign. No, there was no downside to becoming the first of the River blades.

His father nodded, consoled and actually feeling proud now. To have his son be the first of the River Blades, the Riverlands equivalent of the Wolfsworn was a massive honor. The fact that it was also a shrewd political move was not lost on him either. It further tied his family to the new royal house like the creation of the Wolfsworn had, however indirectly, tied nearly the entirety of the North together.

Daenerys began the oaths this time, beginning them after she and Ranma laid the flat of Ice on the young Mallister shoulder. "Do you, Patrek Mallister, swear to uphold the law and customs of the land? To always be true to the crown, so long as it remains true to defending the people it is charged to protect?"

"I do." The young man replied, raising his head to stare into her violet eyes for a moment before looking over at Ranma.

"Will you defend the innocent and the weak against those who would oppress them? Will you both offer and keep our council, fight by our side in these troubled times and beyond, in the pursuit of fairness and the rule of law?" Ranma asked.

"I will." Patrek replied for the second time, his grey eyes now locked on Ranma's ocean blue ones.

"Will you show mercy to those who deserve it, generosity to those who need it, and bring justice down upon those who break the Crown's peace?" Daenerys asked.

"I will."

"Will you defend the realm against the forces of darkness and other dangers, both foreign and domestic?" Ranma said, once again taking up the string of oaths.

Patrek smiled grimly, shifting his wounded arm slightly then answered with the same words Ser Barristan had used to reply to that question. "I so swear to do."

"Then rise Patrek Mallister, River Blade!" Ranma and Daenerys intoned together, removing Ice from Patrek's uninjured shoulder.

With that everyone who understood the importance of this, congratulated Patrek who pushed himself to his feet and moved to one side of the tent taking up a small glass of wine from Cley. Daenerys and Ranma both noticed that Ryger however looked angry, while Shawney and Blanetree both looked wistful. *We'll have to think of something for the older lords who don't have sons we can add to the River Blades in the future*, Daenerys thought filing that away for now.

After a moment however Ranma turned back to more important matters. "The first stage of this campaign is over. Tywin's army is bleeding and lamed, and I doubt he even knows it yet."

"We should get after them now." Greatjon growled getting down to business. He understood Ranma's point about the treatment of their enemies, and in fact respected him more for it. If it got about that Ranma and Daenerys treated their enemies' men with such respect, or at least in such an evenhanded manner, it could only bolster his reputation. But he didn't understand why Ranma had called off the pursuit entirely.

The others agreed, especially Ser Blanetree, Brynden and most of the Riverlands lords and unit commanders. *Yet those who stayed quiet is telling*, Daenerys thought, amused. It seemed as if the Lords who had been with him during his game of lion baiting were all willing to follow his orders now without question.

"We could go after them now, and we might be able to catch them up, I'm not certain of that considering they actually number slightly less than us now, and will be going hell for leather. Portions of our army could certainly catch them up, but would those units have enough punch to finish them off?" Ranma said shaking his head. "Yet think about this my lords, what is the objective of this campaign? It isn't just to smash the Lannister's main army, or even kill Tywin. Indeed, killing Tywin in battle may well serve to make him a martyr, at least at this point."

"No, the main thrust of this campaign is to either force the Westerlanders out of the Riverlands entirely, or wipe out

their army entirely. I've been told that he has several garrisons elsewhere on the south of the Red Fork, and a reserve force at the Kneeling Man's Ford. Those forces would still have to be dealt with, along with their allies."

"That may be, but certainly dealing with them would be much easier after the news of their main force being destroyed reaches them?" said Lord Roote, who knew one of those garrisons was in his town of Harroway.

"Not so, my Lord." Daenerys said shaking her head. "They would become desperate, and desperate men would lash out. The smallfolk on the other side of the Red Fork have suffered enough without the depredations that desperate men would foist upon them."

Ranma nodded towards her. "Exactly. We want Tywin to get back to the Kneeling Man's Ford, then have enough time to call in those men to rebuild his numbers before we attack him there. With the Wolfsworn attacking his supply lines and facing the threat of dragons attacking his camp, he might well surrender or even face a revolt among his men if we're lucky. If not, with the dragons we can burn his camp down around his ears before assaulting him over the Ford. Or he might be forced to retreat back to the Westerlands, which would allow us to try and pin him down at Wayfarer's Rest."

Many of the lords, particularly those who hadn't learned about Jon being sent off to take Wayfarer's Rest looked surprised at that before being filled in by their fellows. Most of their Riverlands lords still looked skeptical, but Shawney and Patrek did not, having seen what the wolfsworn could do.

"By the way, how bad is it on the other side of the Red Fork? I haven't seen any reports about that since we left Fairmarket, and those were mostly rumors." To one side Alayaya and Domic stood. They looked at one another while Lord Roote and the others looked concerned. "How bad is it?" Ranma asked again.

"In certain areas your highness it's very bad," answered Ser Blanetree bluntly. "Not as bad as it could have been, at least in some areas, those whose lords bent the knee, but very bad in others. They've ravaged the land in some areas, wiped out entire villages, settlements, farmsteads, even towns. Mummer's Ford is gone, though Lord Piper evacuated most of its inhabitants into Pinkmaiden and has kept them there since."

Ranma hummed thoughtfully. He'd heard that Piper had capitulated, but if they'd done that, there was obviously more to that story that hadn't crossed the Red Fork. That was good, the rest of what he was hearing that was very bad indeed especially with winter coming. That made it more imperative than ever that he force the Lannister forces or at least large portions of them to surrender rather than be destroyed. He'd need the manpower in the fields, let alone the other projects that could possibly spell the difference between life and death for thousands.

"Lord Blackwood probably did the same thing on his land, though I doubt the land itself will be in any condition to be worked for months. House Smallwood and its lands were ravaged, and the land around the River Road between Harroway and the Kneeling Man's Ford especially has faced extreme depredation." Lord Roote actually smiled a little as he shared this information, but the rest of his face began to try to run away from it when faced with the icy stare Ranma pierced him with.

Daenerys took his hand in hers for a moment, squeezing. Ranma squeezed back then looked around at the gathered lords and unit commanders. "We have a lot of decisions to make my lords, and we need this army ready to move soon regardless. Please see to the disposition of the army, then return here this evening. We'll have decided our next move then. For now, I'm going to go and see the wounded."

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Even before Ranma and his men arrived Daenerys had followed the policy Ranma had sent in creating camps for his army, which included necessities such as having a designated food preparation area well away from the latrines which were in turn away from the rest of the camp, and of course a hospital area. This was now controlled by Merry, and she had made certain it was ready for the influx of injured from the battle.

To aid her Merry had helpers, over fifty of them now, though only seven were trained. She also had another maesters healer, who had apparently been in the town Salt Pans before coming west to do what he could for the Riverlands army that had set up camp on the other side of the Ruby Ford. Only a few hours after the battle the two of them had saved dozens of lives.

But in the hours to come, as more Westerlanders were brought in, that number would pale to the number of lives that they couldn't save. The amount of people Merry and her helpers had to turn away after seeing their wounds numbered in the hundreds. Worse were the men who would be crippled for life, having lost limbs, hands or a combination of both. Pikes caused horrendous wounds, and the broadswords favored by many of the Northerners

were even worse.

"Myrcella, how is it going, are you good for supplies?" Daenerys said, entering the tent that Myrcella was in currently from behind her.

Myrcella turned to look at her, nodding her head politely at the older girl. *Woman dummy* she thought to herself, still wondering when exactly that changeover happened. "For now, we are," Myrcella she replied before turning back to her work, finishing up the stitching on the side of a northern soldier's arm. "The number of injured we're taking in from the opposing army's survivors is going to put a major dent in them before the days done though."

The Targaryen queen frowned but nodded. Most other lords would've immediately told Myrcella to stop using valuable supplies on enemy soldiers, but Ranma and Daenerys had long talks about that in the past. Daenerys agreed with Ranma that the common-born soldiers should only be blamed for the acts they committed off the battlefield rather than on it. Besides, they'd need the manpower.

Myrcella went on, not following Daenerys's thoughts but her own. "Luckily the numbers of our own wounded is much lighter than we expected. I think we're only going to lose four of the wounded that we're currently treating, and our side's injured have already stopped coming in." Since it was barely afternoon and the battle had begun in the morning that was actually pretty damned good.

"You're not going to work yourself into collapse are you?" Daenerys asked.

"I'll try not to." Merry replied, not looking at her as she moved on to her next patient, one of the first Westerlander men to be brought in. He had taken an arrow to his shoulder and another to his thigh. Swiftly Myrcella went to work, cutting out the remains of the arrows that had been let in so as to not make the bleeding worsen then quickly stitched the wounds closed, making certain to use fire wine to clean the wound on his thigh thoroughly as well as on his shoulder after first was finished.

The man looked at Myrcella in shock as she patted his good shoulder before moving off to help one of her aides with a man who had taken a wound to his head. The armsmen she had left of course knew who the young girl had to be, he'd heard her name and the looks would've given it away in any case. But why in the world would Myrcella Baratheon be working as a healer? And how'd such a young girl become so good at it? He would not be the first prisoner to ask that question.

Ranma came into the tent at that point, nodding politely at the guards who were following Myrcella along. They both nodded back and Ranma took a moment to take in their appearances. *Greatjon certainly found exactly the sort of soldier I wanted.* He thought to himself, chuckling evilly inside at the idea of anyone running into either of these men.

The man Ranma had chosen to watch Myrcella as she went about her work was almost large enough to pass for one of the Umber men, though he wasn't as broad across the shoulders. He was an older man whose hair had streaks of gray in it and whose face looked as if it had been used as a punching bag in the distant past then cut up some more. His name was Grege Stenren, and he had served among the armsmen of Winterfell for longer than Ranma could remember.

He was also known to dote on his four children, two sets of twins two boys and two girls and was equally known for being wrapped around his wife's little finger. Appearances can be deceiving.

The man Greatjon had chosen was actually a little below normal height, but he moved lightly on his feet, almost like one of the Wolfsworn though not quite with that mix of unstoppable confidence and gracefulness that marked them. He also had about a dozen knives scattered around his person, and a wicked scar running from right above one eye down over his nose which finished right above his mouth. It changed what could have been a darkly handsome face into one to make grown men afraid. The fact that his eyes looked permanently slitted added to the effect.

His name was Eric Proudthenn. In times of peace he served House Umber as one of their chief thief-taker and one of the family's best scouts in times of war. He'd fought to put down the rebellion of one of the former minor house that had looked to House Bolton, which was where he got that scar from. In his case looks were not deceiving: he was every bit as dangerous, and some would say plain mean, as Grege was not. He did however have a soft spot for animals, particularly foxes for some reason.

Turning from his appraisal of the two guards Ranma put his arm around Merry's shoulder. "Do you have everything you need Merry?"

Myrcella smiled up at him wanly. "Can you make me have another few thousand hands? Or better yet, train me to

sleep standing up and get a full hours rest in a few minutes? Otherwise yes, I've got all I can truly ask for."

"Sorry Merry," Ranma said laughing ruffling her hair affectionately. "I'm not a miracle worker, I can teach you some mental exercises I suppose that could help your tiredness, but they'd take weeks to master, and I'm not even going to comment on the thousands hands thing."

"Best not to bother with it then." Myrcella said moving quickly to another one of her helpers who had just brought in another Westerlander armsmen on a stretcher with the aid of a House Wayn armsmen. This prisoner actually wore the colors of her family. Currently he was looking at her in shock and then from her to Ranma in confusion. Hostages, even 'honored guests' should not be talked to like they were friends like that, and certainly shouldn't be working as a healer around so many men! But the northern dog didn't seem to understand that. And the Princess didn't look as if she cared about it either.

To say that man and the rest of the Westerlands armsmen in the tent, were confused was an understatement. This was made even worse by the fact that there were two guards on the tent door, and their job was not to guard the Princess like the two decidedly evil looking men who were following her around inside of the tent. No, they were expressly out there to protect the Westerlands armsmen from their enemies, in case some of them took it in into their heads to get some revenge.

Such kindness to enemy soldiers was unheard of in Westeros, and the less said about the fate of captured troops in Essos the better, where slavery was the bedrock of the economy. Yet these same men had seen their lords go down, their plate armor unable to stop crossbow quarrels at close range, and the Northerners had fought a ruthless, brutal battle. The disparity between that and the way they were currently being treated was shocking. To say nothing of the girl who looked like a Targaryen.

"Remember after you've healed them they'll have to be separated back into their original units Myrcella. I want to keep the different forces of the various families and houses separate. It'll make it easier to pass judgment on them later on."

Myrcella nodded, and Ranma tapped her shoulder one last time before turning to go. "I'm going to do around and talk to the wounded for a bit, then I have something else I need to do. Will you stay here Daenerys?"

Daenerys nodded, rolling up the sleeves of her simple cotton shirt and looking over at Myrcella. "I'll do what I can here for a bit."

Again that shocked the Westerlanders. Leaders caring about the wounded like that? Actually going around and talking to them? Or, even stranger, pitching in to help actually heal the wounded?

"What is up with these Northerners!" one of them finally blurted aloud. "Don't they know of what war is?"

Another Westerlander answered him. He was a younger man who didn't wear any armor, showing that he'd probably been a conscript, but one who looked as if he came from a slightly better off family than most. "Talk to me about the mountains of dead they left out there on the field, or about the number of lords I personally saw go down when those pikes began to advance. I think they know a new meaning of the word."

OOOOOO

Ranma did indeed go around talking to the wounded, thanking the men for their courage, loyalty and sacrifice, bolstering morale to an even higher degree after the momentous victory. He also mentally thanked the Riverlanders for providing the tents they were currently using for the hospital area. They were much large than the ones assigned to his men, made for six men instead of the three or four of the northern tents. That made them much better suited to protecting the wounded from the vagaries of weather, which was going to be needed, considering that the sky was darkening with storm clouds.

Looking up at the sky Ranma shrugged philosophically. They had gotten incredibly lucky up to this point in terms of weather, only being snowed on once in the North very briefly, and then rained on once more on the march to Seagard. *Besides isn't rain becoming more frequent a sign of autumn? Think I read that somewhere.*

Soon Ranma left the hospital area moving through the army camp and exchanging shouts and greetings with many a man as he did. The Northerners were to a man jubilant about their victory, even the men who hadn't taken part like the majority of those he had been leading in the weeks prior to it in Baiting the Lion (which in years to come would become the formal name for that aspect of the War of Reformation). After the days it took Tywin to gather his army most of those men had rested enough to take part, but Ranma had still held them back from the majority of the

fighting letting the Riverlanders and the rest of the Army win their spurs.

He also noticed that the pikemen were marching about with their heads held high, not arrogant, but definitely more certain about themselves than they had been prior to that battle. Only the 600 pikes from House Manderly had been bloodied before this, and it had come as a shock to them all to see how well their training and their discipline withstood the punishment of battle.

Ranma also noticed that Patrek and the others had released some of the army's alcohol supply to the men and frowned at that, but when he stopped to talk to Rickard Karstark who was the first Lord he saw as he moved through the camp, discovered that they had only allowed each man a single tankard, though they could eat all they wanted. "Good!" said Ranma nodding his head firmly. "If we have to move out quickly, I want the army ready to do so, not drunk off their asses."

Rickard laughed, shaking his head as he looked at Ranma, proud to be related however distantly to the man had won some of the most one sided victories in Westeros' history. "No worries there. But you think will be moving on quickly?" Most of the lords were wondering why they hadn't already pursued the Westerlanders. Yes the reasons Ranma gave them earlier were good, and no one was going to underestimate Tywin or his ability to surprise them, but they should've still pursued them with more than a few units of light cavalry to harry his sides and back.

He wouldn't say that out loud though. Ranma had more than earned his respect in the weeks leading up to this battle, and watching the entire strategy unfold had been amazing. Still, it was odd they had immediately pursued Tywin.

"Don't you find it odd uncle," Ranma said as if not hearing his unspoken question, almost seeming to change the subject. "That you don't see Wendel or many of his knights here? Or for that matter, Meera?"

Rickard thought for a moment then frowned as he realized he hadn't seen the Manderly representative in the meeting earlier, or even before that. In fact, now that he came to think about it, he hadn't seen Wendel, some of House Manderly's knights or very many of the few remaining clansmen today.

"I sent him slightly up river in the barges with orders to attack the Lannister encampment during the battle, and should be back this evening if everything went well. I sent him to do whatever damage he could to the Westerlands camp before pulling back."

"I see, yet..." Rickard shrugged

Ranma nodded. "Yes, yet, it isn't quite enough. I'm waiting for word of what is going on elsewhere to get to me before I decide our course from now on. After that we'll decide what else to do."

The older man cocked his head quizzically wondering how Ranma already seemed to have spies elsewhere in the Riverlands, since he hadn't seen Alayaya or Domicer contacting any such. But after a moment Rickard shrugged and the two men went their separate ways.

Ranma was soon the outskirts of the camp, moving out and away from the battlefield. There were several captured soldiers whose wounds were not life-threatening had been forced to work on aiding the House Wayn men, who, now that the battlefield had been scoured for wounded, had been put to work on burning the thousands of dead. Their faces showed how humiliated they were by this work, but Ranma merely thought it fitting: if they weren't willing to actually join the battle, the least they could do was clean up afterwards.

Another five minutes brisk walk brought Ranma well away from even those men, where he was joined by Fenris coming out of the scrub around him. Just then it began to rain, and both human and animal sighed, or seemed to sigh in Fenris' case. Ranma patted the giant direwolf on his shoulder, shrugging his shoulders. "Come on, the sooner we do this the sooner we can both find a nice warm tent."

The two of them kept moving until they were well away from the army. Crossing over a small previously dry riverbed that was already beginning to fill up with water from the storm, they hid themselves in a small copse. There Ranma sat down leaning against an oak as he stared at Fenris, who sat on his haunches in front of them. After a moment Ranma closed his eyes, concentrating on their connection and Fenris began to howl.

This part of the campaign was something only Daenerys, Jon and Arya had been told about. Jon had realized that if the direwolves could take over local wolf packs and get them to obey them for short amounts of time, then howls could be used for long distance communication between direwolves. Wolves relayed a lot of information to one another, even between packs, so it made sense that direwolves, being more intelligent, could take this to another level.



The problem came in the human mind's ability to understand the information transmitted. Wolves didn't think in terms of patterns, numbers, travel times, those things that humans routinely thought of when they were passing on information. Wolves thought in terms of terrain, sights and most importantly, sounds and smells. The senses of a direwolf in particular the sense of smell and hearing were simply beyond anything a human could truly grasp.

However, certain information could be passed along such as if the pack was doing well, and where they were at that moment. And sound carried. A wolf could make itself heard for leagues around to other wolves, and then have that howl passed on through the local wolf packs faster than any human communication could go. Direwolves could be heard even further away.

Back in the camp, all of the horses began to look skittish for a moment, while many a man of the Riverlands prayed to the Seven at the sudden, terrifying howl from the woodlands. Sunfyre and Rhaegon both raised their heads from their daily meal, staring off in the distance before going back to more important things while their mistress, still busy helping Merry, smirked. The sound even carried to where Tywin was trying to gather the remnants of his armies supplies. He lost several more men after their horses bolted when a few local packs began to answer the supreme alpha's call.

A few hours later that howl reached Stone Hedge, and Nymeria answered it, howling out in a somewhat lighter timbre than her brother. Next to her Arya placed her arms around the direwolf's mighty neck, their mental connection wide open as Arya tried to send to her brother the news that they had taken Stone Hedge. All she was able to do was send, *large man-thing, stone-thing, large, important* and finally an image of a bush, specifically an example of a bracken bush, and then again ***stone-thing!***

Back with Fenris Ranma blinked in shock, nearly falling out of their mind meld. *Stone Hedge?! Dacey took Stone Hedge! That is...* he paused and thought for a moment *that's actually some of the best news I've heard ever! But it does mean I need to change my thinking for this campaign.* After that he delved once more into the howl as it continued on its way, getting passed on by Nymeria to the local wolf packs around her and eventually down to Jon and Ghost.

Ghost couldn't even pass on that much information, all of the human ideas were very difficult to pass on through normal wolves and each pack in the relay made it that much harder. All Ranma got from him and Jon was a sense of being precisely where he was supposed to be, and a sense that they were fully capable of defending their current den but had not been challenged yet. That was enough for Ranma however, and he began to slowly pull out of his meld with Fenris while the giant direwolf passed on his own information.

*This changes everything,* Ranma thought to himself after he pulled out of Fenris' mind entirely. One hand began to scratch his direwolf's ears absentmindedly while his mind was engaged in thinking about how Dacey and Arya's news effected his plans going forward.

Initially Ranma's plan had been to follow Tywin on his heels, nipping at his army to keep him from trying to reform and retake the offensive, then let Tywin get to the Kneeling Man ford as if his own army couldn't quite catch up. Then he'd let the man call in the rest of his forces, give the Westerlanders enough time to bring them all together and then realize how bad their supply situation was. Then if necessary he'd send the dragons across to destroy every piece of siege weaponry and anything else they could in those massive fieldworks, forcing the army to surrender.

And if they didn't, storming across would be much easier if their camp was on fire, their siege weapons gone, and the army starving. Even a week at half rations could tremendously effect the ability of a soldier to fight a well-rested, well fed enemy, and by that point many of the Lannisters would have been dealing with worse than that for several weeks. This didn't even consider the lack of other supplies and their general morale.

*But with Stone Hedge taken, their supply situation isn't going to be bad, it's going to be horrible and obvious quickly. The reserves that were kept back at the Kneeling Man's Ford were almost certainly going to start attacking Stone Hedge to get to those supplies soon enough. And with Wayfarer's Rest also taken, there would be no reprieve from the lack of supplies. Couple that with the depredations they've already afflicted on the smallfolk around that area, they can't live off the land at all! But Tywin will realize that immediately.*

*If he learns Wayfarer's Rest was taken Tywin's smart enough to know what would happen if we caught up to his army at the pass. They could still retreat to the east however. I can't let them get to Harrenhal, that castle could safely house Tywin's entire remaining army, and they could strip the lands leading to it plus Harroway of supplies. I'd be forced to leave at least two thirds of my own army to keep them there or try and burn them out, and the dragons' fire isn't hot enough yet to attack stone.*

No, instead... instead I think I'm going to have to keep the momentum but shift my attention to attacking from another

oblique approach.... With that thought Ranma pulled out a map of the Riverlands from one of his jerkin's pockets, holding it up to the dim light as he thought hard. After moment marking off distances, he smiled thinly. Then got up, looking at Fenris. "I think you've earned the right to go hunt my friend, I'll see you back at camp when you're done."

Fenris nudged his nose into Ranma's shoulder, then bounded off into the distance. He couldn't smell any bears around, this wasn't the territory for them, but he'd seen signs of one of those little wild-cat creatures, the ones with the tufts on their ears. Those made good eating, not as good as bear but nothing was, but as good as deer in Fenris' opinion. Behind him Ranma had still retained enough of their connection to get a sense of his bonded direwolf's plans for dinner, and he laughed shaking his head before heading back to his army's encampment.

That evening at Ranma's behest the commanders of the army joined him in his tent. It was only the lords however, not their unit commanders since Ranma's tent couldn't house all of the unit commanders and the lords. Given the fact it was pouring down rain now, that was not a small consideration.

After letting the lords have a few moments to dry themselves via a small brazier set in the center of the tent, Ranma began. "News has reached me of the success of Jon's assault. He has taken Wayfarer's Rest, and is waiting there, ready to defend the castle from any kind of reprisal. Moreover, Dacey and her assaults on the nearby supply lines have been even more successful than we expected."

As the Lords looked at him some wondered how he had gotten that information. Others were simply waiting for him to expound on that point. Smiling, Ranma did so. "Dacey Mormont has taken Stone Hedge."

A shock went through every man there. None of the Riverlands Lords had been looking forward to that particular fight, or worse the discussion of amnesty for House Bracken. Most of them had actually liked Lord Bracken before this war began, but his deciding to use the war to settle his differences with Blackwood had changed that. Yet this hadn't blinded them to the fact that Stone Hedge was one of the best castles in the Riverlands. Besieging it would take years or lots of lives since Bracken wasn't stupid enough to fall for any of the tricks Ranma had shown them thus far. Ranma and the Northerners hadn't been so concerned about it of course, for various reasons.

More importantly the news that Stone Hedge and the lands around it was a supply hub for the Lannisters had spread, and every lord there knew how important that was. Brynden in particular laughed. "Damn me, the lions really are in a bad way up for supplies aren't they?"

Ranma nodded. "However, let's put that aside for now. Has anyone here heard of from the town of Saltpans and what's going on there?"

All of the Riverlands lords looked at one another shaking their heads. "Nay my Lord, neither House Hawick or Cox have been heard of since the start of hostilities." Said Ser Shawney.

"To my mind that means they chose opposing sides, and have together decided to not take part in the war. I'd bet Ser Cox has chosen the Lannisters, he has a large brood and not enough land to give them all, money would appeal to him. House Hawick's last lord was close with Lord Tully, so the new one will no doubt have decided to work against the Lannisters or at least remain neutral." Lord Ryger said authoritatively.

That seemed to be his default tone, Ranma noted. He was one of those people who thought he was an expert at everything. Still, what he said made sense. "When we get to the Trident we'll need to send someone down there with a large enough force to face anything that could be there. I don't want us to be blindsided by another House joining the Lannisters and attacking our own supply lines from behind or retaking Harroway after we take it back ourselves."

Lord Roote stiffened at that and leaned forward while the other lords looked surprised. "You mean to march on Harroway rather than chase after Tywin?" said Greatjon doubtfully. "I won't call you a fool led but..."

Ranma laughed. "I think we can do both Greatjon! Uncle Brynden," he said, turning to the older man. "You'll be in command of that force. How many men do you think you'll need to make Tywin think that the entire army is chasing after him?"

Brynden thought for a moment then shrugged. "Light cavalry would be best for that kind of thing, with heavy cavalry following up along with a force of archers, and scouts of course. Two thousand two-hundred or so all told should be enough. Do you want us to start off immediately?"

"As soon as this meeting ends, you'll get the pick of the men you want. Harass them, make your numbers seem much larger than they but more importantly make certain that Tywin keeps on falling back to the ford. I want him in those magnificent defenses he's made and nowhere else, but not quickly." Ranma said, nodding. "Who would you like as

your second?"

Brynden looked over at the other lords for a moment then said "Lord Shawney, would you lend your aide to this endeavor?"

Silas Shawney grinned. "Delighted to, my Lord Tully." he replied, bowing his head.

"What are the rest of us going to be doing then lad?" said Greatjon.

"We'll leave our injured here, along with a small force to aid House Wayn in guarding them just in case the prisoners become unruly. I'll take the rest of the army down the Kingsroad to Harroway and beyond with my queen and her dragons aiding us in a campaign that will be based just as much on terror as reality." Everyone save Daenerys looked shocked at that and Ranma smiled grimly. "The time for guile is past, now a show of force will serve us better, even if we don't intend to use them against the town in question."

"We should also think of sending a messenger into the Vale," Daenerys said. Everyone in the tent turned to her including Ranma, one of his eyebrows rising in surprise. Daenerys shrugged her shoulders. "You said it yourself Ranma, we don't want to be attacked from behind. While the Vale might not be able to field a large army, they can field a decently sized and trained one, which could have an effect much larger than their size."

"If I may my Lords." said Lord Ryger, speaking up once more. "Willow Wood is the closest keep to where the Vale Road intersects the Kingsroad, and I heard rumors long before the Lannisters came east about the mountain clans in the mountains of the Vale acting out now that the nation doesn't have any real leadership. It's quite possible that whatever our messenger does he could be intercepted by them before he reaches the Bloody Gate. However, if we take the Trident and Harroway, we can send a messenger by boat down to Gulltown."

"That's an excellent idea." said Jason, nodding his head. "Gulltown is held by House Grafton, which is one of the more powerful Vale houses, and House Royce is nearby, which is the house I'd send my message too. Not Lysa."

Ranma frowned. "I'd like to trust that my aunt would receive any message we send well enough, but..." he turned to Brynden again. "Great uncle, what do you think?"

"Unless she's recovered from her paranoia Lysa won't even see your messenger." Brynden replied after a moments contemplation, looking saddened at the thought of his niece's descent into paranoid madness. "I agree with Greatjon, House Royce is our best bet. Yohn is the most battle-hardened of the Vale lords, and among the most honorable. Moreover he was friendly with Eddard when they were younger."

"And a few of the others like House Elesham and Pryor my Lord," Daenerys said smiling thinly. "If the men of the Three Sisters were willing to try and raid commerce coming out of White Harbor, I have no doubt that those Houses also felt the depredations."

Ranma nodded thoughtfully. "We should lay out what we wish to say to them, lay out the reasoning behind this war from our perspective as well as the fact that Joffrey is illegitimate and the proof of that, emphasizing the reason we annexed the Three Sisters. We can't command them to join us, or even entreat them to do so. The first would seem to be high-handed especially after we've already assaulted the Vale's general dignity and the second would seem too needy. Besides, it would take weeks to work their troops into the army's organization, and I'd have to teach them all discipline as well as my rules about camp management and camp followers. So long as they stay neutral toward as I don't care what they do. After the war the Vale will need to be brought to order, anarchy like that in a neighbor is not good for anyone, but for now we can ignore it."

"What we cannot ignore is the coming of winter." Ranma went on, looking at Vincent. Save the Mallisters the other Riverlands lords all rolled their eyes, but Ranma simply smiled grimly. "Autumn has been declared my lords, if the weather was not enough to tell you. I am not simply paraphrasing my family's lines my lords, we need to prepare our lands for winter. To that end we've already begun projects to aid in transport, and we will continue to do so using the prisoners to do it. To that end Vincent, I'd like to employ that mind of yours elsewhere. My wife, Lord Mallister and Smalljon have all said how impressed they were with your work on the fortification at the Ruby Ford, I'd like to see if you are just as good at more peaceful projects. Specifically, I'd like you to look into the idea of creating the equivalent of the glass garden of Winterfell somewhere here in the Riverlands."

Ranma explained what those were, emphasizing the importance of having the equivalent of a farm that you could rely on even in the dead of winter. Vincent looked skeptical, but Ranma could tell his mind was already working on the issue, shown when Vincent murmured "Water would of course not be an issue here in the Riverlands, heating it would be, unless we put it somewhere like the Hag's Mire, which would have other issues. Someplace with a nearby

source of coal or wood will be necessary..."

"Like Riverrun?" Brynden asked.

"Possibly," Vincent answered almost absentmindedly, reaching into one of his jerkin's many pockets and pulling out a piece of parchment and a small stick of charcoal. "Or possibly one of the towns along the Red Fork. It would be the easiest river to divert some of the water into a small pool, which could then be warmed. Or, no, perhaps a better idea would be to..." He was silent for a moment but then looked up at Ranma. "You realize this is going to take time and money?"

"Time is an issue, money is not." Ranma replied, smiling thinly. "By the end of this war the reparations from the Westerlands alone will pay for most of the royal projects I'm seeing in the future."

Vincent nodded, going back to his plans.

The rest of that evening was taken up with organizing the different forces preparing them to march and bringing up more supplies from beyond the Ruby Ford for the army. These supplies were mostly in the form of weapons and emergency repair items for kit, and some more food of course. This was hampered by the ongoing storm, which showed no sign of stopping anytime soon.

While the others went about their own duties Myrcella continued her work in the hospital and Smalljon organized the guard detail. It turned out that more prisoners had been rounded up directly after the battle by the light cavalry who had been harrying Lord Tywin's army than the wounded that could be saved. Pikes and greatswords really did cause horrific wounds. All told there were only about 1,200 prisoners, only a fifth of whom were injured in some manner, many seriously. How many men had to be given mercy by Lord Wayn's troops was an unknown.

The preparation for the army's march caused some grumbling since many of the men had been looking forward to looting the bodies of the dead. However Ranma had known that was a possibility, and had ordered the House Wayn men on burning detail to go through the bodies and collect everything putting it all in a single pile, which would be distributed evenly among the men. And with the returned Wendel and his knights all watching them, they actually obeyed that command.

"Not," he confided to Daenerys, "That there's anything really the men can spend it on just yet. But eventually we may be in Riverrun or another city, then they'll like to have that cash to spend as distasteful as the exercises may."

That plus the rain kept most of the men from grumbling and those that did grumble too loudly were ordered to join the burning detail, a thankless task given the weather. That work would continue even after the main army left. Daenerys might not have been able to talk Lord Wayn into allowing his men to be used in actual battles, but she and Ranma had shamed them into aiding in the aftermath.

The next day it continued to rain but that did not dissuade Ranma, and he and his army marched up back over the Ruby Ford and towards the Kingsroad within an hour of sunup. Above them Sunfyre and Rhaegon, once again let out to fly whenever they wished gleefully flew through the rain, enjoying the feel of it on their scales.

OOOOOO

That night Daenerys was woken up in the tent she shared with Merry and Alayaya by quiet sobbing. She blinked, raising her head to stare at Myrcella's cot, the two dragons sleeping soundly at their feet. Alayaya would normally have been on a third cot, but she and Domic were supposedly taking the tenor of the army after Ranma's plans going forward were announced. Daenerys had her doubts about that, she was honestly wondering if Alayaya had moved on from Smalljon to Domic, but wasn't going to inquire. At the moment she had something else to question. "Merry? Why are you crying, dear?"

"O-oh, I'm sorry I woke you up, Daenerys. It's, it's silly I know, after all the battles and the many times I've dealt with injured before, but after today...I, had a nightmare." Merry said, wiping her tears away from the back of her hand.

"Nightmares?"

"A-about not being able to help treat them. Sometimes in my dreams the men I've helped treat come back, their wounds reopened, and they, they accuse me of not being able to help."

Daenerys sighed faintly. Given her abilities with organizing and leading the army's healers it was often hard to remember that Myrcella Baratheon was barely thirteen. Moments like this brought that strongly to mind. *Only a child would castigate herself for not being perfect*, she thought, not realizing how hypocritical that was given certain

thoughts she had about both the campaign thus far and especially the fact she'd been forced to leave the third dragon egg behind.

"I have nightmares too you know." She blurted out then wondered why she had admitted to that, something that only Ranma had known before.

"About your brother?" Merry asked shrewdly, sitting up in her cot to look over at Daenerys.

"How did I, yes. I fear what would happen to the realm and to me if he defeats us." Daenerys replied, shaking her head at how well Merry knew her.

Merry laughed wanly. "It will never happen if he attacks Westeros, Ranma and you are going to beat him like a drum, and you know it. I bet it's only when you're asleep that such thoughts can enter your brain."

"I could say the same to you." The older girl replied tartly. "No one else in the army could do a better job than you at commanding the healers Merry. No maester of septon schooled in healing can save everyone."

"Knowing that doesn't help." Merry said quietly.

Daenerys sighed. "No, I don't suppose it would." She sighed again, then lifted up her blanket. "Come here girl." Merry gaped at her, and Daenerys chuckled. "I've found that being held keeps the nightmares at bay."

Hesitantly Merry pushed herself out of her cot, and moved to join Daenerys in hers. The two girls put their arms around one another as Merry snuggled into Daenerys shoulder, and the older girl smiled faintly, before the two of them fell asleep.

OOOOOO

The Westerlands army had been able to break off thanks to a forced march fueled by fear and desperation. Portions of the northern army were still pursuing them closely however, and Tywin knew that he could not afford another open field battle. Those pikes were deadly, though Tywin knew it wasn't the weapons used that made such an impact. No, it was the organization, the training of the pikes that made them so deadly. That, and their armor, which was a better quality than most lords could afford for their cavalry, let alone infantry.

The shock of the pikes and their effect on his men's morale had been grim beyond anything he could have imagined. His army had gone into that battle fully expecting to win if not easily then at least decisively, and now they were on the retreat, smashed not by an army of superior numbers but by the tactics and training of their enemies which was somehow worse to the common armsmen.

A day after the battle Tywin had finally been able to ascertain the depth of their losses, which had been appalling. Up until this point in the campaign Lord Tywin had lost possibly two to three thousand men give or take, with the majority lost with Lord Plumm's night attack. In this single battle that loss had quadrupled, leaving him with a bare 10000 men. This gave the combined Northern and Riverlands forces numerical superiority for the first time.

Worse was the makeup of those losses. His supply of archers and heavy cavalry had been mauled even more than the numbers suggested, and the equivalent could not be said of the other side. And then there was the sauce on the steak, the spoiling attack on his army's camp that had occurred during the battle, and the losses among the Westerlands lords and heirs with the army.

The first shouldn't have been a surprise, Tywin had left behind two hundred good men to guard the camp, but they had not been up to stopping a force of heavy cavalry intent on burning every tent, cart and supply cache they could. In this, his losses actually aided him, because the food left would be able to feed his army for a time, before they were forced to slow down and forage, which would be disastrous if the northern army was still pursuing them. Luckily the spoiling raid hadn't cost his army any of their spare horses, so for now at least they would be able to move relatively quickly.

Even so organizing the men was incredibly hard because of the second surprise the Young Wolf had sprung on them, in battle assassination of enemy lords, heirs, and knights. It was an unprecedented move, since normally in war those men would have been valuable prisoners for the ransom they could bring. But Ranma Stark apparently didn't care about that.

Too many lords and heirs, who made up his commanders, and staring at his ragged army as it moved around him Tywin once more cursed the need of lords to be part of the charge rather than lead from behind as was sensible. Because of that and the Stark's pup's tactics, dozens of Houses no longer had their lords or heirs, and the future of

four was actually in doubt.

House Algood, Dogget, Myatt, Drox were those with their future in doubt. Lord Drox had no heir or even close family member before this, he had been a young man eager to prove himself, but who had died in this battle. Algood and Dogget were notorious for not having many branches from the main line, and they had paid for that now. House Myatt on the other hand had simply been slaughtered, their lord, heir, several cousins and all their men had been at the front of the battle, eager to win their somewhat weak House glory. Now they were dead, but at least the former lord Myatt had two daughters still alive back in their keep, as well as their mother.

The others, their lands would be taken over by one of their neighbors something Tywin would need to deal with after this war was over. A little voice in the back of his head murmured, *If you survive it...* but Tywin ignored it to concentrate on the list of the dead.

House Bettley lost his lord, as had Estren, a man who had impressed Tywin since this war began with his common sense, a thing, despite its name, which was as uncommon as gold in his opinion. Lord Andros Brax, one of Tywin's most important bannermen, was also dead, as well as his second son. Tytos Brax had been left back in their keep to rule in his father's stead, which would mean they would recover soon. House Broom had lost its heir and third son. Lord Broom himself had survived the battle despite taking a crossbow bolt to the shoulder, yet he had retreated to his tent inconsolable from his son's deaths. Still, the family would recover in time.

House Crakehall had lost two cousins and the Strongboar, Lyle, the secondson of Lord Crakehall. Their men too, had nearly been wiped out to a man. Luckily those armsmen, sixty strong, were a bare pittance of that powerful house's total. Since Crakehall was the lynchpin for the southern borders of the Westerlands they had been allowed to keep most of their men at home when Tywin had been mustering the Westerlands hosts.

House Foote had lost its lord, and two cousins of the family but Tywin knew they had retained some men at home and their heir, though a boy, was rumored to be bright enough. Antario Jast had died along with his squire and most of his men, but his heir was at home. Lord Sarwyck, another young man had also died trying to be a warrior, Westerling, Turnberry and Yarwyk had all lost their heirs who had been sent with the army instead of their lords, most of the Knightly Houses had been gutted save for those knights who had been placed in charge of the various holding forces Tywin had station in the various castles on the other side of the Red Fork.

Daven however had not been in the front line of the battle, which was a blessing, though his father had as well of course. The two of them and the few remaining lords and heirs had helped Tywin organize the army despite their own shock at their losses. But now they had to get back to the Kneeling Man's Ford with an enemy army nipping at their heels. That wasn't going to be easy now that the Young Wolf had the taste of blood in his mouth, as evidenced by a cavalry man riding his horse towards Tywin even now from the back of the column.

OOOOOO

*Castle Oldflowers is a smallish Castle, yet seems well made for all that.* Margaery mused as she and her escort rode through the outer gate. She could already see the servants of the keep lined up the small courtyard to receive her, and she smiled, pleased that they were prepared as they should be.

Beside her Ser Igon Vyrwel, the captain of Highgarden's guard rode on his horse his carriage that of a much younger man. His demand to go with her had been a surprise, but a good one. While initially Margaery had dismissed him somewhat since he had never served in a war, he was well versed with the rules of setting up a camp and leading a march. He also knew how to defend castles and he was a welcome companion in his own right. The two of them had shared tales of her brothers and her father throughout the trip, having a good deal of fun.

About an hour after their arrival Margaery was being shown around, and smiled at what she saw on this side of the walls as well. The outer wall of the keep was about four stories tall, and the keep itself was another two stories taller than that. The keep itself was situated with its back side facing the Mander and the top of it was more than wide enough for six scorpions on rotating plates set along that wall, with enough room for hundreds of archers scattered in between. One outer wall continued northward of the keep for about 100 yards, before turning inland at a small tower to intersect the wall that came out from the keep heading away from the river at the gatehouse.

All in all Margaery was happy about the defenses here, though they had been undermanned before her arrival. "You certainly kept up the castle well in your lord's absence Ser Shermer. I trust you are able to accommodate my men?"

"Of course milady." Eliphas Shermer, the majordomo of the castle said nodding his head. He was a youngish man, about her brother Garlan's age but much more weedy than any of her siblings. But Eliphas wasn't castellan of this castle for no reason, he was an excellent organizer, and had a gift for numbers that was incredible. He had even

been sent to the Citadel at one point, before his older brother died in a riding accident, leaving only one more brother between him and the lordship. This made his father recall Eliphas then send him to House Oldflowers to learn how to manage a castle.

Still, Eliphas' basic courage did seem to leave much to be desired, shown in his stutter as he went along as well as the way his hands worked against one another. "I, I understand that you think we might, we might be attacked here milady, but how reasonable is that? I've heard the rumors of what happened to the Shield Islands and the Arbor, but, but surely actually pacifying them would take all the Ironborn's manpower?"

"If they were a conventional military force, that might be so." Margaery replied, making no comment on how his obvious fear. "As it is, I do not know how likely it is we'll be attacked. I think it depends on what they find further down river, and unfortunately most of the Reach's manpower is away at present."

She couldn't keep a little growl out of her voice at that, but she went on smoothly. "And if they use the Mander to raid further inland as they surely will, this castle represents the best forward defense of Highgarden and the villages and towns further up river. Of course that means we'll have to sacrifice everything further down river, which I'm **not** happy about." She sighed sadly at that, shaking her head. She well knew what the smallfolk and the other lord's houses further down the river would face with the Ironborn, but she didn't have the force to do anything about it.

"I I see." Eliphas responded then rallied slightly as he changed the subject, holding out a raven messenger tube. "On another note my lady we have received a raven from Highgarden addressed to you."

Margaery took the message from him, noting that the seal had not been opened almost absentmindedly then read the message inside. It was from her grandmother who had apparently recovered her faculties and was angry at her for endangering herself and ended with an order for her to return. Return at once you fool girl, all of your brothers have gone into harm's way, I'll not allow you to do the same!

Regardless of whether or not Olenna's concern was based on her family feelings for Margaery or the possible loss of Margaery as a tool for the furtherance of her family's power, she was prepared to ignore that. Margaery knew she was right, with her here the Ironborn wouldn't even think of bypassing Oldflowers, which they might well have been able to if they were careful about it. No, she had to remain here a visible prize that could not be ignored.

With a sigh she looked at Eliphas once more. "Please, show me to your lord's office, I require some writing tools to send back a reply. And if you could have my guard captain shown to your keep's roof? It's time we raise our banners high." Soon after that Margaery's personal banner, a side view of a rose on a green field, flew from the top of Oldflowers.

OOOOOOO

Victarion was not one for strategy or thinking ahead and despite his lack of imagination he was an Ironborn down to his toes, he lived for leading others in reaving. With the Shield Islands under Ironborn control the Mander and the riches along it what are yours for the taking. Leaving Harras Harlaw in command of the Shield Islands, he led the rest of his much reduced fleet into the Mander and against the town of Dunland, seat of House Dunn.

Here and there ships broke off to attack the villages and towns built along the river, but Victarion was in search for a bigger prize. House Dunn had put up a fight, but after that he hadn't yet found any battle worth his iron.

He found it in the keep of House Graves, a noble family which much like most of the others in the Reach had sent most of its men to war already. Nor did it have the defense of Oldflowers, only a single ballista on the keep's roof and a two-story outer wall.

Victarion led Iron Victory close in, having taken archers from five other longships onto his own. They raked the wall while the other Ironborn ships ran themselves aground all around the castle. The Ironborn swiftly threw up grapple and were over the outer wall, slaying several defenders though most had already retreated into the keep after Victarion and his men had raked the outer walls with their arrows. The ballista on top however was still firing, and one of the Ironborn ships was hit, the bolt slamming into its single mast, shattering it and sending splinters of wood into the crew, killing dozens.

Victarion grounded his own ship and he and his men raced forward pulling themselves up the ropes on the outer wall with the ease of lifelong sailors, even Victarion with his injured leg. When they got into the inner courtyard of the small keep, they found the door still barred against them, though a small tree set in the courtyard nearby was being hacked down to be used as a makeshift battering ram. Arrows were still falling from above, and here and there Ironborn lay dead.

The battering ram went to work, but it was obvious that the men inside had already piled up enough furniture and other things to keep that door standing for a while. Seeing this Victarion shook his head and motioned to a few of his men. "Follow me."

He led back up onto the outer wall, then along it to the nearest point with the keep. From there Victarion ordered a few of them to see if they could hit the nearest window with one of the grabbed mills. It was an actual window, not an arrow slit and there was enough room there for men to pull themselves through the window. The defenders of the keep however were concentrated on the first and second stories, and were still laying down a hail of deadly fire.

It took a few tries, but eventually a grapnel caught on the window ledge and one of the Ironborn volunteered to climb over first. Making his way hand over hand along the rope he came to the window sill, and pulled himself up and into a small room that looks like a child's quarters. Absentmindedly grabbing up a mirror with a gold handle he waved his hand out of the window, motioning the others to follow.

Victarion was the last across, since he was wearing full plate mail he was the heaviest. Even so he was able to pull himself along and through the window though he had to take a few moments to rest afterward. After a few moments he pulled his heavy axe off of his back and motioned toward the door. "Forward for the Drowned God!"

The seven men with him roared in reply and burst out of the room, startling to servants who'd been carrying a heavy dresser towards the stairway leading downward. Both of them screamed, but died quickly before the Ironborn raced on.

Later that day Victarion and his men feasted in the main Hall of the castle. As Victarion bit into a haunch of meat prepared by one of the servants who had been allowed to live his first mate leaned in. "Captain, you know that woman I took, she had a son and was desperate to save the boy." He sneered slightly. "I don't see why, the boy I'll get on her will be tougher and stronger by far than the little whelp, but I suppose women are soft like that. She had something to say that I thought you might find interesting."

Victarion grunted indicating the man should continue. "She was apparently one of the gossip queens here, and an interesting rumor reached her ears this morning. Apparently the maid of House Tyrell has moved to the keep of House Oldflowers. They apparently don't have enough men left to defend Highgarden, and she thinks Oldflowers might be of good enough position to keep her safe."

"My map." Victarion said holding out his hand to one side. One of his men belched, then quickly got up from the table and ran to fetch it. A moment later Victarion was looking down at it frowning. "That makes no sense, if she was afraid for her life, she would either stay in Highgarden, or move as far away from the Mander as she could get. Oldflowers is right on the river!"

"Then she's daring us come after her!" said another Ironborn, a captain from house Botley. The man slammed his tankard of ale down on the table, glaring around him, causing the few surviving servants how had been serving them all to flinch away. "I say we head out to show her the folly of trying to dare the Ironborn!"

Victarion didn't say anything for a moment, thinking about what the maiden's true reasons could've been. It was true that Highgarden was a large city as well as a castle, and with their men away at war they might really not have had enough men to man the defenses. *But the same could be said about Oldflowers, couldn't it? Still Botley's right, she's not trying to run away, I don't know what she's trying to do, but the maiden of House Rose is a prize we cannot overlook.*

"Very well!" He said aloud, to cheers among his men. "Let's see what that old fool Tyrell does when we take his precious daughter and give her a taste of true Iron!"

OOOOOO

Lord Serret walked along the wall of King's Landing, nodding his head to men here and there, while keeping his head below the parapets with difficulty. *My back's going to kill me tomorrow, but better that than an arrow to the head!* All around him archers were busy, firing as quickly as they could. Down below there were enemy archers using the hovels, which had been cleared of wildfire and other traps by this point, as cover to fire back.

They were not making much headway though. In terms of skill the archers on both sides were probably equal, but the wall and the parapets was a far better defensive position. Even as he watched an archer firing out of what might have been a doorway at some point took an arrow to the shoulder, falling back into the hovel's interior with a cry. He reached over, slapping the archer who had just taken that shot on the back. "Well done lad!"



The man grinned and Rupert moved on. Two sections of the wall later, Serret was still moving in a sort of half crouch but the battle had become much more serious. Taking a glance over the parapet Serret took it in at a glance and bellowed toward the nearest tower. "More archers over here, now!"

Below was a force of archers larger than most sniping at the wall, trying to get local superiority. The reason for this was hundreds of men trying to smash some of the houses down. They looked like levy forces, only a few had even leather armor, and even then barely a jerkin in most cases.

Rupert turned as another forty men came up from the nearest tower. "Sorry to interrupt your naps lads, but it looks as if the bastards are trying to be clever. Show those men down there they should head back home!"

The men all chuckled, unlimbering their bows. With the new bows they quickly almost silenced the archers down there then took the levy forces under fire. Looking over the parapet Rupert saw at least two dozen men dead down there before the rest broke away, running off. More died when they tried to break away, but the majority were able to get out of bow range.

There was a cheer all around the Hand, and he cheered and thumped backs for a time. All the while however his mind was working, coming up with a grim thought. *They were creating lanes for siege towers. Stranger take them, I thought it would take them longer to build those.*

"Well lads, it looks as if you all have things under control. Just keep an eye out for other groups like that trying to pull the hovels down." He was answered with a roar, and he smiled for real this time. *At least morale is high among the troops at least.*

He quickly entered the nearest tower, then made his way down to the road, pausing a moment to stare at the interior defense that had been thrown up here. Two story tall mounds of rubble had been thrown up around the towers, where people could access the towers leading up to the wall. Those mounds were protected by other small bands of archers and men with halberds, intent on keeping any mob that appeared from attacking the tower, where food for this section of the wall was stored.

Elsewhere there were similar defenses around the trebuchets. Most of those had been thrown up in time to save the massive siege weapons, but one of them had been smashed and burnt. Ironically, more than half the mob that was part of that hadn't lived to celebrate. The Trebuchets all had small stores of wildfire near them.

The alchemists themselves had been moved to the Red Keep the moment the riots began along with as much of their paraphernalia as could be moved. Wildfire was far too important to the defense of the city to let the alchemists out in their guild which wasn't in an area that could be defended very well.

Serret nodded to the men waiting for him. "Back to the Red Keep, what streets are clear for now?"

"River Row milord, for now. There was a riot there a few hours ago, but the gold cloaks cleared it out well enough if we move fast we might be able to get through all the way up to the Keep." Said the knight in charge of the Hand's guard.

The current Hand of the King swung himself up into his horse, growling irritably. They hadn't yet gotten to the point where they would be forced to butcher their horses, but Serret could see that time coming, three or four weeks down the line. *Still, I'll only order that started when every other avenue has been exhausted, the horses, much as a loathe the beasts, are a resource we might need to use in the future. And at least grass isn't hard to come by yet up at the Red Keep.*

Around him the group of men began to move, riding their horses carefully up and down the mounds of rubble all around the tower. Five hundred strong the group then set off at a canter through the empty seeming streets. But they were only seemingly empty, everywhere eyes watched them, most surly, some frightened and far too many becoming angry with each passing day of few rations and no end to such in sight.

As they went the group passed near the Great Sept of Baelor. It was still open and the High Septon remained in place because they were using the Great Sept as a distribution point for the food. This made it seem as if the food was coming from the High Septon, which helped his popularity slightly and kept some of the citizenry from violence. *For now we're able to distribute enough food to offset the bowls of brown and the rats on sticks, but it won't last more than a week more. We'll have to start slaughtering the food animals we've got up at the Red Keep for the defenders soon, let alone the smallfolk...*

The food on the small council's table was a sign of that issue. Where before there would have been fresh fruit, bread,

sweetmeats and wine, there was no wine, no sweat meats only preserved fruits, and a small amount of that. There was bread true enough, but it certainly wasn't a fresh loaf, and if there was more than a tenth part of yeast in there rather than... other things, Serret would be surprised.

There was however meat available every other day, so the food available to the royals in the Red Keep was still better than what the troops got, let alone the smallfolk. Serret rotated the troops on the wall back into the keep every other day so they could partake. And there could have been wine, but Cersei had ordered the entirety of the Keep's wine cellar turned over to the men on the wall, one of the reasons morale among them was so high. The fact she had done so as to remove temptation for herself was not known.

The men and the queen all served themselves, another change. Most of the palace's servants had been let go, simply because it would allow the Red Keep to save more food. The court as a whole had also shrunk dramatically, though that had begun before the siege.

A small jug of wine was passed around, and each of them took a small jot of wine, with Varys and Joffrey both looking irritated at the fare in front of them. The eunuch was a fat man who was rapidly losing weight and not liking it at all. Joffrey was a little shit, Rupert had decided, but he was keeping a handle on it and keeping out of the way, which was all Rupert could ask at present. "The siege is going about as well as we can expect now that Renly understands he just can't assault the walls without paying too high a price. That leaves the smallfolk as our main problem. Varys, Baelish?"

Petyr was the first to speak up. "Riots are happening here and there every day now. We're cracking down on them hard, and any smallfolk who resist are killed. The enlarged gold cloak forces are keeping a lid on things but barely." The ranks of the gold cloaks had grown dramatically when the rationing began, since Rupert and the queen had let it be known that the gold cloaks also counted as working in defense of the city and thus were due higher rations.

"But we're coming to the point where we'll have to cut back food to the troops even further or simply stop rations to the smallfolk entirely." Serret muttered. "Damn it, if there was just some way of breaking the blockade that would solve our problems..." *I don't want to have to start butchering more of the hoarded food animals or the horses, not yet. We're not going to win this siege, Randyll Tully's in charge over there now and he's not going to make that kind of mistake. But we might be able to break out and away at some point, and those horses could be the difference between life and death.*

"I think we need to sortie out!" Joffrey said, glaring over at the Hand. He was angry all the time these days. The food issue was angering him, the lack of wine thanks to his stupid mother's decision was angering him, but worst of all he hadn't been able to partake of his little diversions for five days now! His mother was keeping him even closer at night. Though she allowed him to go out with a suitably sized guard to the wall during the day, that wasn't enough, he wasn't a good enough shot to join in the defense of the city personally and he was getting more irritable every day that passed.

"They'll never expect it, and you said it yourself the other day, they haven't thrown up any defenses of their own. Sneak out into the hovels during the night then assault the center of their army. With my Stranger-damned uncle dead the army out there would capitulate."

"That is one of the most idiotic ideas I have ever heard." Serret said, his voice calm but his face thunderous. "We don't have the numbers to attempt anything like that, their army's camps are too far from the city's walls for surprise to be a factor. We'd be caught out in the open and wiped out. If you don't have anything intelligent to add to the discussion your Grace, please be silent. The rest of us need to deal with reality."

"That is the king you are talking to Lord Serret." Cersei said sternly, rising to her son's defense, though her own voice was showing the strain of the change in diet and everything else. Though actually, physically the lack of fatty foods seemed to have only enhanced Cersei's beauty, removing the fat that had begun to build up here and there save around her hips and chest. "We are all being sorely tested by the current circumstances, but we all need to keep cool heads. We cannot afford to turn on one another now."

Everyone nodded at that, even Varys. He knew that his own life was very much on the line now, the mob would not differentiate, and that was only if the lack of food didn't kill him first.

"I still think that my plan would have a chance of success, because it is so obvious it would fail they wouldn't expect it!" Joffrey stated sullenly.

Serret growled, but at Cersei's warning glare he subsided. He wasn't Tywin, he couldn't simply tell the queen to shut up and smack the little shit upside the head until he learned. He had to be more 'diplomatic' than that. "If we had

enough troops who could move silently through the night and a place along the wall that wasn't observed, I might be willing to try something like that, but we don't. It's a skill most armsmen don't have, and I wouldn't trust any of the gold cloaks to try it either. Petyr, anything to report?"

Petyr shrugged, and reported the many business concerns that had shut down for fear of the mob, lack of material or dead owners. "Frankly, the entire city is slowing to a halt. A lot of the smallfolk and even the merchants used what monies they had to get food from the pirates, and even that is drying up now. I've closed down all of my brothels, but I can't even bring most of the girls up here. Ser Jaime has refused my suggestion that they would be good for morale."

Cersei glared at the man angrily. She hated whores, far too often Robert had broken their wedding vows with such, and you never knew where they had been. Moreover she didn't want her son to be around such, he was so desperate to be like his 'father' he might follow down that same road.

"If the whores want somewhat better food they can move to join the men in the garrisons along the outer wall." Rupert said shaking his head. "Not in the Red Keep."

"I agree." Cersei replied firmly. "On another topic, what do you know about my father and his army Varys? He's the best chance we have to see the end of this siege."

Varys sighed sadly, though the sadness was mostly feigned about his first bit of news. The second bit however that was serious enough to keep a smile off even the most madcap jester's face. "I have several reports about Lord Tywin your highness, none of them very good I'm afraid. Lord Tywin has recently suffered a loss, a monumental one."

Everyone there, even Pycelle who had not been sleeping well and had in fact been nodding in and out a moment ago, jolted at that. Varys carefully did not let a small smile of amusement show on his face. "He was apparently chasing after the Young Wolf for several weeks, and ran into a trap of some sort. His army is retreating in good order, but it is evident that Ranma has his number and the numbers now." Varys's lips twitched at his little bit of word play, though he was the only one who was of any mind to notice the humor. "It will be down to luck if he reaches the field defenses he threw up on the Kneeling Man's ford. I don't think there will be any aid from him any time soon."

There was a moment of silence then as the queen raised a weary hand to her eyes while Lord Serret grimaced. Joffrey however was practically vibrating in rage. Jaime simply sighed sadly. Before anyone could speak however Varys went on quickly. "There is something else my birds have reported, something much closer to home and much more important to us here and now. Three of my little birds inside the city live along the edge of Fleabottom. They report seeing several bodies with no visible sign of death save signs of blood around the mouth and eyes. Most of them were found lying in a puddle of their own sick, which also was colored red from their own blood."

That brought another moment of silence around the table, as everyone but Joffrey paled in fear. "Plague..." Pycelle murmured. The Grandmaster could all too easily recall his early years at the Citadel when a plague struck Oldtown. The measures taken had been utterly brutal, but they had worked. "We must contain it! Offer rewards for every hundred dead rats, they are carriers, double the number of cats in the Red Keep and make certain that they are not killed for the meat on them. Most importantly close off Fleabottom if we can, keep it from spreading!"

"How?" Jaime replied harshly, his hands on his sword blade trembling slightly. He was terrified of plague, of the idea of an enemy against which his skill would be useless. "Fleabottom isn't separated by the rest of the city by a wall or a gate, there are dozens, hundreds of different sized roads leading into and out of the slums."

"Then we need to create dead zones between different districts, not just Fleabottom and its neighbors but all of them." Pycelle stated firmly, his exhaustion in abeyance as one of his childhood nightmares came to life in front of him. "We need to keep people from moving from one area to another, that way we might be able to stop it from spreading."

"We don't have the manpower." Jaime protested a second before Serret could.

"We do if we use wildfire." Pycelle replied bluntly. "Get the Grand Master Pycromancer and his minions to create as much of it as we can, then burn out the dead zones, set up wildfire traps if we can and make certain the smallfolk know they are there. We'll have a panic on our hands, but we'll have one of those the moment people realize any kind of sickness is going around, let alone a full blown plague."

"Use of Wildfire in the city? Are you mad?" Petyr asked, aghast. Not at the idea itself or even the horrendous loss of life that would come from such, but the amount of businesses, some of which were his that would be destroyed.

"No, I am the only one here who has lived through a plague before! My lords, I beg you to listen to me! A plague will

kill us just as quickly as that army out there would if it breached the wall, faster even, and with much less mercy." Pycelle pleaded. "Plague knows no class and bows to no king."

Everyone around the table seemed to understand then how serious this was, all save Joffrey, who was still vibrating with rage, having not even heard Varys' announcement, nor would he care if he had. Joffrey had something else on his mind.

Besides Joffrey everyone at the table turned to Lord Serret, who held his head in his hands for a moment, seeming to age slightly before their eyes. "Do it. Pycelle, you know how this works, take a map of the city and outline what needs to be done, then think up the minimum number of men you'll need to do it. Get with the Pyromancer if you think that best. Jaime and I will go over the defenses of the walls, to make certain the internal defenses are as strong as we can make it."

Jaime nodded firmly, and Serret turned to the others. "Your grace, I suggest you start to lock the Red Keep down even further, no one goes in or out save myself and my guards. Baelish, you help Pycelle, he's in charge, you just help him however he wishes, and no back talk!" Serret glared at Littlefinger, who simply nodded. Serret turned away, looking at the eunuch. "Varys, I have a special task for you..."

OOOOOO

That evening Petyr sent his bought swords the Kettleblacks brothers out into the city to find and bring back a hidden cache of gold. Of course he didn't tell them about the possible plague that might have begun. All they needed to know was that he was beginning to look for a means to escape the city quickly regardless of his position on the small council even with the enemy army out there and the blockade not allowing any ships out.

He wasn't the only one busy that night. Joffrey however was on a much more sinister mission. His mother had worked herself into a frenzy organizing the Red Keep to be even more cut off from the city around it than it had been before, cutting down on the number of servants even further. She and Lord Serret had even expelled most of the remaining court, ordering them to join the defenders of the wall. This had not been easy, but with Jaime and several of the Kingsguard enforcing her edict none had been able to argue. That evening Cersei was so exhausted she didn't even have the strength to check up on her son as she always did these days. This had allowed Joffrey to sneak off to the dungeons.

Edmure Tully had not been living an easy life even before being thrown into the deepest pits of the Red Keep's dungeon. Thankfully for him Varys had found out he had been tossed down there, though he hadn't known that Edmure had been tortured until his agents surreptitiously shifted him back to one of the upper level cells. This was information Varys had decided to sit on for a time, since he had not been able to discover who did it.

That was the only reason Edmure was still alive. But his once strong and supple frame had shrunk dramatically in the intervening weeks, with no real exercise and little food even before the rations to the prisoners had been cut dramatically. Indeed, Edmure was the only prisoner still in the prison. All the others had either been executed or forced into work gangs and worked till they died, not out of cruelty, but simply to save food. Even most of the guards had been removed, added to the gold cloaks trying to keep order in the city.

Edmure had been sleeping fitfully ever since that night he had been tortured, and he woke up quickly when he heard the clang of the dungeons doors in the distance. Even in his weakened, near delirious, state Edmure knew there was only one reason why anyone would be coming to the dungeons in the middle of the night. With a grimace he raised himself off of the cot he'd been sleeping on and moved towards the door, pressing himself to one side of it, just out of the way if someone slammed it open.

He waited there, breathing in and out as his hands clenched and unclenched. They were very careful about not letting Edmure have anything that could be used as a weapon, but Edmure was past caring. All Edmure wanted to do was go down swinging. Outside he saw a small glimmer of light along the floor, and he tensed himself. A moment later with a creaking groan the door slammed open, making him smirk as it smacked into the wall right next to him.

Ser Blount was the first one to enter the cell, a wide vicious smirk on his florid face. He stopped for a moment perplexed at not seeing anyone in the cell's bed or anywhere else, then turned at a small noise behind him before he was born to the floor by a raging half-starved madman screaming in rage and fury. "GRAHH!" Boros found himself on his back, and someone's hands clawing at his face. Those hands grabbed him by his hair and lifting his head up to slam his head back onto the ground with vicious force.

If he had been in peak condition it was possible that Edmure could have slammed the other man's head hard enough to knock him unconscious, or even crack his skull against the stone floor. As it was it simply hurt like hell and the man

below Edmure roared, trying to scuffle at him punching at his chest with gauntleted fists. "Seven curse you, get off me!"

Behind Edmure could try again another man raced into the cell, and Edmure whirled, leaping for him as well. This move caught the other man by surprise, and he fell back into the doorway. He took three blows to the face and another to his chain mail armored chest before one of his gauntleted hands caught Edmure on the chin throwing him backwards. Then Edmure felt his legs grabbed. On the ground Blount had reached out, wrapping his arms around the prisoner's legs.

With a snarl Edmure went over backwards while a third knight quickly entered and aided his fellows in subduing the prisoner, which was much more difficult than it should have been, desperation lending Edmure strength. "GAH, the Father will judge you all for this!"

Behind them Joffrey had watched this all wide-eyed, astonished at the prisoner's berserk assault. However now that the world had righted himself he smirked, motioning behind him to another one of his guards, who was carrying various paraphernalia.

Despite his fury giving him strength Edmure eventually succumbed to his three attackers. Despite his best efforts he soon found himself chained to the wall with his arms stretched above him and his legs stretched out to either side. Even so Edmure still glared around at them, trying vainly to reach them with a headbutt or possibly his teeth it was impossible to tell. "Damn you all, give me a weapon, we'd see how smug you'd be then!"

His eyes hardened as Joffrey finally entered then his heart nearly froze at the sight of the various devices that the guard following Joffrey was carrying. The two men entered the cell and Joffrey personally closed the door locking it. He nodded down at the crack at the bottom of the door, and one of the men quickly grabbed the ragged blanket from the bed and stuffed it down into the crack.

"We wouldn't want anyone to hear your screams." Joffrey said almost conversationally. Two of the knights began to lay out the devices Joffrey had brought along on the bed, while Joffrey turned back to the prisoner. "You see, the point of having a hostage is that the hostage is supposed to be valuable enough to force his House or country to bend to your demands. In your case this hasn't happened, but even so many people think that you're still valuable. I don't any longer, I don't think you're being here serves any purpose, but it can serve as a warning."

At that point Joffrey at last lost control of his anger leaning forward and shrieking into Edmure's face. "Your Riverlanders have risen against me! Against **me**, the true king! They've helped that bastard Stark's army attack my grandfather when he was doing his duty in defending me from the traitorous Northerners! I am going to do to you what I am going to do to every one of your lords and their families for breaking their oath to me!"

After spitting that last line into Edmure's face Joffrey seemed to calm down. He stepped away from Edmure then his eyes lit up with eagerness and his lips turned up into the most evil smile that Edmure had ever seen, sending a shiver of fear down Edmure's spine.

"We'll start slowly, it's amazing what you can do the simple knife..." The bastard King said reaching down to his pile of toys and picking out a small knife whose edge looked razor-sharp. Nearby a brazier began to burn and several of the other tools were placed upon it. "But don't worry, we'll get to the more esoteric tools eventually. We have all night..."

By the time Joffrey and his fellow sadists were finished, Edmure's body could barely be called that of a human being any longer. His mind had broken only a bare turn of the glass into the torture, thankfully. That might have happened when his eyes had been burned out with the poker, or possibly before that when Joffrey had cut off bits of his skin before using a hot brand on the exposed same area. Whatever the case, it had happened long before Joffrey had begun work on his lower regions, the pain of which finally caused Edmure's heart to stop.

Joffrey didn't notice his prisoner had died for a time, and when he did he had worked off enough of his urges to not really care. Exhaling a long breath he set aside the last of the tool he had been using. He sighed happily then intoned "Thus will all traitors to the crown be dealt with."

Around Joffrey his men all nodded. All of the Kingsguard members Joffrey had personally appointed were chosen because Joffrey could sense in them the same interests he held. It had not been easy even with Blount to call upon, but it was worth it. They took almost as much sick pleasure in the torture as their King.

"I suppose with the Red Keep shut down as it is we can't dispose of the body as we normally would, but we can leave it here as it is. Send one of the others to order the servants to stop feeding the prisoner. The ones that usually have to

bring him his food can take his ration instead. That should keep them from talking." Joffrey went on. His men all nodded then began to clean up.

This ploy didn't work. For one thing, while the servants were eager to take the prisoner's rations, though it amounted to little more than a 'bowl o' brown' it added to the meager amount they were allowed, they became suspicious about why. One of them actually worked up the courage to go and see Edmure and the sight of his corpse was so horrifying to the man that he lost his stomach, and tried to get out from the Red Keep entirely.

The servants however were being watched closely by the master of whispers, and Varys intercepted the man before he could get out of the Red Keep. Hurrying the man into his own personal chambers he said simply "you seem as if you have had a fright. Brandy is good for that, sit and have a drink."

It took only a half glass of brandy to get the man talking. Varys kept plying the man with drink however saying that he needed the alcohol to get the shock of what he had seen out of the system. After his fifth glass the man never noticed how Varys opened one of the rings on his finger and poured in a small drop of a black liquid into the cup before filling it up once more.

Watching dispassionately as the servant convulsed in his chair Varys frowned thoughtfully. *So the Vile One is proven to be Joffrey Waters after all. I had wondered, but he was so clever about sneaking out of the Red Keep that I hadn't been able to find any proof before this.*

The question for Varys wasn't 'should I hide this information?' He had no loyalty to the Lannister cause. No, the question was how to use this information to the best advantage, who to get the information to and how. He decided after a moment to get the news out to Hoster Tully that his son had been tortured personally by the King via a spy that's he knew Hoster knew about in Riverrun. That way it would seem as if he had personally decided to pass on that information, which could be useful in the future. *After all, with Daenerys Targaryen married to Rann Stark, this might allow me to have a foot in every camp.*

Closer to home, Varys decided to keep the news from becoming common knowledge in the city. That kind of thing could only turn the smallfolk further upon the royal house and everyone nearby. Varys reminded himself once again that the mob tended not to be very discerning in their targets.

Opening a secret passage in his rooms wall and lifting the body of the servant up with surprising strength Varys thought, *I think I won't allow it out to Renly just yet. No, I'll wait for that until either the plague is dealt with, or I have been forced to make a run for it myself. That time is coming quickly, and I will need all the bargaining chips I can get to use with the invading army. On the other hand... I think, yes I think it is time for a Vile One at least to be found, and for Petyr Baelish to be removed...*

OOOOOO

Lord Serret had ordered Varys to somehow get the word of the plague out to the besieging army hoping that would make Renly stop attacking allowing him to concentrate on trying to control the smallfolk and stop the plague from spreading. It worked, within four hours the knowledge that a plague had begun in the city had reached Renly's ears. In the dead of night Renly and his lords met in his tent, many of them still halfway drunk from that night's revelry.

The would-be king however was not drunk, not yet. He had been drinking of course, but one thing he shared with Robert was a large capacity for drink, which served him well now. "We can't do anything about a plague can we?" He asked, looking around at the few lords who were still capable of thought. He deliberately avoided looking at Loras, who had joined them for this meeting with his father for the first time since his injury. The sight of his former lover's face pained him, as did the accusing glare in those so-familiar eyes. "We don't have nearly enough healers, and when the news of the plague breaks there goes any chance of controlling the populace of the city."

"Indeed your Majesty." Randyll said, thankful the naïve young man wasn't **that** naïve. Plague was the bane of any city, any army, any **nation**. Plague could kill more men in a year than any war, ravage a country more thoroughly than the most ruthless army. "In fact we should change our army's layout to account for this. We need to stop people getting out of the city now, not just getting in."

"True..." Renly mused. "Tell me, how many men would you need to stay here and cordon off the city?"

"For preference all of them." Randyll replied bluntly. "Even when the second echelon arrives we will barely have enough men to invest the entire city. I'm sorry my lord, but we can't afford to be adventurous when doing so might allow the plague out of the city to infect the rest of the Crownlands and beyond. We'll need to build up our own defensive lines and prepare to turn back or kill anyone attempting to get out. The Lannisters might attempt a breakout

as well, and we can't allow that to happen."

Renly nodded sadly. "True enough, but it sits ill with me to simply sit here and wait for the plague to do its work. Still, needs must. We can shift the catapults down over the Blackwater, then down to the other side of the Harbor to stop any ships from leaving. Forts or defensive ditches?"

"Forts my lord, nodal points to block every road out of the city, then lines interspersed between." Randyll replied crisply, and he and the other sober lords bent to the task of mapping out the new defensive points the army would have to throw up starting tomorrow. They would need to retreat somewhat from the city, but close enough to make certain no one was able to leave.

The forts, though small, would sit along each of the six roads leading into the city. With the bridge over the Kingsroad demolished they didn't have to worry about that, a few lines of archers and infantry plus the catapults would do there. Each fort would be led by a Lord of a Major house. Mace Tyrell took both the fort facing the King's Gate and the catapults and their defenses on the other side of the river. The other major Houses were each assigned an area throughout that night and work would begin on their construction the next day.

Eventually Randyll was satisfied and left off, allowing the other lords to retire, including Renly. Renly however was stopped by doing this by Loras. "We need to talk."

Renly frowned at his lovers, or should that be former lovers, attitude, but seeing the man wasn't about to give up, simply nodded. "Very well." Renly moved back from the flap of his tent to sit on his camp bed, a rather elaborate affair in comparison to most, but still, albeit technically, a camp bed.

As soon as Renly sat down Loras let him have it. "Why in the Seven's name haven't you come to see me? I've seen all of my friends, my father dozens of times, but not my lover?"

"I do have an army to lead you know." Renly replied, trying to calm Loras down.

"Most of which you leave to Lord Tarly while you and the other lords sit around and drink wine or practice jousting!" Loras replied tartly then went on, each word coming out louder. "The truth Renly! Am I so disgusting to you now that you can't even look at me? Was our relationship based purely on the physical?"

Keep your voice down Stranger curse it!" Renly hissed. "You know what your father will think if he hears about our love when I am due to marry your sister when I gain the throne." For just a moment Renly wondered about that, why had he made that vow anyway? He shook that off quickly however to deal with the here and now. "I was ashamed all right!?"

"What?" Loras asked, much calmer now that he was finally getting some answers.

"I was ashamed." Renly stated again, looking away for a moment. "I, even when I was in Storm's End during the siege with Stannis, I never saw battle or combat. I've never seen the, the real thing. I never realized before that, that people important to me could be injured or die in battle. Especially in a battle that I ordered, and especially you. And every time I look at you now, that guilt hits me like my brother's warhammer and I can't take it."

That sounded far more egotistical and naïve when Renly said it aloud, but it was true in a way. It wasn't the whole truth, but Renly hoped it would suffice. The rest of it was that Renly truly had thought at one point he was in love with Loras, he was so handsome and chivalrous even when he was younger. They had many happy times together over the years, yet the moment he saw Loras' disfigured face all he felt was revulsion. Renly was left wondering if he had ever been in love with Loras at all, or if it was merely lust. Yet he couldn't afford to break utterly with Loras, not when their 'friendship' was part of the ties he had to House Tyrell. After he married Margaery however, that would change.

"Oh, you stupid man!" Loras replied shaking his head. "I'm a knight, whenever I go into battle I face the chance of death or crippling injury, no matter who gives the commands. Besides, I was the one who came up with the original plan, not you. My injuries are my own to deal with, no shame or onus fall on you, my love."

Renly smiled wanly. "That's nice to hear, but it doesn't make it any easier for me. I'm, I'm handling it Loras, just give me time alright?"

Loras nodded then leaned in, sharing a kiss with Renly for the first time since his injuries. He didn't notice his lover flinching slightly before contact, and when he pulled away Loras was smiling widely. "Take all the time you need, I'll still be here, waiting." He said, before turning and leaving the tent, never noticing Renly's shiver of revulsion.

OOOOOO

Two days after putting in at Harlaw, Asha and her now larger group of ships set to see once more. "Well, I suppose it's good we got this gaggle of sharks moving in the same direction again." Asha sighed, huffing lightly. Inwardly however she was glad to be away from the island of Harlaw. Ten Towers was still a welcoming place, and she'd knife anyone who said that Rodrick Harlaw was not the best of hosts. But the conversation she'd had with Lord Kenning had disturbed her, disturbed her a **lot**. Not just because it challenged her belief in the Old Way and the Drowned God, but because it was all so terrifyingly easy to see that it could be the truth.

"Gaggle of sharks, captain, shouldn't ya call us a fleet or something like that? I'd think that ya'd be 'appier 'bout leading such a flotilla." Qarl, her first mate and on-again off-again lover spoke up from next to her while Asha herself controlled the tiller. "Especially since the new ships come from House Harlaw and the houses beholden to them."

"Calling us a fleet is too generous, I'd only use that word if we were as disciplined as my uncle's Iron Fleet. And just because the newcomers come from House Harlaw doesn't tell me anything about them as individuals." Asha retorted, taking a hand off the tiller to punch the barefaced young man in the shoulder.

After a moment she went on more seriously. "I'll only truly trust any captain when he proves himself to be better than the normal jetsam. Remember those ships were the first to answer Lord Harlaw's call, and while they'll follow me at his orders, their captains are eager for plunder and booty, eager to pick at the leavings from Rise of the Kraken, and will move against me if I don't lead them right."

"We still don't **know** that da other tentacles of the kraken failed, cap'n." Qarl said. Like most Ironborn he believed they were invincible at sea, and he sometimes disliked the pessimism Asha viewed her father's plan with.

Looking at him Asha could only groan inside, wondering why her fellow Ironborn were so **stupid!** She changed the subject, knowing she wouldn't change the Maid's mind. "You're right though, with the majority of our ships now coming from Harlaw I was able to pitch a plan to the other captains. They'll all follow me, for now." Her standing with that family was well known so she had at least a little bit of leeway before she had to start watching her back for knives again.

Four days sailing took them down towards the straits between Westeros and the large island called Fair Isle. It had been here where the Iron Fleet had been demolished in the first uprising, and more than one captain in her fleet felt both anticipation and fear. Fear that history would repeat itself, and anticipation at avenging themselves.

Not a day after they entered the straits, the first group of ships came within sight of the watchtowers set at the entrance to the large port of Faircastle. Asha and *Black Wind* was one of those first ships, this part of the operation was the trickiest, and she wanted to make certain that it worked so had to be here personally.

The wind was with them as they moved forward, in a sort of semi-line for now, heading straight towards the port and the small town and castle of Faircastle. Five longships against the four war galleys that a little under an hour later suddenly started to make their way out of the port. Asha nodded to Qarl. "Single the split, let's show these Greenlanders what real seamanship is!"

Qarl grinned and nodded. A moment later he raced up the rigging, where he quickly began to signal the other ships. The longships after a moment began to break off, two of them turning their course slightly, heading towards the watchtower that had spotted the Ironborn. The other three turned slightly to starboard, heading towards the castle of Faircastle which was on the southern edge of the port itself.

It looked as if the longships were trying to get to shore and disgorge their crews before the war galleys could reach them, or as if they hadn't even seen the war galleys. Either assumption would fit the normal Ironborn thinking, which worked for Asha. *Come on, react like we're just the normal dumb fucking islanders you think we are...*

Ahead of them the war galleys came on, then Asha smirked evilly as she watched them split in turn. One went after the two longships that were making for the watchtower, and the other three going after the more dangerous threat of Asha and the two ships with her.

Asha allowed Qarl to take over the steering wheel. The ship kept racing on a trajectory for the castle for now while the war galleys continued to try and cut their course. Asha turned with a Myrish glass that she had taken in one of her first raids to keep an eye on the watchtower. She could tell when the watchers spotted the rest of her fleet incoming. She even watched as someone lit a watch-fire, trying desperately to signal the war galleys, but none of them were watching the tower.

By now the war galleys were almost upon them, and had begun to fire at them with their scorpions. Asha smiled



grimly however as that fire faltered for a moment, the captains of the war galleys finally seeing the signal in the watchtower. "Sail haul, all hands to oars! Hard about to port!" Up above her Qarl signaled the other two ships currently moving with Black Wind, and they too began to turn quickly, their sails pulling up and all hands to oars.

The war galleys behind them showed their lack of experience now, hesitating to close with the enemy in front of them before turning to confront the next as they should've done. One captain in fact tried to turn his ship entirely around, while another one kept barreling forward intent on the Black Wind and her fellows, as the third actually floundered indecisively in place, uncertain which direction they should go.

Twenty minutes later however they had run out of time to do so. Asha's ships had turned almost entirely around and were now rowing hard back the way they came, moving with the speed and efficiency that only well-trained Ironborn crews were capable of getting out of their oars. They were now past the area covered by the war galley's scorpions, all of which were on their prows facing forward and to the sides of it.

Arrows began to fly both ways, but Asha added yet another aspect to the battle, because half of her arrows were fire arrows not aimed at the crews of the of the war galley's, but the rigging. War galleys could move under oars, but they were heavy and slow, losing much of their maneuverability especially in comparison to longships.

Asha's crew first riddled the war galley that had kept on course even as that captain tried desperately to turn his ship around to once more bring his scorpions to bear. Its sails soon caught fire as did several areas on its deck, even one of its scorpions was hit by a few fire arrows. Asha had no doubt that most of those fires would be put out quickly, but by then it would be too late.

Black Wind raced on, almost taking a scorpion bolt along its prow from the ship that had been floundering, and several of her men died from the arrows of that ship's crew, showing that whatever their faults as seamen they still retained enough skill at war craft to be dangerous. Asha herself nearly took an arrow in the cheek as she dived for the nearest bit of cover, the war galley's larger sides enabling the crew of that ship to fire down onto Black Wind's deck. But her crew fired back and soon enough the rigging and canvas on that ship was ablaze as well.

The other two longships had concentrated on catching up to the ship that had turned to engage the rest of the fleet, closing with it just as the war galley took the first longship of that portion of the fleet under fire. Suddenly the war galley found itself being attacked from all sides, and then two longships pulled alongside throwing their grapnels across.

Asha nodded in grim satisfaction and turned to her steersman. "Bring us back around, I want us first on the walls of that castle." Her crew gave a wild cheer at that, ignoring their dead fellows around them for now.

The rest of the fleet soon barreled into the port, more ships peeling off to attack the war galleys that she had crippled, while several others raced to aid their fellows near the lighthouse against the last sail-worthy war galley. Asha however had done enough for the overall battle, and now could get in a bit of looting for herself.

She pulled out her cutlass and her small hatchet, tossing it up and down in one hand as she grinned at her crew. "I want the lord and lady of the castle alive at least for now, and I'll be helping myself to some of her jewels, but other than that..." she shrugged eloquently then bellowed. "Who's ready to pay the iron price!?"

The Black Wind's crew answered it's captain with a roar, and the ship grounded directly underneath the castles walls, archers from above having already begun to fire at them ineffectually. Most of the armsmen of the castle might have been on the war galleys, or perhaps their sudden charge had taken them by surprise. Whichever the case, the defense wasn't nearly as strong as it could have been.

Grapnels were thrown up, and the men started to pull themselves up as archers on both sides began to fire much more accurately, at least going down. Asha lost over two dozen of her men in those few moments, but then the defenders had to split their fire when four more longships came into range grounding themselves on the shore all around the castle.

Someone on one of the other crews had been particularly forward thinking and had brought along a small battering ram, which they had quite a bit of difficulty getting over the side of the ship and onto the small strip of shore. However after that, they were able to race along the edge of the Castle towards the castle's entrance, which was a simple if heavy wooden door, not a portcullis or gate.

Suddenly Asha heard a hissing sound in the distance and then several screams abruptly cut off. Realizing what happened Asha wince even as she grabbed the grapnel rope in front of her. A second later she began to haul herself up the wall, her hatchet clenched between her teeth and her cutlass once more in its sheath. *It would seem someone*

*forgot to order their archers to take out anyone near the cauldrons with boiling pitch. I'm glad I remembered those Drowned God- damned things.*

Two more Ironborn ships grounded themselves on the rocks around the castle, their crews concentrating on taking the defenders under fire for a moment. Then, just as Asha put her hands up on the wall to haul herself over Asha heard the sounds of the battering ram begin its work.

Ignoring that Asha hauled herself up. She was then forced almost immediately to roll forward, nearly throwing herself off the parapet in her haste to get away from a sword stroke.

Her hatchet was out and in her hand a second later, hacking towards the man's leg. He went down with a scream clutching at his ruined calf, and she brought her hatchet back up to meet his chin, slicing into his face right through the small opening of his bucket helmet. Asha was then forced to roll onto the dead man's body, to get away from another sword blow. Impacting against an archer who had turned to engage her with his long dagger she brought her hatchet up again this time between his legs and he screamed the blow landed "GAaaaaahhh....!"

Behind Asha more men had pulled themselves up and were engaging the other defenders, getting the swordsman's attention. This allowed Asha enough time to regain her feet while she used the maimed archer to defend herself from another archer behind him who had turned trying to fire at her. She pushed the new eunuch in front of her into that man. Pulling out her cutlass at last Asha cut the second archers throat before knocking him off the parapet to land in the courtyard below as she raced on.

By this point over a dozen Ironborn had made their way up onto the top of the wall. Asha was soon joined by Qarl and a few more of her men, and with them at her back she forged her way towards the tower that would take them down to the courtyard and the keep below.

OOOOOO

The battle of Faircastle lasted for most of that day and well into the night. There was a holdfast in the center of the port that held out well. Yet after the war galleys were taken out it was never really in doubt, the longships allowing the Ironborn to concentrate their men wherever they wished along the docks of the city. The Ironborn crews that had been involved in taking the castle and the small holdfast had taken losses, some of them severe but what did that matter to them in comparison to the loot and plunder and above all salt wives they had taken in the castle and in the town.

What mattered more was the loss of three the longships. They had been lost in the battle against the one war galley that had gone after the two longships making for the watchtower. That war galley captain had proved to be much more capable than his fellows, and he was able to stay out of boarding range long enough for his archers and scorpions to take a deadly toll on the Ironborn.

Still, the loss of those three longships simply allowed the survivors of their crews to be used to patch up the losses in the other crews. Asha had lost 27 men dead and another 30 injured, so would need to winnow through the men off those lost ships to find replacements. Qarl had found the maester of the castle, and was currently standing over the man forcing him to help her injured, so at least a few of them would survive.

While the battle for the port continued Asha was standing in what had been the bedroom of the lord and lady of the Castle. The Lord was dead, he had fought decently enough for his old age in the entrance to the keep below. The lady of the castle however was still alive, and untouched, for now. Since she had been personally taken by Asha as part of her plunder, she would remain that way. That had earned Asha several odd looks from her crew, but they knew not to question her.

"I'm a bargaining piece I presume?" said the woman in question. She was a short and extremely buxom brunette. Slim in the waist she had hips and breasts that nearly any normal woman would have envied. Her face was not gorgeous but pleasant enough, and her eyes which were brown and somewhat deep, seemed actually intelligent, odd for a Greenlander woman.

"That depends on what family you're originally from." Asha said, looking at some of the jewelry the lady had. There weren't that many pieces to her collection, but one or two of them were very fine. One of them in particular grabbed Asha's attention, a bracelet with a torque of worked gold set with what looks like a very good quality sapphire. She reached forward, trying it on her wrist and turned to look at the other woman.

The Greenlander showed no outward sign of annoyance that Asha had stolen that from her which was good. She seemed to understand the realities of her new situation well enough. "I am Lady Daphne Crakehall once again since

you killed my husband and he had yet to father a child on me. I don't suppose you have any idea if any of the captains on the war galleys survived? He was the heir of the house and it's only son in point of fact."

"Almost certainly dead." Asha said without a hint of concern. "Crakehall? Of the Castle of the same name?" When she was young the Reader had made certain Asha knew the names of the more powerful Greenlander houses. She thought she remembered that one was important to the Westerlands.

This was true, since Crakehall stood on the Ocean Road and defending its southern border with the Reach. "Indeed. Nor I am I the daughter of a branch family, I am Lord Roland Crakehall's daughter, his fourth born child."

Asha look at the woman, trying to see if there was any deceit in her expression or body language, but she couldn't see anything there. After a moment Asha realized that keeping her up here separated from the rest would allow her to question the maester of the Castle and make certain of her back story. "Good, I might need you in the future. Which means you'll be safe from what my men have in-store for your maids and other female servants."

At the woman's look of incredulity Asha shrugged. "I might be an Ironborn, but I'm still woman, and that kind of crap bothers me. Can't stop it though."

Over the next few days it became clear that the victory and more importantly the amount of plunder and salt wives they had taken had given Asha enough clout with the other captains that she could begin to truly organize them, and begin to prepare to defend the Straits. She didn't think that word of this attack would get out quickly, they had taken every ship in the harbor and there weren't that many there to begin with. Unless the war galleys they sank were supposed to switch out with their fellows in Lannisport or something, Asha could keep word of this attack from getting out, and use it Faircastle as a forward base to attack any fleet moving to invade the iron Islands.

Two days after the initial battle the Ironborn were still winnowing through the small town for anything of value or any females pretty enough to take back to the Iron Islands as salt wives, or simply use as whores for the moment. However, Asha had once again taken to sea with *Black Wind* as well as several of the Harlaw ships including the one who's captain had been the one to bring along the battering ram. That showed a level of forward-thinking Asha wanted to encourage. They had put out to sea, moving further down the Straits cautiously.

So it was that they spotted the incoming small fleet of nine longships moving along almost fearfully down the Straits. Asha turned to her signalman. "Signal the other ships to start slowly turning around to Faircastle, we'll go forward and meet these fellows. It doesn't seem to me," she said in a loud voice that carried all along the deck just to make certain that this was passed along, "That these boys look like they won anything."

They weren't. As *Black Wind* got closer she saw that all of them were flying the flag of House Blacktyde. They kept moving, though they slowed when *Black Wind* came within shouting distance of the lead ship. "Who's your captain?"

Eventually *Black Wind* had come close enough to the Baelor Blacktyde's own to shout across at him. To say Baelor was surprised that Faircastle had fallen was an understatement, but he was happy of the news, and his ships followed him into the port quickly enough, quickly crowding it from one end to the other.

That was dangerous, and after ordering his captains to rotate half of their crews onto the shore he ordered their ships back out to sea to find other places to anchor for the day. "A single fire ship could destroy our entire fleet if it struck with us all here," he said to the few unhappy captains who questioned him.

Such questions had stopped almost entirely after they saw the Lannister fleet close the final jaws of the trap behind them. Before that, more than one captain among his house had been ready to challenge Baelor for his act of cowardice in turning away from the battle, but seeing those war galleys moving in and watching them deal almost contemptuously with the longships that had entered the port had changed their minds. The ambush he had done on the two war galleys that had tried to follow them had also helped his standing.

Baelor Blacktyde was a young man of Asha's age, though the two of them hadn't met before this. He had been sent as hostage to the Reach after Balon's first uprising, since the Reach forces had been the ones to take Blacktyde and Orkmont. He was tall, black haired and bearded, though rather than being the wild untamed thing most Ironborn seems to favor his beard was a neat affair somewhat longer than a normal goatee, but still extremely well cared for. His black eyes were sharp and intelligent, and his face lively. When Baelor spoke he could make the normally grating Ironborn tongue seem much more lively, much like Rodrik.

It was obvious watching her serve them that Daphne Crakehall was quite taken with his looks, and Asha rolled her eyes when she was certain neither of them were watching. For his part however Baelor seemed to ignore the woman for now, concentrating on relaying what he knew of the battle in Lannisport.

"So after making certain that none of the other war galleys were trailing us, we decided to cut hard for the land and head to the Straits. I felt that doing so might allow us to take a few merchant vessels between Lannisport and Faircastle. It had too, we took two of them before sighting you and my crews are well up for plunder at present, but neither ship actually fought back, simply taking to their rowboats and making for shore. "

In the Straits shore was a risky proposition for larger ships but small rowboats could make shore if they were lucky enough to figure out where the shore was rather than a small inlet that was cut off from the rest of the Westerlands by impassable columns of rock that stuck out of the coast. At times a small pirate operation popped up occasionally among the rocks, but frankly the trade that crossed the Straits just wasn't enough for them to make the most out of it.

Baelor stared across the dining table at Asha, who was lounging in one of the better plush seats in the castle, while he did the same on a sofa. The two of them alone at present save the lady of the castle who was serving them. His captains were no doubt present telling Asha's captains their tale of woe which would cause issues, but it was pretty obvious that Asha had just as much control about her fleet as he did his. For the moment at least. "So what are your plans?"

"The Lannisters aren't seamen, they don't like putting out to sea much further than they can see the land. I think they'll come straight down the Straits and make for Banefort, pick up what more men they can there and then invade the Islands. With the fleets elsewhere, the Islands are open for invasion. I aim to do what I can to stop that from happening."

Baelor nodded, still staring at her thoughtfully though his eyes flickered to the lady of the house once when she passed behind Asha. She was a pretty lass. Still his attention was firmly on more important matters. "I'll join you for that, if we can beat their fleet off we might be able to sue for peace with the Westerlanders, whatever hell else is happening down south."

Both of them became a little grim at that, but would not dare speak the words aloud, after all they were practically strangers. But the thought passed between them that the Rise of the Kraken might have been an unmitigated disaster. After all even if Balon and Victarion won their battles, what would that matter if the Iron Islands themselves were conquered behind them?

OOOOOO

Ranma and his men were making excellent time heading toward the Trident and beyond when the sky finally cleared. With the rain pounding down it had taken them four and a half days to get the pikes onto the road, which was amazingly fast for any other army, very slow for them. Still, their rate of advance sped up after they reached the road.

Their first destination would be the town of Harroway. That city was one of only three smaller supply points that could supply Tywin's army, mostly tools and weapons, as an area it was actually more important than Stone Hedge or Wayfarer's Rest. Much like the other Westerlands-allied areas around Darry and Harrenhal, Harroway also supplied the army camped outside Raventree Hall. This meant that in terms of food at least, they would not be able to help feed Tywin's army.

For now though, the sun was high in the sky the day was beautiful, and for Ranma and Fenris at least the pace of the Army wasn't difficult at all. Ranma let himself be lulled into a moment of downtime between battles, holding Daenerys in front of him. Possibly sensing this the rest of the lords had moved back to lead their own men in the column rather than stay at the front, leaving the two would-be royals with Smalljon and their other friends.

Fenris loped along at the head of the army, and though he was somewhat happy at the moment he was a little irritated. While normally he wouldn't care about carrying his bonded or his mate, the two of them had been parted for several weeks, and Fenris knew that such as that could make mates anxious for one another's affections. Fenris just hoped the two of them weren't going to, what was the human term for sniffing and rubbing against one another, flirting? He just hoped they didn't do anything like that while riding on his back.

Ranma took in the scenery, noting that there were some smallfolk in the fields nearby and wondering what they grew here in this portion of the Riverlands. His mind however wasn't really on what he was seeing, no was really concentrating on the future. *Time's getting on, we have at best another year before winter hits. By that point the lands need to be prepared.*

In his arms Daenerys leaned her head back lightly against Ranma's shoulder. "What are you thinking about?"

"Transportation, manpower the need to get farmers out to their fields for at least one more harvest, and everything else that's involved with getting the North and the Riverlands ready for winter." Ranma replied, shrugging his

shoulders. "Autumn's been declared, which means we have time for one more harvest before winter hits, and it'll be important to bring in as large a harvest as possible. I'm also thinking whether or not Vincent will have any luck in thinking of a way to create more glass gardens down in Riverrun or anywhere else, and how long it will take the Royal canal project to be finished, as well as the Umber canal."

Daenerys smirked impishly struck by a sudden desire to tease. She lifted her hips off of Fenris, pushing back with her rear slightly against Ranma's lap. "Reeeally?"

"Well not now." Ranma growled his arms around her tightening slightly. It had been nearly a month since the last time the two of them had been able to make love and their policy of not making love while in the field surrounded by their army had had truly begun to bite them hard.

A warning growl from below them caused Daenerys to move forward slightly, sighing regretfully. It was amazing to her how much she enjoyed that aspect of their relationship, and she was looking forward to getting to Harroway and having at least a single night together.

Thinking about that town she began to go over the plans they had made for after reaching that town. "Are you certain sending Lord Karstark down to the town of Saltfans is a good idea? I understand the need, I'm just wondering if he's the right one for the job. Wouldn't Smalljon be a better bet, or Lord Mallister?"

"I think Smalljon might be needed later on, he's the only other one with even a bit of training in how to lead the pike regiments. As for choosing Rickard, my kinsman might not be the most diplomatic soul, but he's better at it than Greatjon, and he proved his ability to command before this war even began. Jason's good, but I might need him to speak to some of the Riverlands lords on the other side of the Trident such as Lord Vance of Atranta, Lord Blackwood and even the Lannister allies, since we don't have a good idea about why some of them joined with them."

"I know Blackwood fought against the Westerlanders, but my father never told me much about the man, and I want someone with us who knows them. But you didn't suggest any of the other Riverlands lords, hmmm?" Ranma finished with a chuckle, squeezing Daenerys around her stomach, fighting with himself to keep his hands from wandering.

"I like Blantyre well enough, but he's got a lot of anger in him, best to keep him close." Daenerys replied firmly. "Ryger is too arrogant and Roote too much of an... what did Smalljon call him? An ass licker? Beyond the fact we'll need him in Harroway." *And beyond the little trap I made in our agreement with him, if the townspeople aren't happy to see him...* "But you don't sound worried about the rest of this campaign."

"Tywin is hampered by four things, morale, organization, supplies, and time." Ranma replied. "His morale is in the crapper right now, as is his organization because he just lost a major battle after technically winning for several weeks. Worse, he lost at least half of his men in that battle in a one-sided affair that every one of his soldiers knows was one-sided, and in which he was outsmarted from the get-go. Armsmen aren't stupid, they'll realize that just as well as any Lord could which brings me to the second portion of that issue. He doesn't have many lords left to keep discipline, and worse, he doesn't have anything like our system of sergeants in place."

"Supply we've already gone over that one. But that word doesn't just mean food. Arrows, lances for their cavalry, leather to fix their boots or armor, or pieces of metal to fix their armor, new weapons, which are always needed after a battle, all of that falls under the heading of supplies. And thanks to Wendel, Tywin's force won't have many tents, cooking supplies, or other camp necessities either. I've made certain that our army is well-stocked with everything of that nature but even we are beginning to feel the strain, and Tywin's army is going to be far worse off."

"And third, he knows that he needs to keep his army intact, he can't take another loss like he has already. He called up everything the Westerlands had, the Westerlands won't be able to supply another army for months maybe even a year, during which the winner of this war will be have been decided and winter may well have arrived even this far south. I played on that and his desperation to get down to King's Landing when I baited him."

"Are we going to follow them once they leave the Riverlands?"

"It depends on the direction and the status of our own army. If Tywin tries to escape by the River Road, they won't even get out of the Riverlands. We'll crush them between us and Wayfarer's Rest or smash them on the road when they run into us."

"You're putting a lot of faith in Jon," Daenerys said, not critically just commenting. "I thought that Wayfarer's Rest wasn't that good of the Castle."

"It won't have to be. If Tywin retreats from his fortifications at the Kneeling Man's Ford, we'll be right behind them. All

Jon will have to do is slow them down and we can crush the Westerlanders right there."

"Beyond that, we'll need to reform the army, rest, and put the Riverlands in order as much as possible. Winter is coming Daenerys," he said seriously shaking his head. "Regardless of the other factions warring elsewhere we need to remember that, and look to our people."

Daenerys nodded, but decided she'd had enough of the serious talk for now. She took Ranma's hands, gently kneading them where they held her around the middle. "And will we have time enough for some farming of our own?" she said.

Ranma gulped. "Er, I, I thought we'd decided that we, we wouldn't have children until after we'd secured to the crown." Despite his self-control Ranma's hands began to knead Daenerys' stomach rising slightly higher to gently bump the bottom of her breasts. Daenerys was wearing a simple shirt and leggings combo as she had since leaving Winterfell, though this one had been a gift from Lord Seagard and was much more form fitting than the others she had, which showed.

"I know..." Daenerys said with a sigh leaning her head back against his shoulder for a moment then kissing his neck lightly for just a second, not speaking of one of her deepest fears, which was connected to childbirth, not now, it was too pleasant a day out. "And the equation still hasn't changed. You might need my dragons in the field, and I'm the only one that can command them. But practicing is rather fun though don't you think?"

Ranma growled back an acknowledgment, leaning forward slightly to nibble at Daenerys's neck forgetting that Smalljon, Merry and their other friends were to either side of him for a moment and even that Fenris was under him. That was brought strongly to mind however when Fenris leapt forward rather than loping along, almost bucking like a horse would to throw his two riders off. Ranma scrambled to grab onto Fenris for a while Daenerys did the same with a startled yelp, causing Smalljon and the others on either side to burst out in laughter.

Barely another day's march brought them to the Trident, across which they could see the town of Harroway. Originally the town had been situated directly on the river, but it had been burned since then in the War of Conquest and then again later on during the Dance of Dragons and the rivers had shifted slightly. Now it sat on the southern edge of the Trident, a squat, somewhat ugly little town, but still much cleaner seeming to Ranma than King's Landing.

Ranma hadn't stopped here on the way down to the capital, the King's party had pushed on to Darry instead. Ostensibly this was because Robert felt that the whores in Harroway were substandard and one could never tell if they had any diseases, but whether that was the real reason Ranma didn't know.

When the vanguard of the army was just out of bow range they halted, the command group moving off the road slightly to a small rise in the land. Once there, Ranma nodded over to Patrek. With his injured arm Patrek had become the standard bearer for the march rather than a front line swordsman. That hadn't stopped Ranma from starting his training though. "Raise the banner Patrek, let's tell them who we are!"

That statement roused a cheer from lords and common soldiers alike all around them, while Daenerys laughed aloud, her violet eyes glinting in eagerness. For his part Patrek smiled then unwound the banner standing upright next to him, allowing it to fly free. The banner was quickly caught in the breeze, and the shouts and cheers of the men around them expanded.

The banner that Sansa had designed back in Winterfell was a magnificent symbol of the unity of the Stark and Targaryen families, though it broke many of the conventions of heraldry. It was a large, five feet by three feet banner, denoting a tower shield. The shield was bisected with one side having the gray of House Stark for a background, while in the foreground was half a dragon's face, its maw gaping open. On the other side set on the black of House Targaryen was a wolf's muzzle. Its mouth was open as well and the two faces were set so they seemed to merge in the center of the shield.

At this signal Daenerys concentrated, calling upon Sunfyre and Rhaegon. The two of them had been resting in two of the very few carts following the army, but at her call quickly flew into the air and forward of the army. Even from out of bow range they could hear the screams begin from the townspeople and Westerlands garrison.

"That's it my lady," Ranma murmured from where he now stood next to Daenerys. "Scare them, they've already heard about you from that spy that got away, it won't take long to frighten them. Either they surrender or they run, I really doubt they have the stomach to stay and fight but if they do even then the dragons can take their attention away from our men moving forward. Lord Roote." He said, turning to that man. "This was your town, you lead the way in."

Roote jolted a little, staring over the Trident at his town, the single-story walls seemed almost to tower twenty stories

in his mind, and the archers on top seemed to multiply as he stared. He gulped, backing his horse away slightly, but before anyone could call him on it. Daenerys spoke up, her voice the odd, stilted tone that showed how much she was concentrating on her dragons. "Wait. Something's happening."

Daenerys watched through Rhaegon's eyes she saw four armymen burst out of what looked like a well-to-do merchant's house. One of them was dragging a young girl behind him, while carrying what looked like a carpet over one shoulder, while another was hauling along a woman. There were a dozen other men waiting outside with bundles of what she assumed were stolen items on their horses already. There were also a number of dead smallfolk in the streets. The nearest townfolk still alive were a few houses down, staring at the group of armymen fearfully from around the walls of a house there.

As she watched a boy who couldn't be older than Rickon rushed out from the house along with a man wielding a frying pan. One of the armymen guffawed and smacked the man wielding the ironing pan to the ground with the flat of his blade, but the boy got in his way when he tried to thrust his sword into the down man's body, cutting the man's arm with what looks like some kind of knife. Enraged the man lifted his sword to strike the boy down.

Then he however had seen enough, and releasing her control of Rhaegon for a moment with a final order to simply fly around she forced her considerable control onto Sunfyre. "*Dive, help the little-human against big-human, use claws!*"

The dragons by this point were about the size of a pony, minus their wings of course. Their claws were also now very sharp, and powerful enough to take down a deer with ease. Their backs weren't strong enough to carry anyone, but they did have striking power.

At his mistress' mental command Sunfyre flew down his claws extended. He dodged a few arrows fire from here and there in the town, but most of the archers on the wall had already fled their posts, completely spooked by the two dragons flying just out of bow range. This was not helped by watching Sunfyre dive down as if it he was a hunting hawk avoiding their fire as he did.

The guardsmen about to cut the young boy down had a moment to wonder what was blocking the sun and to hear his fellows begin to cry out in fear before he died. Sunfyre's claws slammed into the back of his head taking it off his shoulders. His body went down in a welter of blood and brain matter as Sunfyre roared. The horses that the Westerlanders had hoped to use to escape the town bolted, dragging two of them along the road with them for a moment before they lost their grips on the stirrups while the other armymen ran off screaming.

By that point Sunfyre was already banking back up, and Daenerys was faced with her hardest mental challenge yet. Going up Sunfyre didn't have the speed that he had going down and the archers were better prepared. Luckily there still weren't many of them willing to try to shoot at the dragons rather than run away, and after a few harrying moments during which Daenerys nearly bit through her upper lip she had Sunfyre once more back in the air circling the town with Rhaegon.

At last Daenerys opened her eyes again, looking over at her husband. "The townspeople are rebelling and the garrison is attempting to loot the place in some areas of the town before getting away." She reported quickly. "It's getting ugly in there."

Ranma nodded, not questioning why she had risked Sunfyre that way. Later Daenerys would castigate herself for it, though Ranma would praise her when told the story. That moment, when rather than trying to protect her dragons Daenerys used them to save a nameless and unknown child showed Ranma once again that Daenerys was a woman after his own heart.

For now Ranma turned to the others, barking out orders quickly. "Wendel, pick out your best and most disciplined knights, I'll want two flying columns of a hundred and fifty each, the first moving after me as soon as possible. Smalljon, Patrek, Greatjon, you'll go with the second group to circle the town. Ser Blantyre, Jason, you'll stay here and keep the rest of the army back for now. **Control** Sers, we want to move into that town and restore order with the minimal loss of life either to the garrison or to the townfolk. Once we capture them, the guards can then stand trial, it'll be a good trial run for the prisoners we've already taken, but we need to restore order, anarchy helps no one."

*At least not on this scale*, he thought to himself rather amused. Ranma was already thinking about taking on Stannis, and against someone like that, chaos and the ability to ride it would help, just as much as having lieutenant he trusted to act on their own initiative had. *After all, if I can't predict what Dacey of all people would do, how is someone else supposed to?*

While the others all nodded understanding, Lord Roote looked caught between relief at not having to lead the charge and anger that Ranma wasn't putting him in charge of the attack group. Ranma noticed that, but didn't care, instead

he raced off sprinting towards the town on the other side of the Trident. He moved so fast he was almost a blur crossing the distance within a minute of setting off while behind him Fenris stayed behind growling irritably. Ranma had also given him some very specific orders, which didn't make the direwolf happy, but he would do his part.

There were a few archers by the northward gate that had remained at their posts not because of courage but because the area around them had already fallen under the control of the townsfolk. They had even been forced to kick away the ladders leading up to the wall. The wall of the town wasn't well-built enough to actually have a staircase or towers.

*Something that would have to change*, Ranma mused. By then time that thought shot across his brain however Ranma was already leaping into the air. He cleared the outer wall easily, his sword flicking out left and right in midair to chop two of the archers on the wall into pieces before he continued on, landing easily on his feet on the other side of the gate.

Instead of forcing it open however, Ranma raced on, Ice now blazing with ki as he charged into a ferocious melee going on between a group of seven or eight guardsmen and two dozen townsfolk. None of the townspeople were armored or armed as well as that initial group that Daenerys had spotted, and several of them were already down, dead or wounded.

Ranma smashed into the battle like a bowling ball hitting the nine pins. He sent men through the air or stumbling to the ground with that first rush then threw Ice into the air, grabbing one armstrong by the arm pulling him into a kick that sent him flying into several of his fellows. Then Ranma weaved through the melee, working to separate the two sides with the minimal amount of force needed.

Grabbing one man right under the arm Ranma ducked under another blow, kicking out and sending two men, one townsman and one armstrong to either side of the street before twisting around his hold on the first man slamming a palm into the back of his head, knocking him out easily. Before the man collapsed Ranma used his head as a standing board, lashing out with kicks to all around him before leaping off, dodging blades and even a flail he leaped into a clump of combatants.

While the townspeople got the idea they should back off the Westerlanders tried to fight back or run, but failed at both. Soon enough they were all disarmed and hurting. The townspeople saw this and rushed to attack again but Ice fell out of the sky at that moment. Ranma grabbed it out of the air and brought it down point first with as much speed as the sword's Valyrian steel could handle. The point of Ice impacted the ground of the road shattering it and sending a shockwave through the air which slammed into the people all around and threw them back away from one another. Thanks to Ranma's earlier work in separating them, the two groups were now fully separated at two different sides of the street.

"Enough!" Ranma shouted, glaring around then pointed at the Westerlanders. "You lot, hands where I can see them." He turned to the townsfolk who were getting back to their feet. Many of them were not looking at him though, still glaring at the Westerlanders. "Tie them up. I don't know what they've done here, but they will stand trial for it after we take the town."

"Who are you to tell us to back down!? Those bastards have it coming!" shouted one man, but he quailed as Ranma's eyes pinned into the floor.

"I am Ranma Stark-Targaryen, grandson and speaker of the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands and Lord Paramount of the North. And I tell you now that they will stand trial, but this chaos will stop! Before I arrived these guards were winning against you lot! And do you think that these are the only ones who are trying to take advantage of the fighting here, or that all of those who do will be from the garrison?!"

Violence hovered in the air there was a moment, the townspeople could have turned on Ranma right then, but Ranma didn't seem to notice, simply barking out orders. "You five," he said pointing to the largest and strongest looking of the townspeople. "You're with me, we'll move towards the central holdfast and gather as many of your fellow townsfolk to organize this mess."

"You two," he said pointing to a few older men who had the look of men who had seen battle before this. "You're in charge of the prisoners. I want them alive remember, the rest of you spread out and tell your fellows that you all will have justice if they start to calm the fighting down."

Twenty yards behind where Ranma had ended that skirmish there was a sudden booming crash. Ranma smirked as Fenris, glowing blue-gold smashed straight through the flimsy gate of the town at the head of the flying column that he had ordered Wendel put together. Around him the townspeople began to scatter, but a barked order from Ranma



stopped them, the smallfolk's ingrained training to follow orders holding them for moment.

In that moment Ranma once again took command, and his orders were now obeyed as Wendel and his men began to spread through the town.

Ranma looked at the five men he'd chosen and asked "Where d'you think is the center of the fighting is it the keep or elsewhere?"

"We've got the Northwest under control," One of them said. The Grand is over there, and he was organized and waiting for a chance! If we're 'aving any trouble, it's pro'bly by the fat bastard's keep, the garrison took it over as their barracks when he fled like a yellow belly!"

Ranma frowned, hearing that said aloud. Lord Roote's retreat from Harroway was one of the problems he had with the man. Not that he could have protected the place, after all the walls were a joke, most of the buildings he could see were wood, and he didn't have that many men, a bare 600 or so and not many of them decently trained or outfitted. However he could have ordered the town abandoned entirely, forcing the smallfolk out with him further north. Instead he'd simply ran, which both Ranma and Daenerys felt was, as Daenerys put it once 'damning evidence of the so-called care he gives the smallfolk who are supposed to look to him for protection.'

But something else the man said grabbed his attention. "The Grand, who's that?"

The men all around him clammed up, and Ranma laughed shaking his head. "All right, you don't have to tell me now but I hope he'll come forward after order's been restored. He sounds like someone I'd like to meet."

He turned to Wendel, who was still on his horse of course. "You know what to do Wendel. The knight nodded his head and Ranma reached up to clasp arms with him briefly before the two men raced it in different directions.

Riding around the town's walls the second of Wendel's cavalry column along with Fenris smashed in from the south, shattering that gate as well. Then they held it easily against the forty men from the garrison who had just reached it. Twenty-two of those men surrendered after Fenris ripped five of their fellows into pieces and Greatjon had cut two of them down with the ease of a man long accustomed to such excursions. The fear of the dragons, the coming of the direwolf from the south, the fact that both of the gates were now held by their enemies and the fact that every Northerner had taken up Ranma's shout of surrender as they moved through the town made the garrison quit fighting quickly.

Stopping the smallfolk from killing them all took a bit longer, but even then it wasn't as difficult as it could've been. The shock and awe of the dragons, as well as the direwolf and Ranma himself worked for them, and there were only about 2000 perhaps 3000 smallfolk in the town in any event. And even using clubs and staffs the men from the north were more than a match for the Westerlander garrison, most of whom were barely trained levy units, with a smattering of armsmen and archers pulled from minor noble houses. They didn't have the armor or the training of the knights of House Manderly.

Eventually the prisoners were gathered outside the Lord Roote's keep, where the rest of the army commanders joined Ranma, Wendell and the others. However, this almost unmade the work Ranma and his fellows had done pacifying the town.

"Traitor!" said one man from among the townfolk, pointing angrily at Lord Roote who along with a few of his men had come forward with the other Lords.

"Coward!" shouted another.

"Despoiler!" shouted another. That time it was a female voice, and Ranma noted that she looked as if she was some kind of maid. As he noted that, someone else threw a piece of rotten fruit which smacked into Lord Roote's chain mail. Another one caught him in the face, and he backed away from the townspeople looking around worriedly.

A few of Roote's men made to move forward, and the grumble from the watching crowd began again but stopped instantly as Ranma and Fenris were suddenly in the men's faces. "Back off if you want to live." Ranma said in a soft tone that still carried through the suddenly silent crowd.

"Why do I get the impression my Lord Roote, that you fled 'your' town in a different manner than you told us?" said Daenerys, riding up on her own horse with Ser Barristan on his following by her side. Myrcella wasn't with her, having commandeered several of the locals who had remained by the gate to show her to where those in need of medical attention were taken prior to and during the outbreak of violence. Naturally enough that was the sept of the town.

"You already knew that I had to retreat quickly from the town my lady." Lord Roote said, staring between her, Ranma and the townspeople, who now once more looked as if they were poised on a knife's edge of violence.

"Yes I knew that, and though it didn't speak highly of your courage, it did speak somewhat of your good sense. But you left your people behind, you insinuated to us that that was because you retreated precipitously? Is that not the case?"

"I don't know what that word means milady," shouted someone from in the crowd, "but he had enough time to loot his own way out!"

"Truly?" Daenerys said looking at the man before turning back to Lord Roote, though her words were still addressed to the man who had spoken. "And would you be willing to testify to that?"

The man looked bemused for a moment for another member of the crowd leaned in and whispered hurriedly into his ear. He then nodded and several dozen others also shouted they had seen the same thing.

"Hundreds of us could do that ladyship!" said another somewhat deeper voice. The crowd seemed to part for a moment, letting through an older man of Ser Barristan's age.

Looking at him, Ranma got the impression of solidness. He looked like a cross between a well-to-do merchant and drover, possibly a man who had made the jump between working in someone else's warehouse to owning his own. In one hand he held a billhook that was dark with blood.

He looked at Ranma not like a smallfolk normally would to a lord, but almost challengingly. "I'm the Grand, Grimaldi Anderson lordship. I was told you wanted to speak with me?"

"Tell me Ser," Ranma said moving forward to hold out his hand to the other man. "You say that Lord Roote pillaged the town before leaving, did he do that kind of thing often, simply taking whatever he wanted? And what were his taxes like?"

"Not often, but taxes have been heavier ever since the little fucker took over from his old man." The older man replied bluntly, not showing his surprise that a lord would offer to shake hands with him, but grasping the younger man's arm firmly, though the power of that grip told him Ranma wasn't someone to cross. "There've also been tales of a few maids who were suddenly sent home to their families out in the countryside."

"You have no proof of that." Lord Roote muttered, gathering his men around him as the crowd's muttering became louder and darker. It was evident that there was a lot of repressed feelings there, and after the last few months of being under Lannister rule plus the final outlet of violence none of these people were willing to go back to the status quo.

"More than a dozen people here just said they would testify that very thing." Daenerys said.

Lord Roote move towards her blustering angrily, not noticing that Ser Barristan had loosened his blade in his sheath and moved to one side while his own men had carefully raised their own hands away from their weapons. All of them had seen Ranma in action, and beyond that they could count. "We had an agreement!" said Lord Roote angrily.

"Yes a written agreement since you and Lord Wayn wanted the pacts I made with you in writing." Daenerys said. "You would retain control of Harroway and gain lands from House Darry, in return for your backing us in the future. Contingent upon there being no wrongdoing against the smallfolk on your part." She smiled faintly as Lord Roote blanched. "Did you think I put that in as only a bit of fluff to fill in the parchment? Rest assured that we will get to the bottom of these claims against you. For now, I believe it best that you remain in our care."

As Lord Roote was pulled protesting from the saddle Daenerys turned to Ranma. Leaning close she said "I will oversee the trials of the garrison. You should oversee Lord Roote, take Ser Grimaldi and some of the other local representatives with you." At his quizzical expression she explained, her eyes showing her sadness. "I need to show that I can wield the sword Ranma."

"And I need to show that I can handle politics and matters of law," Ranma said with a nod. "Makes sense especially if we want everyone to realize that this is an equal relationship. We both need to show that we are equally capable in as many fields of ruling is possible."

"Exactly." Daenerys nodded, leaning in to kiss his cheek lightly. "Have some of the men bring out a few chairs, I'll oversee the trials for the garrison and any other looters our men found outside, and you can deal with Lord Roote inside until the time comes for sentencing."

Just then the crowd screamed a bit, moving back hurriedly as Sunfyre and Rhaegon both landed by Daenerys. She looked at them, then smiled faintly, reaching out to gently stroke them under their chins. "Well done my little ones, she murmured, sending a feeling of approval and love down their link, getting back a feeling of intense hunger. That made her frown a little. "I think first though I need to let these two hunt, their exertions have made them tired. Unless there is a surplus of meat or fish in the town?"

Surprisingly a few of the smallfolk answered, having gotten over their fear thanks to seeing the Northmen not retreating from the dragons and the dragons not lashing out "We just got a from further downstream milady, said one man who looked like a fisherman. "Mostly crab and shellfish, if'n that please ye, milady."

Daenerys blinked, looking at her dragons. "They've not had shellfish or crab before, so we'll see." With a hand gesture she sent Sunfyre and Rhaegon into the air, sending them toward the town's small dock, situated on its northeast side. "I'll get them fed and come back quickly to start the trials."

Ranma nodded, yet asked, "But are you going to actually wield the sword?"

That caused Daenerys to pause. That was one aspect of the North that had astonished her, that the man who passed the sentence personally wielded the blade. She liked it too, it showed how serious they were about law and honor. "I will." She said firmly staring into Ranma's eyes. After a moment he nodded, and the two of them split off to begin organizing the trials.

It turned out that both dragons absolutely adored crabs and other shellfish. The crunchiness of the shells and the rubbery nature of the meat were very much to their liking. Wanting to get the two dragons some more exercise, Daenerys ordered the fishermen to let the crabs out into the water of the Trident. Sunfyre and Rhaegon gleefully splashed into the water after them, swimming here and there as they gobbled the crunchy treats up one after another.

This show actually attracted a following of smallfolk, including several dozen of the children from the town, who began to root for Sunfyre or Rhaegon as they chased the crabs down. Smiling Daenerys fielded questions about her little ones, having determined long before this that while the fear of them was a tool, it could also be a rallying point for her enemies, as it had in the past during the Dance of Dragons, when the dragons in the pit in King's Landing were attacked by a mob. She never wanted the dragons to be so hated again, even if they would eventually be used in battle.

Soon enough however the two dragons waddled out of the water, laying down to nap on the riverbank. Daenerys left them there with several of the pages and squires watching them, making certain the smallfolk stayed away. Daenerys and Ser Barristan moved back to the holdfast, ready to start an unpleasant duty.

OOOOOO

Renly Baratheon was very worried and very angry, but he didn't allow either of those emotions to appear on his face. The news that the Ironborn had assaulted the Arbor and the Shield Islands and actually won was astonishing and very worrying. The fact that the second echelon wasn't as large as he had hoped was also worrying. Gone was his plan to have so large an army that he could simply overawe his opponents. Gone too was the idea of leaving a portion of his army here to keep the blockade of the city going while he turned with the rest to face his brother. They just didn't have the manpower to both retain their cordon around King's Landing and face Stannis's army, not with the kind of force disparity that Renly wanted.

Around him the Stormlands and Reach Lords were muttering angrily, shaking their heads in dismay at the news that Lord Ambrose had shared with them. Their initial responses had been much louder, but Mace had bellowed them down saying that his son had done the right thing, and that he trusted Garlan to be able to handle the Ironborn assault.

That Randyll Tarly agreed with Mace helped quiet most of those murmurs. "Garlan has a good head on his shoulders, and as long as he listens to Lord Hightower on matters pertaining to sea warfare, he'll do well enough."

Renly spoke into the silence after Randyll had finished speaking nodding his head. "Indeed Lord Tyrell your son did right to turn back with such a force. I have no doubt that's Garlan will continue to do his utmost to retake the Arbor and the Shield Islands. After we are done with King's Landing and my brother has been brought to heel we will have to consider what to do about the Iron Islands. This is the second time they have rebelled." Renly put on a serious expression and stared around him as hard as he could. "I think we should make certain that there is not a third occurrence."

Nods of approval from all around him answered Renly's words, even Randyll agreed with that idea. Renly went on thoughtfully. "We might even be able to pay the Lyseni pirate fleet out there to aid us. That and the Royal Fleet would give us naval superiority whatever the Ironborn tried to do to defend their Isles.

"I still say we should pull out some more of our forces and send them back home." Said Lord Dunn, His lands were on the Mander, and he knew all too well what a good route for invasion the river could be for the Ironborn. In point of fact by the time Lord Dunn heard about the invasion his lands already been ravaged, and his keep destroyed. His wife had also been taken as a salt wife and transported back to the Shield Islands.

There was a murmur of approval for that, but Renly held up a hand quickly. "My lords, remember what we have heard from the city. There is a plague in there! We need to keep as much of our army here as possible to keep a lid on the city, we cannot allow any refugees out until the plague is dealt with internally." How such a thing could be accomplished Renly didn't know, nor did he particularly care. He simply wanted to keep the plague inside, and then ride in to claim his throne when it died down enough for it to be safe.

"And there is my brother to consider, we need to retain enough force here to face him as well as cordon off the city. Unless you all have a better method of keeping the population of the city contained, in which case do share it but until then we have to stay put." That this allowed Renly to retain control of the largest army in Westeros was simply a side benefit. 62,000 men should be enough to face any threat.

There was a moment more of grumbling, and Renly could tell that despite the obvious logic of what he had said many of them were still unhappy but there was nothing he could do about it. The plague was nailing his feet here despite the fortifications they had thrown up around the city. And Stannis was out there as well, marching towards the city now.

Still slowly for some reason, it would be at least another week with the rate Stannis was marching. That was astonishing given an army his size could only have taken for five days normally to get from Stokeworth to the capital but now it was moving so slowly it had been on the road from Stokeworth a little under a week and was still that far away.

"Let us turn to other matters my lords." Renly said again nodding his head at Lord Ambrose. "Thank you for your report, and thank you for continuing the march up here my Lord, that will not be forgotten."

As the man beamed more than one Reach Lord shared glances with one another, shaking their heads angrily though Mace was nodding his head ponderously. None of them had as much faith in Garlan as Randyll or Mace did. After all, while he was known to be a fine warrior in the tourney, he had never been challenged as a field commander much like far too many summer knights. And their holdings were in peril from the Ironborn.

More than one man there wondered if they should pull their men out of the Stormlands/Reach army and head back home. But peer pressure was an awful thing, and with the number of lords against that idea they were forced to remain. At least for now. But all of them were prepared to head home as soon as they could.

Renly was not aware of the cracks in his authority spreading like that, and he turned to the two lords in charge of scouting and gathering information from the smallfolk. Originally only Lord Staedmon had been in charge of that, but Lord Cockshaw had proven that he had a good touch with interacting with the smallfolk. That Cockshaw was also being passed messages from Varys was well known to Renly, but Renly considered it simply business as usual, a sign that the Master of Whispers wasn't a Lannister supporter merely someone who wished to retain his own position. "Any news?"

The two men looked at one another and Staedmon waved at his fellow lord to answer first. Cockshaw bowed formally to Renly then looked at him as well as his fellow lords. "News has reached the smallfolk around here of a major battle up in the Riverlands. The lion and the wolves have met, and the Lannisters are in full retreat after suffering a tremendous loss. No one knows any details, except that it was very one-sided, that Ranma Stark and his northerners only took a pittance in casualties while gutting the Lannister forces."

There were some exclamations of astonishment there, including one coming from Randyll. He hadn't really put much truck in the idea of the Stark youth as a general, his father yes, but Ranma? A good warrior, possibly an excellent one given his destruction of the Mountain That Rode, but being a general was a very different thing.

"There are no details of how this was accomplished?" Loras asked. He rarely put himself forward in these meetings any longer, ashamed of his looks even if he and Renly had healed the rift between them somewhat. But this was interesting enough to make him speak up.

"None." Cockshaw replied, shrugging. "Rumor is rarely good for detail, in fact I'd even take the 'one-sided' portion of that report with a grain of salt, but it's certain that the Lannisters lost and are in retreat."

"It might be time to send out an envoy to the Starks." said one Lord from the Reach thoughtfully. "We certainly have an enemy in common and possibly as many as three."

Cockshaw coughed apologetically. "There have also been many more rumors about the Starks having the aide of former Targaryen loyalists. Some rumors out of Duskenale say that Ranma Stark returned with the Stormborn, and she had two young dragons. Those rumors at least are solid..." He trailed off looking around at everyone's faces.

Renly's eyes widened and he too looked around knowing that this news had hit like a jug of wildfire among the lords here. The Reach and its lords had in the majority stayed loyal to the Targaryen Dynasty. They had been ineffectual in that loyalty yet could still be counted among the closet Targaryen loyalists. If there was any truth in the rumors that the dragons themselves had returned, then rather than simply being a symbol for someone else's ambition, the Targaryen girl became a power to be courted.

With that in mind Renly spoke up quickly, an idea forming in his mind. "If that is indeed the case, then we will make overtures to the Starks immediately. I'll send a messenger this very day as soon as we can discuss the wording my lords. However I do not believe that the Targaryen alone should sit on the throne. At least not in this generation. No, they should instead be wedded to the royal line, part of it but not sitting on the throne. Too often those Targaryen members that sit on that throne change over time, becoming mad."

His words had a noted effect among many of his listeners, and more than one Lord found himself nodding remembering not just the Mad King, but those Targaryen members from the Dance of Dragons, and of course Maegor the Cruel, who had ravaged the Reach in his war against the Faithful.

"How so?" said one Lord cocking his head quizzically.

"I note Lord Mace, and that only one of your three sons has married yet." Renly said smiling faintly. "I'm certain if given the choice between fighting for a throne now and guaranteeing her children sitting on the right side of that throne with the full might of the Reach, the Stormlands and apparently the Starks behind such a dynasty, this Stormborn girl will see reason."

Mace look at him then grinned widely as he finally understood what Renly was getting at.

Needless to say, the rumors that Ranma and Daenerys had married had not spread as far as the rumors of the dragons return. If it had, then Renly's idea would never have been taken seriously, especially considering that the Starks were already aiding the Targaryen queen.

Renly once more tried to change the subject, turning to Lord Staedmon. "Lord Mace and I will work on that later, for now, why don't you tell us what my brother is up too."

"He's still moving very slowly my Lord, and seems to be treading lightly on the smallfolk as he has since Stokeworth." Everyone there nodded. The farmland around Stokeworth was well known to be almost as good as that routinely found in the Reach so that made sense. "The weather isn't the cause of their moving so slowly, though I have no idea what is."

It had rained here near King's Landing twice in the last few weeks, light showers that amounted to nothing though they had not helped the general morale of the army. Health wasn't affected, since Lord Randyll had had a hand in each of the creation of the camps scattered around King's Landing. A few troopers were having health issues, but not many.

This was one area where Renly had listened to Lord Randyll from the very beginning, and he had requisitioned every maester and septon of every castle along their route from Highgarden up to King's Landing, as well as any other healers that could be found. Not all of them were as well suited to taking care of the health of the army as others, but the 'quantity approach' had worked so far.

"So we have another week to prepare for his arrival." Renly said with a firm nod. "Good, keep your scouts watching his army, I don't want to be surprised if they suddenly speed up or do a forced march to catch us by surprise. Also," he said turning to the Lord in charge of construction projects. "If you could prepare a pavilion well back of our camps, say right outside bow-range of the nearest encampment to my brother's route of march I think that would be a good idea. I've said before, I'll give him one chance to talk and that will need to happen on neutral ground."

After that the meeting wound down, and eventually ended without any further new information coming to their attention. Renly was true to his word, and sent off twenty men with a messenger up to Harroway. Ser Willam Wythers went with them, in fact he had insisted on being part of the party though no one knew why. Behind them that party left a group of lords who were now thinking very hard about the intelligence of continuing to back Renly Baratheon.

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At the same time that Renly and his army were finally hearing about the return of Daenerys Stormborn and her two dragons, a fleet was rounding Massey's Hook. Every ship flew the three headed red dragon on black of House Targaryen. Their target, Dragonstone. Viserys was a firm believer in symbolism, though his next target would be a much more useful goal.

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It turned out that there were in fact **documented** evidence of Lord Roote adding his own taxes to those the townsfolk were already paying, well above the level a Noble House of House Roote's minor standing should've been allowed. Lord Tully's factors should have spotted it years ago, but when talking to the locals who had come forward to give evidence against Lord Roote, he found out that those factors hadn't been seen in Harroway for over ten years. Ranma was forced to put that down to his grandfather's declining health, though there should have still been a formula for his men to follow.

Those and the charges of pillaging from the well-to-do houses before fleeing the city were proven in that first day of hearing, though doing so took a long time. Lord Roote tried to fight them, but the evidence against him was irrefutable on those charges. Unfortunately most of what he had stolen had been turned into liquid capital long before this, stored with a factor in Wickenden, the seat of House Waxley in the Vale. It would take months to get that money back, if it was possible at all. So Ranma made the decision to reimburse a fourth of what Roote had stolen out of his own coffers, which were still glutted thanks to the fall of House Frey and his share of the plunder from the various battlefields.

The charges that he had raped some of the maids and servants however, could not be proven. None of the girls who might have been raped were anywhere in the city, having fled to farms elsewhere, and no one in town knew their locations. Two cases of rape could be substantiated against a group of five of his men, and Ranma ordered them executed immediately, doing the deed himself right there in the holdfast's main hall. It served as a hard reminder for his troops, and showed the townsfolk that justice would be swift. Others, who aided their lord in the pillaging, were sentenced to two years of labor and sent back up to the Ruby Ford with a small guard.

But Lord Roote could not be executed for the crimes that could be proven. Instead Ranma stripped his House of its noble status, and exiled him to the Quiet Isle, a island at the mouth of the Trident devoted to a silent order of brothers of the Faith. Since Tomas Roote was the only member of his house, not having a son and not having married as yet, that was the end of his House. Those of his armymen absolved of wrongdoing would remain with the army for now.

Of course, this left a power vacuum in the city, which Ranma filled promptly. As the former lord was led off in chains still protesting 'We had a deal', Ranma turned to Ser Blanetree and the townsman named Grimaldi Anderson. As a witness himself he had been sequestered during the trial so he couldn't influence the other smallfolk witnesses, but even so, he had impressed Ranma with his forthright attitude and intelligence.

When he spoke, Ranma kept his voice formal, as he had throughout the trials duration. "Ser Blanetree, I am well aware that my wife promised you the former House Vypren lands after the war in repayment. Would you prefer to retain your original lands and gain a stake of fifty percent of Harroway?"

"You can't break up a town like it's some kind of, of cow!" Grimaldi said before he could stop himself. At this breach of the hearing's etiquette Ranma's eyes stared into the older man, causing him to shuffle his feet and move back slightly.

After a moment though, Ranma smiled. "I did not mean the town itself Grimaldi, I meant the proceeds from a new set of taxes, which we will work on after this trial is concluded. It will not be onerous for the next few years, to aid the town in rebuilding, and indeed, I hope growing in the future. Ser Blanetree?"

Ser Blanetree had used that moment to think, and he replied in the affirmative. "I would prefer to retain my original lands my lord, and I thank you for trusting me as one of your voices here." He had noticed that fifty percent bit, and knew Ranma was planning something there.

"Excellent." Ranma turned to Grimaldi, with a wide smirk on his face, and suddenly the former tradesman felt a shiver

go down his spine. "Grimaldi Anderson, you have proven yourself to be an intelligent and insightful man, and your grasp of Harroway and its people is obvious. Moreover, those same people seemingly trust you, and look to you for leadership. I think that myself, and my grandfather and uncle when we secure his release, could use such a man here. Would you be willing to act as our local voice?"

Grimaldi gaped at him, knowing that eventually such a position might bring his family into the realms of the minor nobility. However he hadn't organized his minor rebellion against the Lannister garrison for personal power. "You realize if you give me that kind of power, I would look out for the welfare of the townsfolk and the town before serving your needs?" He asked bluntly, having realized during the trial that Ranma Stark preferred blunt speech.

As the other lords present stirred angrily, Ranma laughed aloud. "And that good ser is precisely why I'd give you the job."

"In that case, I accept the commission my lord." Grimaldi said.

"Excellent, and for your first job, you and Ser Blanetree are going to sit down and look at the taxes on the books here in Harroway." Ranma smiled grimly. "A thankless task, but one which needs to be done now."

OOOOOO

Elsewhere Myrcella had arrived at the sept, and quickly took over the smallfolk attempting to get themselves some medical attention. The sept was apparently run normally by one very overworked elderly septon who looked old enough to be a great grandfather at least, aided young brothers who didn't have any healing knowledge at all outside of a few droughts to deaden pain or how to put a poultice on. The town didn't even have a maester, Lord Roote hadn't had one for his keep which unfortunately meant that no one around here was very good at healing outside the smallest level.

However this group was helped by another septon when Myrcella arrived and she stared at him in shock. "Septon Sparrow? What are you doing here?"

"Doing what I can to care for my flock young princess." The old man said looking up at her through stern eyes. He gently touched a rosary hung around his neck which Myrcella hadn't seen him wear before but she didn't see any significance about it. "I have little in the way of healing knowledge, but I am guided by my faith and I have two strong hands. As such I will serve as I may."

"Good, then you might know where the local well is, we'll need several buckets worth of heated water." She nodded over to George who nodded back and moved towards the old septon. "Please go with George here to get some."

Father Sparrow looked a little disconcerted at being ordered about like that, but went off readily enough. Myrcella moved towards several women in one corner who looked as if they had been beaten in the past, already barking out orders to a few of her helpers who had followed her to get her specific salves and poultices.

Over the next few hours Septon Sparrow watched as Myrcella went through the backlog of injured and abused smallfolk. In comparison to the wounded after a battle it was almost pathetically easy for her, not any less distressing, but easy. No one here had lost limbs, or needed desperate, last minute stitching to save their lives. The young Baratheon princess served them all equally, man, woman, well-to-do and poor looking made it didn't matter to her, a sign of egalitarianism that most healers would never get away with.

Ranma showed up at one point after finally clearing up the issue with Lord Roote. After greeting Merry with his now habitual one-sided hugged Ranma asked her "What was it like before you got here? Were the local septons well-trained?"

"Not trained at all!" Myrcella said angrily. "There was no maester here, and most of the local healers ran off, and the ones that remained aren't the best. Oh there were a few locals who knew how to heal broken arms or legs and bruises and cuts, but ribs? Shoulders? Deep cuts or more serious wounds, or ailments beyond the common flu no! At least Lord Roote kept the city clean enough using the River, and it was never it as crowded as King's Landing is, thankfully."

"But worse is the fact the local midwife apparently ran off the moment the rumor of the Lannister's coming towards the town got here. One of the local drover's wife's tried to step into the role but they lost three women and their babies since the Lannister's took over the town. And five men who had head injuries at various points. Even I would've had trouble with most of those, though maester Cresson, the maester from House Wayn who decided to join the army, he could've handled them."

Ranma winced at that, shaking his head sadly at the loss of life especially in that manner. Myrcella went on, not commenting on his wince as she knew what that was about, squeezing his hand affectionately. It always astonished her after watching him in battle how gentle Ranma was outside of it. *Then again when you're as strong as he is you can afford to be gentle I suppose.* "Really I would've liked to see a Maester here, and a few students at least in a town this size. It's actually larger than Fairmarket was before the influx of refugees."

"But Fairmarket had the same issue, no dedicated healers. After this war Merry, we need to found some kind of up Healing Hall. A separate profession from Maesters and the Faith, that can both provide medical attention to people and can continue to expand medical understanding. The Citadel and the maesters are supposed to do that, but they really don't get it out to the people well enough, and when they do it's always first to the nobles, the smallfolk only get a trickle-down effect from that."

"That is a magnificent idea Ranma, especially with winter coming. Nutrition and disease in particularly fevers will be a major factor when winter comes."

Ranma squeeze Merry around the shoulders again chuckling quietly. "Took the words right out of my mouth Merry. You could be a Stark with the way you recognize the coming of winter. I could wish more of these southern lords understood that."

Myrcella blushed rosily, taking a moment to rest her head against Ranma shoulder before pushing him away. "Get on with you, I've still got some more work to do here. Oh, I might be taking on one or two more helpers when we leave."

"That's fine, have them read or read the written contract Patrek made up, then I'll have him release their first payment to them before we leave."

Septon Sparrow moved towards Ranma as he made his way back towards the doorway. "Your Majesty." he said bowing formally.

Ranma looked at him, not having noticed Septon Sparrow before and now looked astonished to see the man here. *A single man covering the distance between Fairmarket and Harroway over the past two weeks?* Ranma wouldn't have given 50 to 1 odds that he would be able to get through. He was about to question that when he noticed what was around the older man's neck. Myrcella might not have recognized it, but Ranma did. He reached out with slow hand to tap the rosary set, which was made of finger bones. "And this is, father?"

"The bones of septas and septons who have died in this war your highness." Septon Sparrow said staring into Ranma size. "Martyrs every one of them."

"I see. I might not follow the Faith of the Seven Septon, but as my wife and I said in Fairmarket, we believe in the freedom of choice, and I'm not blind to the good work that the followers of the faith with the smallfolk both here and elsewhere. I could wish that your martyrs and those they died serving could have been saved, but..." Ranma shrugged. "I am many things, a miracle worker I am not."

"I was going to ask you how you got here Septon, but I think I'll simply shake your hand and wish you well if you're going to continue to travel the lands like this. I hope to start putting the Riverlands in order in another two months most, but until then I couldn't guarantee your safety except possibly from here to the Neck."

"Alas I am not moving in that direction at all." Sparrow said shrugging his shoulders. "I am a servant of the Seven your highness, and no one ever told me that it was an easy road to take. I am moving towards the Crownlands, much of it has not been despoiled yet, but there are rumors of Lord Stannis that coincidentally match which you told me about Shadow Warriors you said you fought on the ship. Most disturbing that Stannis Baratheon has seemingly taken up with Heathen Essosi scum."

"I wouldn't say that last bit when my wife is around." Ranma said laughing lightly but with his eyes serious. "In my opinion magic is just another tool. It is not inherently evil, but the deeds it can be put to make it so just like any weapon."

Septon Sparrow looked at him, as if thinking through his words very carefully then shrugged his shoulders responding in a neutral tone. "On that we will have to agree to disagree, Your Majesty."

"I'd also warn you if you run into any other kings and queens out there not to speak to them as you did my wife and I." Ranma said have seriously half in jest. "We're far more easy-going and certain of ourselves than most. Our power comes from who we are not the panoply of a crown, but others are much more aware of their dignity."



Sparrow laughed suddenly shaking his head. "I do not make a habit of rubbing elbows with the rich and powerful my lord, my work has always been with the faithful of the smallfolk, the folk of Hill and dale, of farm, village and town. They are the people who cook your food, who harvest your crops, who make your clothing and your weapons and steel. The true backbone of the nation, though few Lords would acknowledge it."

"I do." Ranma said simply laughing as well before going on more seriously. "Be careful out there old man, Westeros needs more people like you and they can ill afford the loss of even one." Reaching out he gripped the other older man's shoulder for a moment before turning and exiting the sept.

Septon Sparrow watched Ranma go, then turned to watch Myrcella, exchanging laughing words with a young girl whose arm she was setting while the mother looked on a faint smile on her face though she looked more bemused than anything. It was evident she recognized who Myrcella was and was astonished to see a Lannister princess here taking care of the smallfolk. It was like the old tale of Baelor the Blessed.

She was not the only one making that connection. Septon Sparrow's mind was hard at work even as he moved forward to help a man carrying in another man whose leg was bleeding heavily around a makeshift bandage.

For decades there had been a movement among the Faith of the Seven to reform the Church, but it had never really gained momentum. Even if you were part of that reform movement, the higher you went in the church's hierarchy, the more corrupt you were forced to become to keep your own power base let alone actually accomplish anything. The council of Most Devout were corrupt, everyone knew it, but doing something about it was much tougher. Because it wasn't just the Most Devout, or even the High Septon, it was practically every high ranking septon and septa in every city below the Neck. (The Faithful of House Manderly and White Harbor were a group apart, and had been for thousands of years) Without the septons of the cities and the greater religious orders beyond the Penitent Brothers on their side, the reform movement could never gain any traction.

In wartime however, that was no longer the case. The official organization of the church was **gone**. King's Landing was utterly cut off, while Petyr and the eunuch were able to get messages out, that was a skill that the Most Devout and the High Septon did not have. With them no longer at the top of the church's hierarchy that had allowed several of the other cities to step up. Lannisport could not, busy with internal issues. Oldtown could not, always at war as they were with the Tower. And none of the other cities were big enough or their septons and septa as experienced enough to do the job.

That had allowed the errant and country-based septons, the ones who were at the heart of the reformist movement to begin to step up their own game. And they had, but they ran into problems, beyond of course the purely physical of needing to deal with refugees, actual battles, and other dangers to their flocks. The main problem was, that none of the Kings seemed at first glance to be worth convincing their flocks to back.

At first glance the two Baratheon brothers should have been. Not only was Stannis a person who believed in the rule of law and precedent, he was also his brother's heir if Joffrey indeed was not legitimate. But this was more than countered by the fact that he was now a follower of a heathen religion, and the priestess of said religion was a magic user who seemed to loath the Seven.

Many of the faithful from the Reach thought at first that Renly should've been their chosen champion, that they should've begun to preach to their followers about him being the chosen King but that was argued against strongly by the septons who had actually met the man, led by the septon of Storm's End. While Renly was personable, intelligent and always careful to remain popular with the smallfolk, that wasn't the same as being a champion of the Faithful. His own morals were in question, not just the rumors about his relationship with Loras Tyrell which had begun to spread since the war began, aided by the agents of both Petyr and Varys.

The Lannister's chosen King Joffrey had been chosen by the Most Devout and the High Septon as their champion, despite the little bastard pressing a polygamy clause for the king into law. Needless to say, he was even less suitable as a king in the eyes of the reformist faithful than the two Baratheon brothers. That was despite the very thin reason that convinced the High Septon to go along with it, the idea of converting the North. The more intelligent among the faithful knew that would never happen. It hadn't for thousands of years, to assume it would suddenly change was the height of folly.

That left only the heathen of the North and his Dragon Queen, a woman who while having been anointed by the seven holy oils when she was younger certainly hadn't followed the Faith since. *On the other hand I've actually met them and seen their deeds* Septon Sparrow thought as he used firewine to wipe away at the wound on the man's leg, ignoring his screams. *Others might preach kindness and attempt to gain popular support, but the two of them have actually gone out of their way and done it.*

*I know who I think should be king, and who the Faithful should begin to back. Now all that remains is to convince the rest of the reformist party of the same thing.* Later that day, Septon Sparrow left Harroway, heading south and east to the ancient sept of Peasedale to meet with his fellows septons on that issue.

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Later that evening Daenerys sat at the front of the long table in the dining hall of the holdfast, flexing her hands wearily. Ranma smiled wanly at her, reaching over to knead her hands with both of his. "I've always felt there's something about wielding the sword for an execution that makes it weigh more than it does during a battle." Ranma could fight all day and had and not really feel tired at the end, but even a few hours of residing over trials and executions had exhausted him.

"Seeing as I haven't wielded a blade in battle that often I can't comment on that. I'm just happy most of the trials were so simple to officiate." Daenerys replied, twining her fingers with her husbands.

Splitting the work between them had allowed them to go through the entire remaining Westerlands garrison here in the town, and they had found only nine men that could not be indicted on counts of rape, arson, theft or outright murder. Those nine men had been stripped of their weapons, then placed in a prisoners cart to be taken up to the Ruby Ford to join their fellows there. They had been glad to go considering what had happened before Ranma and his men stormed into the town, as well as the executions that occurred after.

"It turns out that the spy did indeed tell the local garrison commander about the dragons," Domic was saying as Daenerys came back to the here and now. "He and his sub commanders, five knights apparently, all left with the spy ostensibly to meet with Sir Tywin and discussed future options, and amazingly the reality of the dragons didn't actually get out beyond rumors from further south until we arrived."

Alayaya nodded from where she sat next to him. "It isn't that the smallfolk here have pleasant memories of dragons or anything of that nature your highness, but the panic of the garrison simply allowed them the opportunity to strike out against their oppressors. I would recommend we keep the dragons out of the city entirely from now on. Despite Sunfyre saving that boy this afternoon many of the families here remember tales of dragonfire. The original Harroway town was burned down by a dragon apparently."

"Vhagar, last of the original three." Daenerys said nodding. "I remember that from my family history, it happened during the Dance of the Dragons. Her rider was the kinslayer Aemond. A boy that should never have been allowed to ride the dragon in the first place, the tales of him remind me all too much of my own brother."

"I know we need to stay here for a while to put the town in order, but are we going to let the troops have some time in the city?" asked Rickard.

"What do you think Domic?" Daenerys asked looking over at the man.

"I think that would be a very bad idea your grace." Domic replied swiftly. "These people have spent months under the lash of the Lannisters, and many of them see armed men of any sort as the enemy. Ranma and yourself scored a major coup with them when you held open trials of the men you captured and even more when you imprisoned Lord Roote, but the euphoria of that will pass quickly."

Alayaya nodded. "And let's face it, our army has fought and marched for weeks, and with your rules about not allowing camp followers the men haven't had any way to let out certain urges. Troops often get out of control and barracks, and I think that that would be the case here."

"Then let's move the army through the town and bivouac them on the other side. We'll let you and your men in place Wendel, as a visible police force." Ranma decided, nodding his head to the second son of Lord Manderly, who nodded back. "When we pull out we'll also leave a force of the pikemen from White Harbor here, they should get along better with the locals than most of our northern troops. We'll rotate some of the men through the town and let them get some beer in them and visit the brothels, but I'll want the unit commanders and all of you, my lords, telling the troops my rules about rape, arson and theft every day."

All of the lords and commanders there nodded, and Ranma nodded back before standing up, pulling Daenerys up with him. "Now if you'll excuse us my lords, it has been a long few weeks since my wife and I were able to have some privacy." That statement made most of the lords break out in laughter as Daenerys chuckled, but did not protest Ranma's lack of propriety, her own eyes glinting in eagerness.

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"And I tell you, the Arbor is gone, the fucking Ironborn took it!" Said one man to another standing on a quay in Pentos. "That means the wines in my hold will be worth far more than you're trying to pay me."

"Bah!" said the man he was talking to, significantly older looking and somewhat overweight as well. They'll never hold it, the Arbor is too large and too important to the rest of the Reach. We might face a few months of scarcity, but not enough to drive up the price of the Arbor's wine to what you're asking for it. There are other wine merchants in the town my friend, if you don't want to trade with me at the price we already agreed to, you're free to try any of them."

The first man scowled, and the two began to haggle back and forth until they finally agreed on a price. The price was nowhere near the amount the captain of a wine ship had initially asked for, but it was still somewhat larger than he could normally have demanded for his wine.

The captain was soon moving back through the docks towards his ship intent on giving the crew their pay before rustling up another cargo for his ship when a hand clamped on his shoulder. He turned to give the man who had accosted him an earful and paused as he stared into the one eye of the man who had done so. He was a tall man, with the look of warrior about him, with a cascade of black hair to his shoulders and a neatly trimmed beard. He wore an eyepatch over one eye.

There was something him off about the man's one-eyed gaze, something that froze the captain's heart.

"Excuse me friend, I couldn't help but overhear your interesting bit of news about the Arbor. I was wondering if you could tell me more about that?"

OOOOOO

The next day Ranma practically bounced as he left the room that he and Daenerys had commandeered for the night. He almost ran into Myrcella and one of the keep's maids, both of whom took one look at him and began to blush hotly. Behind them Fenris led the two dragons behind Merry, growling occasionally when Sunfyre or Rhaegon looked at the maid or passerby as if they were contemplating attacking them.

The two dragons were not quite violent to any non-Targaryen adult that came near them, but it was a near thing sometimes, and it was slowly getting worse. Luckily children were still safe around them. Rhaegon might not like them much, but he wouldn't attack them, and Sunfyre seemed to like the attention he got, so long as the children in question didn't smell too badly. Their respect for the direwolves however hadn't disappeared, which allowed Fenris to control them somewhat when Daenerys wasn't around.

The maid was carrying a tray of food, simple fare but plentiful, which began to shake as her arms did. "That looks good. Hello Myrcella, how are you doing this lovely morning?"

"Apparently not as good as you." she replied tartly, shoving his shoulder lightly with one of her hands. "And the food isn't for you, you big lummo. I've no doubt you wore Daenerys out again."

Ranma had the decency to flush a little pulling at his ponytail. "Might have..." he muttered looking away.

The maid kept blushing and staring at him. Ranma and Daenerys had been even louder than normal last night, and many of the servants had heard them, including when Daenerys began to verbally urge Ranma on in certain acts (and vice versa). The fact the noises had continued almost the entire night was somewhat astonishing to all of them, from the experienced to the inexperienced.

"There's some breakfast ready downstairs, you can go get your own. Shoo!" Myrcella replied firmly, flapping her hands at Ranma as if he were a duck. Ranma laughed and walked off, leaving Merry to open the door to his and Daenerys' room. As she had expected Daenerys was still asleep, splayed out naked on the bed, the sheets, which looked ruined to Merry's eyes, bunched up nearby.

Behind Myrcella, Sunfyre and Rhaegon entered the room quickly moving towards their mistress before snuffling and turning away from the bed to curl up nearby. Their sense of smell was nowhere near that of a direwolf, but there was something about the smell of human sex that threw them off a little. They would wait until their mistress was back to smelling pleasant before greeting her.

The almost comatose girl cracked one bleary eye open to stare up at Myrcella, then at the tray the servant was holding. She muttered something that could've been "lifesaver" Myrcella before waving a single finger at the table next to the bed.

Myrcella laughed, letting the servant put the tray down before ushering the girl out of the room and turning back to

Daenerys. She sat down next to the young woman, absently patting her naked back. "I think you really need to teach Ranma the meaning of restraint."

"Wanted it." Daenerys muttered into her pillow. "Couldn't stop myself. Couldn't stop him. Too long since the last time."

Myrcella nodded, looking around at the state of the sheets the bed and a few patches on a tapestry on one wall which had been splashed with something and ripped as if by someone's nails halfway up its length. "I think you made up for lost time." she said dryly. "Either you need to work on your endurance, or he needs to work on his restraint, choose one. What if you had a meeting or something you couldn't put off, would you show up like this?"

There was a low, angry growl from the depths of the pillow, causing Merry to laugh. After a moment she reached over to the tray, picking up a small steaming mug of tea. "I have your Moon tea here, I think..." she said now looking and flushing hotly at this state of Daenerys's lower regions. "That you need it."

It was odd, Merry thought to herself, waiting for Daenerys to respond, how calm she was about this. Most women who had fallen for a man would have been jealous or possibly enraged at seeing another woman with him, or like in this instance, the aftereffects of said. But Merry didn't. She found it erotic as all get out, like those small, **extremely** expensive tomes from Dorne that a few of the ladies of the court had that she wasn't supposed to know about. But there wasn't jealousy in Merry, she couldn't be jealous, not after seeing how happy Daenerys made Ranma. Merry knew she still loved him, but she also knew that alone she would never have made him as happy as he was with Daenerys.

After realizing Daenerys was in danger of falling asleep, Merry moved one hand to help push Daenerys over onto her back, and the Targaryen woman looked at her blearily then slowly she nodded, a sudden look of fear flitting across her face as the memory of last night came back to her. She had been in no mood to let Ranma pull out last night, and he had come inside of her three or possibly even four times, she had lost count somewhere in there and they still couldn't afford for her to be with child yet.

Her little ones needed her around to control them, though if they won the Riverlands they could send for Bran or let Jon try his hand at warging with the dragons. Daenerys thought long and hard about that, and had decided that she had been foolish not see the opportunity of having someone else around that could control her dragons. It was a weakness, not just in their strategy flexibility, but in her as well. She could no longer afford to fear the loss of the power base her dragons gave her. No, her fears were much more personal than that.

With Myrcella's help she sat up, which set her breasts could jigging slightly. Merry glanced down, and Daenerys blinked a little at seeing a spark of something there for a moment before Merry directed her eyes upwards once more. With one arm around the older woman, Merry brought the moon tea up to her lips, allowing her to sip slowly, though at first Daenerys had tried to gulp the moon tea down before Merry pulled it away for a moment. Her face was thoughtful now as she looked at Daenerys quizzically. "What's wrong?"

Daenerys tried to shake her head, leaning forward to try and get at the moon tea again, but Merry removed it once again when she tried to gulp the hot liquid down again. "Easy Daenerys, it's not going anywhere. Honestly, what's wrong, you really look worried about something."

After a few moments of sipping at the tea, Daenerys hesitantly responded. "According to what I remember being told when I was younger, my mother had trouble with each of her pregnancies, and such things tend to be passed on. It, I am, I am not looking forward to tempting fate there."

Merry frowned, all too easily remembering how the town's septa had told her about the women who had died in childbirth here of late. "I can understand that. If you're worried about that kind of thing, I would suggest sending to the Citadel for an expert or perhaps to one of the Free Cities. I understand that they have several medical techniques that the Citadel derides for one reason or another. I'm afraid that's one area my own knowledge is sadly lacking in."

"That's not a bad idea, thank you." Daenerys said before going back to sipping her moon tea, leaning her head lightly against Merry's shoulder. The two continued to talk quietly for a time, simply enjoying having a moment to relax with no demands on their time before a knock on their door signaled the world had need of them once more.

OOOOOO

While Daenerys and Merry were talking, Ranma had headed downstairs to see what he could find for breakfast before getting to grips with the day's workload. While he was walking down the stairs however, he was hailed by one of the army's messenger boys. "Milord, the camp's guards have reported seeing a rider has arrived with a message for, um 'the Queen and her consort'. They um, they told me to pass on the words he used."

"Interesting wording." Ranma muttered laughing slightly. He remembered however that House Darry was one of the houses that remained loyal to the Targaryen cause during Robert's Rebellion. *It makes sense they'd think that way I suppose. We'll disabuse them of that notion quickly, though.* "Ask the guards to escort him to us please. Oh, and send a maid up to my wife please."

The messenger turned out to be a knight in full armor, an older man thin of face with white hair and beard. He bowed floridly to both of them, though he looked a bit askance at Ranma sitting next to Daenerys like an equal.

Merry and several of the maids had been able to get Daenerys to at least look normal so long as she didn't move much, despite her exhaustion and sore muscles. She had winced slightly when she sat down though, which nearly made Ranma laugh aloud as he remembered one of the positions they had tried out last night. Her answering glare did nothing to get rid of his smirk despite her best attempts.

"Your highness." he said bowing his head further to Daenerys. "We have long wished for the return of House Targaryen. When word of the dragons being seen in the sky reached us at Darry last night, we overthrew the small garrison that the Lannisters had forced upon us after which I rode here immediately. My Lord was injured in that battle, so could not come to see you personally, but I am here to pledge the House Darry and its lands to you."

"Tell me, didn't Darry also pledge themselves to the Lannisters?" Ranma said leaning forward coolly. "You and your Lord swore to follow them and the bastard, and I say the word with feeling, who currently sits on the Iron Throne. Why should we believe this sudden change of heart?"

For a moment the knight's eyes didn't move from Daenerys' face, but she simply stared back at him coldly. Ranma laughed darkly. "Don't keep looking at Daenerys as if she's going to override me on this, we're both equals in this relationship, and she agrees with me in asking that." Daenerys nodded firmly despite her weariness, her violet eyes narrowing.

The knight licked suddenly dry lips but gamely answered. "Well your majesties, I would say it is easy to bow your neck when you fear being forced to your knees. You act as if we had a choice. If we had not, we would've been destroyed."

"Or, you could have joined your men to those that fought at the Kneeling Man's Ford, and beaten the Lannisters there. With more men there Vypren might not have betrayed the defenders, and without that Tywin might not have won." Ranma said equably. "Or even have declared neutrality and held up in your castle, which I understand is small but well made. Instead your entire house bowed your heads to the house that is keeping your Lord Paramount's heir prisoner under contrived charges, and we've heard you sent men to help besiege Raventree Hall."

"To put it bluntly Ser Knight, we have no reason to trust you, and every reason not to. You're house seems to go where the wind blows, and now that it is blowing in our favor you seem to think you can simply change side as easily as I would pick up a hat." Daenerys said coldly. Behind her Sunfyre stirred, raising his head to look at the knight over his mistress's shoulder.

"Very well, you may join us, but only on our terms, and you will pay for first following the Lannisters. And know that we will be continuing to watch you my Lord." Ranma went on for his wife grimly.

He clapped his hands, and Cley appeared next to him, holding a small piece of parchment tied with a string and marked with the new royal seal, the faces of a dragon and wolf merged side by side. "These are the terms to give your Lord. My army will be continuing its march down the Kingsroad to the River Road soon enough, which will place us very near Darry. You have until we arrive to make your decision."

Despite the almost contemptible tones the knight had no recourse but to return to Darry with this new message, and his Lord flew into a rage. He had been expected to be rewarded, not vilified, which was rather shortsighted of him. After all, once a turncoat people began to assume you were simply a turncoat. Moreover, while Daenerys felt she could look to the Houses that backed her family during Robert's Rebellion for support, she wasn't willing to trust them, since their oaths were to their Lord Paramount and threw him to the crown.

However it was a proven fact that Darry could not stand against them. He didn't have enough men on hand, at best his house had only around 500 armsmen at the best of times, and half of them were at Raventree Hall with the besieging force there. And the dragons utterly terrified Lord Darry. Moreover the terms were not nearly as bad as they could've been and he knew it.

The terms allowed him to retain his armsmen and castle, as well as all the lands of his house to the South, Southeast and Southwest of his castle. He only lost the lands directly north towards Harroway, which were going to initially be

ceded directly to the crown as another area of Crown lands. So in general terms, he was getting off very lightly. He also might gain more land south of his castle from here on, depending on how well he helped supply Ranma's army. Some people however were never satisfied, and Lord Darry was one of them, which was why he did not tell Daenerys that he was in contact with her brother.

OOOOOO

Victarion frowned thoughtfully looking through his Myrish glass. Not one for deep thoughts, he was however an excellent tactician, and could tell that the castle farther up the Mander was a much tougher proposition than the castles he had already taken since opening up the fat belly of the Reach. A few on the Shield Islands were tougher, but each of them had weaknesses that could be exploited, and hadn't been nearly as ready as their fleet for combat. This one, only the small size of it could be seen as a weakness, though the fact it looked to be threatening rain today could also be an advantage.

He stood on the prow of the *Iron Victory*, staring ahead thoughtfully for a moment then nodded. "Begin!"

When his first mate gave the signal, four longboats that had been anchored all around the *Iron Victory* pulled up their anchors. Then they began to move up river under oars and sails, the wind behind them for the moment.

Behind them the other fourteen longboats that Victarion had gathered for this assault waited, each of them resting easily at anchor. Here the Mander was deep with a silt covered floor which would've told any farmer the reason behind the fertility of the soil hereabouts. The Ironborn however cared not for that only that the river was deep enough to let them anchor here for a few moments with their numbers spread out further down the river. Only the *Iron Victory* and the four ships that had just moved past it should be within sight of the defenders right now.

Behind him Victarion heard a distant voice began to bellow commands, and he knew that the captains of the other longships were getting anxious. He turned, his helm on his head giving him an even more fearsome appearance than normal. Though his leg had yet to fully recover from the wound he had taken against Ser Talbert Serry he was still the most fearsome fighter among the Ironborn, evidenced by the fact that he continued to wear full plate mail when even Ironborn would only wore chain.

From within his helm he glared out at the two longships that had begun to lift their anchors and were beginning to move forward in line. The Mander was so wide that two or even three longships could move abreast if they were careful and not using their oars. Their captains saw him standing there glaring at them, and quickly, like unruly children, ordered their crews to stop.

Order once more restored Victarion turned back to view the battle nodding with satisfaction under his helm as he began to see splashes of water around the ships he had sent forward as the defenders' scorpion bolts slammed into the water. "Send in the second group."

OOOOOO

Margaery knew that she wasn't a warrior and she had only a basic understanding of combat. Ranma had insisted she get some training with a dagger, and she had spent a few hours exercising with him, Sansa and even young Merry (though quite reluctantly in that case). However that did not make her a master of weapons, or of battle and she knew it. She could however use a bow quite well, having hunted geese and other birds many a time when she was younger. Now she was standing at one of the arrow slits set into the wall of the keep facing the Mander when the longships began their attack.

The castellan of the keep had tried to get her to hide somewhere in the Lords Chambers, but Margaery had refused. "The idea of not seeing my end coming, of not being able to effect events, is anathema to me." She said quietly but very, very firmly. "I am no warrior, but I will still take part in the battle." Something in her gaze had stifled the man's protests and he had retreated into his own office rather than taking part in the battle.

Margaery sighted along the arrow set to her bow then fired quickly. Her first arrow missed her target, smacking into the wood of the longship's deck to one side. The next shot however took her target in the shoulder, punching through his very badly made ring mail armor there. He went down with a cry, and Margaery smiled thinly. "You will not find this rose so easy to pick you Ironborn dogs!"

That won her a cheer from the archers sharing this guard room with her.

Sighting along another arrow she frowned suddenly. Those ships weren't firing back. They were moving along the water directly in front of the keep but they weren't trying to get close enough to throw grapples, instead they were

simply sailing on.

Even so, they were still taking heavy fire from the defenders. One ship suddenly listed, struck near the prow of the ship by a scorpion bolt. Another ship was struck by two scorpion bolts in quick succession. One bolt took out its mast high up sending the furling sails crashing down among the crew to their screams of pain. The other slammed into the deck at the far back of the ship where the steersman had been previously.

Despite this the longships began to move up river of Oldflowers. She gasped in astonishment. *Are they going to ignore the bait?* Her question was answered a second later when a shout from above reached her ears here on the third floor. "More longships coming up river!"

Leaving her place at her own murder hole Margaery raced across to another one that was on the corner of the keep facing down River. Four more longships had appeared on the horizon, coming on swiftly under the power of oars heading up river. They moved much faster than the first group, so fast it obviously took the defenders up top by surprise as evidenced by another shout. "Get scorpions one and two turned around again, Stranger damn you!"

Before the scorpions could turned around and begin to fire on their new targets the first of the new ships was within bow range, and they began to fire on the keep's rooftop. The angle was such that aimed fire was almost impossible, so they were trying to simply lay down a heavy enough barrage to keep the defender's heads down. Thanks to the well-made parapet and the height of the keep however this failed, and the archers on the top and all around Margaery began to fire back.

That first ship kept going, as two more ships came up behind it, both of which in turn also began to lay down a heavy fire. It occurred to Margaery then that these ships seemed to have more archers than she would've expected in an Ironborn crew. Archery wasn't something the islands were known for, Theon notwithstanding.

These two ships however were armed with fire arrows and began to fire up onto the keep, trying to set the scorpions there on fire. Judging by the shouts that Margaery heard, this tactic was proving successful. Tossing her bow to a nearby page who was assigned to bring new quivers to the archers she raced out shouting "A bucket chain, organize a bucket chain!"

She raced down grabbing every servant she could find organizing them into a line to bring up buckets of dirt and water from the well set into the floor of the kitchen. Once that was done Margaery raced up onto the roof with the first bucket in her hands. There she found that two of the scorpions had been set alight while the other two had already been doused with the buckets of water and dirt that had already been placed on the roof.

She raced forward towards the scorpion that looked like it had been hit with the least fire arrows, knowing that the other was a too far gone to save. She also shouted at the archers. "What you waiting for, give them some of their own medicine back!" Even as dozens of archers turned from their places on the wall to help out with the bucket chain, others hurriedly prepared their own fire arrows.

OOOOOO

Victarion nodded grimly satisfied and what he was seeing so far. One ship sunk with all hands since even with his Iron Price bought looking glass he didn't see anyone trying to swim for the riverbank. Another that seemed to have taken heavy losses. That was a small price to pay for the destruction of one possibly, two scorpions if his lookout was right about the amount of smoke he could see from the top of the keep.

He watched as the boats of the second group anchored directly in front of the keep's walls, becoming stable platforms for the archers on them. Those archers had been taken from every other crew that was part of this battle and placed on those ships for the duration. There had been some grumbling about that, but not a lot. If Victarion's plan succeeded, there would be more than enough plunder for everyone and if it didn't then it was going to be on Victarion's head, not the captains who allowed their crews to be broken up like that.

He frowned suddenly as fire arrows began to streak out from the keep towards the ships that had anchored. Almost immediately the fire from those ships lessened somewhat, as men quickly turned to put out their fires under the leadership of the captains. That would not stop the Ironborn, they were no strangers to fighting with fire but it would decrease their own arrow assault.

"Signal the crews that have already gone ashore to begin their attack." he said smiling grimly. "Let's split their attention further."

OOOOOO

Margaery wiped soot from her face as she let the bucket she had been holding fall to the stone of the keep's roof beneath her. They had managed to save one of the scorpion said been set on fire, but another had joined the first two. That one and the one that Margaery had written off before were both damaged beyond repair even if their fires on them had been put out.

Glancing quickly over the top of the roof she could see one longship had been set ablaze despite the best efforts of the crew.

That had more to do with the fact that a lucky arrow had found the captain of that ship than anything else. While Ironborn crews were more disciplined than most would imagine they could be given the Ironborn society, it was a very rickety sort of organization. Remove the captain, and the first mates position was very tenuous on most Ironborn crews and if he didn't have the coxswain or other crew members on his side before the captain's death, he would have a very hard time exerting his authority, especially in the battle.

Another ship had taken so many losses to their archers that it had fallen silent completely, simply drifting at anchor.

But the losses among the defenders were bad as well. A dozen men were down at least, and as Margaery watched another took an arrow in the eye pitching silently over the side of the parapet surrounding the keeps rooftop.

A lookout down on the wall of the keep that moved away from the riverbank suddenly shouted "Ironborn troops coming from the south!"

Nearby Igon Vyrwel cursed. "These Ironborn are tougher than I expected my lady," he said staring over at Margaery. When he had first seen her coming up onto the roof he had been appalled, but there had been no time mid-battle to spare men to take her back allow, and her organization abilities had proven worthwhile in any event. There was also, and this was a thought he would never say aloud, something to be said for a lady who was willing to get her hands dirty in an emergency.

"They've conquered the Shield Islands and the Harbor, and they did tremendous damage in their last rebellion." Margaery said sternly looking back at him. "If you have been underestimating these curs, stop doing so now!"

"It was not their toughness or battle prowess I was questioning, it was their ability at tactics." Igon Vyrwel said moving over to where he could stare over the wall at the incoming mass of infantry. Arrows from the keep's walls began to slash into the group almost as soon as they came within range, and they didn't seem to have nearly as many archers as the ships.

They did however have a few large makeshift wooden barricades which could protect them from arrows. "I want dozen of archers over here, ignore the ships for now," he ordered and several archers turned from where they had been firing at the ships in the river to take the army assaulting the walls under fire from a higher position than even the keeps wall could provide.

The makeshift palisades couldn't protect enough of the Ironborn from such angled fire and dozens began to fall. But the rest kept going, tossing up their grapples and beginning to try to pull themselves up the walls, spreading out to cover all of the landward walls of the castle.

OOOOOO

"Time for us to join the battle," said Victarion smiling thinly. His first mates and the rest of the *Iron Victory's* crew all shouted aloud gleefully and Victarion pointed downriver with his acts. "Forward! For the Drowned God!"

Above them the sky finally opened up and rain began to fall on the battlefield. This of course did not cool any ones ardor for combat, but it did put a damper on the fire arrows of both sides.

The *Iron Victory* led the way up river quickly with the remaining seven longships of this attack behind it, the others remaining behind at anchor, their crews having already been committed ashore. The *Iron Victory* and another ship slowed down and drifted to the sides of the river allowing their fellows forward while they began to fire their scorpions at keep. The bolts did nothing to the walls of the keep save possibly knocking out tiny chips of the stone. The wall was too well made and the Ironborn scorpions were not that powerful in any event. A catapult would've done more, and if it had been large enough might well have were burst through the walls, but such a weapon could not be put on any longship, not even one of the Iron Fleet.

Victarion cursed luridly at that, then shrugged his shoulders philosophically and ordered his ship forward. "I guess we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way!"



His crew all gave a roar of approval at that. Quickly the *Iron Victory* moved forward to join their fellows. The longships ground themselves all around the beleaguered Castle or got in close enough to the wall of the keep that was right on the edge of the shore to throw up grapples there while their fellows on the ships of the second group tried their best to keep the defenders heads down.

OOOOOOO

Ser Igon's face had become grimmer and grimmer as the battle continued and he turned to Margaery. "My lady, go below." He ordered, his tone grim and unyielding.

Margaery looked at his face then down at the battle all around the keep while the rain began to come down in ever increasing amounts. She nodded, fear and anger warring within her, but she knew that being on the keep's roof served no purpose now save to distract the defenders from their own worries. "Good luck captain." she said formally, holding out her hands to him. He bent over it, but she used it to grab one of his ears and pulled him upright kissing him lightly on the cheek. "Be safe." She ordered then was gone.

Igon Vyrwel of Highgarden stared after the young woman, who he had seen grow from a child up to the beautiful lady she was now, shaking his head in amusement for a moment. "May the Maiden and the Mother watch over you, milady."

He turned back to the battle grabbing up a bow of his own and firing down at the Ironborn ships that were trying to throw grapples up onto the wall of the keep and having no luck. "That's the way lads, beat these attacks off, then we can concentrate elsewhere! We'll show these Iron bastards, what true courage is all about!"

OOOOOOO

Upriver the first four ships had finished the laborious process of transferring crew from the stricken ship. That was not an easy process for any Ironborn longship. After all feuds among the Ironborn were taken seriously, and longships were more often than not family affairs. Several vendettas were cleared up in those moments before the Ironborn began to turn back.

They were supposed to land somewhere on the bank and have their men march overland back towards Oldflowers, but there was nothing here of interest to them. The two remaining captains had decided that heading back down the river until they were nearly with arrow range would be acceptable.

The last ship had turned itself around, a hard process but necessary if they wanted to steer at all, when a lookout shouted from above in the crow's nest. "Ships coming downriver, they look like barges!"

The Ironborn captains both looked at one another from across their decks and one of them, a captain from Pyke itself grinned evilly. "Some fat fucking merchie that didn't get the news? I think we've found our own prize!"

"It'll make a good warm-up."

"They're comin' on fast!" Said one of the lookouts now having saw the same things his fellow did.

By that point the ships were close enough for all of the Ironborn on the deck to see them despite the now pouring rain. The barges didn't stop when they were well within sight of the longships, instead coming on strong. The longships captains worst but so astonished at this that they couldn't do anything for a moment. It was like so many sheep trying to attack wolves.

That impression lasted right up until the groups of ships were close enough for grapples to go across. A roar was heard on the wind despite the sound of the rain pattering down "Growing strong!" The longships crews moved across the now tied together ships only to be met by a furious charge of their own and various shouts from armored Knight's and soldiers.

One roar in particular was heard on the wind despite the sound of the rain pattering down "Growing Strong!" Each barge was stuffed to the gunwales with warriors and though many of them lacked experience they were eager and very angry at the despoiling of their lands.

Garlan smiled grimly. He'd had no idea the Ironborn would be so stupid as to come this deep into the Mander but these ships didn't have the scorpions that could've made this confrontation a thing of horror to him and his men. Indeed, they didn't seem to have many archers either which meant this was a steel-to-steel battle. He said this allowed to a nearby knight, who he knew from his days in the marches then added "I'll take that any day against Ironborn scum!"

"I as well!" the knight laughed almost gaily, but with a grim undercurrent as their barge slammed side to side against him a longship. With a final nod to one another the two young men raced forwards joining the charge over their barges sides and onto the longship.

OOOOOO

If Victarion had known that Garlan and his men had arrived it was quite possible that he would have tried to pull back his men and prepare a more advantageous battle. It would've made good tactical sense after all, since he had no idea about the numbers or strength of these newcomers. This wouldn't have worked though, not even Victarion could get the Ironborn to retreat from a battle whatever sense it made.

As it was, Victarion didn't know. All he could feel was the battle turning against the defenders. Slowly the archers fallen silent up on top of the keep, and from the sound of steel clanging against steel over the sound of the rain he could tell that the other Ironborn had gotten up on to the wall at several places. The defenders just didn't have enough men to match the assault, and the rain had cut badly into their archer's ability. Bows were not as susceptible to water damage as the layman thought, but visibility dropped dramatically in any kind of rainstorm, making archers ability to pick out targets far worse than normal.

He was still losing dozen of men of course, and that was only on the river side of the battle. Thankfully however the keep's scorpions couldn't be depressed enough to fire on their ships any longer.

Victarion grounded the *Iron Victory* slightly north of the keep and went ashore with his entire crew. Between them they were carrying a battering ram, and they raced around the walls of the keep, losing several men to the archers on the wall despite the rain before they got into position in front of the keep's main gate.

With the defenders spread everywhere, more than 200 already dead from various means and with Ironborn already up on the wall in several places the defenders simply couldn't concentrate enough fire to take out the battering ram or its crew. The gate however was old and strong, and it withstood the blows of the battering ram with ease.

No, it was the attack on the wall that moved inland away from the keep that finally got through. The Ironborn got enough men onto that section of the wall to gain superiority there despite still losing men from the archers on top of the keep's roof. More men began to pull themselves up onto the wall as the defenders retreated quickly, archers always knowing that they didn't really stand a chance against swordsmen at close range.

Seeing this, someone up top of the keep blew a horn sharply five times in quick succession. At this signal the defenders on the other wall of the triangle retreated into the keep with that their surviving fellows from the southern wall, aided by a massive hail of arrows from overhead halting any close pursuit. They bolted and locked the two doors leading from the keep out onto the wall before any of the men could get there in time and from the sound of things were already barricading the inside of the doors.

Realizing this many of the Ironborn began to pelt down into the small courtyard, hurriedly. After a vicious fight in the gatehouse they opened the outer gates for their fellows. Victarion smiled grimly as he motioned his men to bring forward the battering ram against the keep's doors in turn, though arrow fire was still taking a toll on the Ironborn around him. He grabbed six of his men and shouted, "Head back to the *Iron Victory* and bring one of the scorpion bolts up here!"

As those six ran off he grabbed another man. "Head around the south of the Castle, their fire's weakest there now. Signal the archer's ships to bring their men ashore, we can put them up on the walls here!"

The runner raced off while Victarion himself moved to head up to the wall. He never noticed the messenger didn't get two steps before being nailed in the back of his unarmored head by someone from a murder hole set on the third floor of the keep. More archers joined the defenders fire from there, and despite the ongoing pounding of the rain the casualties among the Ironborn began to go up once more. Yet that first shot, unnoticed as it was then and unremarked upon later, was so good that, had anyone actually noticed, they might have thought it miraculous.

Soon the men Victarion had sent to get the scorpion bolt were back and he bellowed, "Get over here!" From where he was taking refuge from the defender's fire right next to the wall of the keep in the small recess of the doorway.

Two of them died while all around the Ironborn horde were trying to find cover wherever they could. The remaining men however brought the scorpion bolt up onto the castle's walls and over to where Victarion was taking shelter. He tapped it with one gauntleted fist. "Let's knock on their door!"

With that he moved to one side, helping to grab the scorpion bolt. They backed up then raced forward slamming the iron head of the bolt into the doorway splintering it. Another five runs shattered the door and pressed the few pieces of furniture that had been stacked against it backwards slightly. One of them died from an archer from inside firing through the hole in the doorway they had made, but the others pulled back quickly and ran forward again slamming the scorpion bolt once again into the door. This finally pushed enough of the barricade inside out of their way for the men to force their way into the keep.

"We Do Not Sow!" Victarion shouted wielding his axe hacking away not at men at the moment but at the furniture blocking the doorway deeper into the keep. The doorway itself was so small that only a few pieces of furniture had been able to be placed against the door, which proved to the defenders' undoing.

An arrow clanged off of Victarion's chest plate at an angle as he twisted to one side, and then he through his axe over hand at the lone archer trying to defend this position while behind him another had already raced off shouting the alarm. Dozens of armsmen came up, but by that point Victarion had already burst out of the destroyed furniture with dozens of Ironborn behind him, grabbing up his axe from the dead archer's chest. All of the Ironborn that had been trying to batter their way through the keep's door were now pouring in behind Victarion shouting their own houses war cries as well as the general "For the Drowned God!"

At the head of the assault Victarion found himself dueling with a few young knights who were trying to wield great swords of all things inside the confines of the corridor. They got in each other's way so much Victarion slew both of them with ease, then came to where another corridor intersected the one they had been attacking from. Ironborn quickly raced off in every direction while Victarion stood there thinking, trying to figure out the layout of the keep.

Just then if Victarion had ears to hear it he would've heard a shout of joy and sudden happiness go up from the men on the keep's roof. Because it was at that moment that Garlan and the barges under his command had come into sight, racing down the river as fast as they could move. They weren't very fast, and the Ironborn ships whose crews were still trying to throw grapnel's up onto the top of the keep there saw them coming.

All of those men had been angered and irritated by their inability to go through with their portion of the attack. At this sign of what they thought was new, softer targets every captain there upped-anchor and swiftly made their way up river towards the barges, whose shape they could barely see in the pounding rain, let alone what was on their decks. They discovered too late that the barges were packed full of armsmen knights and archers. One longship lost enough of its crew to begin to list badly in the water, getting in the way of two more.

Here however the general disorganization and callousness Ironborn had towards one another actually worked to their advantage. Rather than retreat or try and pull away which would've been disastrous in the close confines of the Mander the other five remaining longships kept going, skirting past their tangled fellows to crash into the barges at the front of Garlan's command.

This won them force superiority for a moment upon the first few barges. Moreover this was the kind of fight the Ironborn excelled that; on uneven surfaces in bad weather and in-close. Moreover the unlucky, stupid and inexperienced had been weeded out since the battle to take the Shield Islands began, leaving only the good, the lucky and the experienced which was something many of the men under Garlan could not say. The experience in this kind of fighting began to tell, and Garlan's men took severe casualties in those first few moments. The battle turned however when more barges pulled up alongside and greater numbers of knights and armsmen began to come in on their fellow's side.

While this was going on the last four barges of the convoy grounded themselves on the shoreline, and the men on them began to race towards the beleaguered seat of House Oldflowers.

Inside the keep of the castle Victarion had fought his way up onto the fourth floor of the keep, where he began to meet even stiffer resistance. These knights and arms men were much more experienced than the ones down below, armed with short swords, hatchets and here and there in the hands of an especially capable man longwords, weapons that were much easier to use inside rather than the greatswords those two young idiots Victarion had killed earlier had tried to use.

Numbers however were pushing them further and further back, and Victarion was at the head of his man all the way killing for his Drowned God, while internally noting they would have to feed the bodies into the river at some point in the future. Eventually they forced their way within arms-reach of a doorway that led into a room which must've served several of the murder holes facing the river. Victarion laughed coldly. "They're trying so hard to protect that place, I think we've found where the Rose of Tyrell is hiding boys!"

That idea seemed to spur his man to greater heights, and they charged forward at the remaining defenders. Victarion

was at their head, and he tried to pick out his opposing number in the defenders, finding him after a moment. He was a knight, an elderly one standing at the back of the group extorting his fellows. "Hold, the Warrior blesses our arms, hold damn your eyes!"

Though his armor was of high standard, and his sword and armor both well cared for the face that showed through the visor opening of his helmet was overweight and old, matching the voice that Victarion heard, and the armor had obviously been tailored to allow room for a fat belly. *Just like the Reach itself, strong seeming, but a fat and rich underbelly.*

Despite this however the man was decent with his longsword and shield. As Victarion cut down his own opponent the knight did the same to an Ironborn warrior, blocking the Ironborn's mace with his shield and reposting quickly not at the opponents just but at his leg, cutting deep into his knee. The Ironborn screamed, flailing for a moment and the older man's sword came up in an economical backstroke cutting his throat open right below his helmet.

Another Ironborn charged the man and the older knight dueled with him sword to sword for a moment. Then the Ironborn overextended slightly allowing the older man to smack his sword to one side with his shield and skewer him through the middle punching through the Ironborn's chain mail with ease.

The old man only had a brief moment to pull his sword out of his former opponent before Victarion was on him. Victarion took a single moment to nod his head at the older man then charged. "We do not sow! For the Drowned God!"

"For my honor, for my oath, for my family and house Tyrell! Flying Free!" The older man bellowed, meeting him sword to axe. Though he was old, the man obviously had kept up at least some of his training, and was stronger than Victarion had anticipated. Not as strong as Victarion however, and their locked blades were quickly pushed back.

The old man disengaged, twirling to one side and using his shield to smash Victarion's axe to one side, his sword coming up as quickly as he could make it. But Victarion blocked it with his own shield, and the two exchanged several quick blows, the man refusing to lock weapons with Victarion again. He also refused to move from the doorway he was guarding, turning his body instead to face Victarion.

After another series of exchanges Victarion was able to get within the man's reach slightly, bowling into the man throwing him bodily backwards through the doorway. This allowed the Ironborn behind Victarion who had finally finished off the last of the armymen in the corridor to barrel into the room. By this point there were only eight Ironborn with Victarion, the others having spread out throughout the keep or having fallen in the fierce defense of this room outside in the corridor. But they would be more than enough to subdue the archers within and claim the prize.

Four of them fell to arrows from inside, and two more were engaged quickly by unarmored archers racing forward with long daggers. Five of those archers died in the next few mad moments, but they took two of the Ironborn with them. This left two more plus Victarion and the old man, and in one corner holding a bow and quickly putting another arrow to it the girl who could only be Margaery of House Tyrell.

The last two Ironborn pushed quickly past the knight and Victarion. One took the girl's arrow in the throat, the other danced back out of the door just in time to avoid a second.

He then tried to get behind the older man, as Victarion tried to turn him slightly their blades still locked up but he screamed as the girl, showing a remarkable ability, shot between her last defenders legs to catch the Ironborn warrior in the lower leg. He almost fell, but still made his way around the two combatants, hobbling forward.

By this time the old man was gasping, and his blows were nowhere near as strong or swift as they had been when the battle began. Victarion finally smashed his sword to one side, kicking out hard and catching the man in the chest before he could get his shield in position to block it. The man 'oofed' in agony as the breath exploded out of his lungs the kick doubling him over.

Victarion smashed his own shield against the man's as he tried feebly to raise it to guard his head. The man fell backward, stunned. The axe came around, its heavy cutting edge slamming into the armor of the man where his shoulder met his neck.

"No!" Margaery screamed another arrow on her bow, taking the other Ironborn reaver in the eye. Through her tears Margaery reached down quickly fitting another arrow to her bow. She tried to fire at the man who had just killed Igon Vyrwel, who she recognized from the stories about him as Victarion Greyjoy. The arrow caught him in the shoulder, but it didn't penetrate his plate armor hitting as it did on an angle, simply bouncing off as he turned towards her.

Victarion kicked the man's dead body off his axe, dropping his mangled shield. He turned to face the girl, wincing as his injured leg once more had to twist around, thankful the old man hadn't been mobile either, else the fight between them might have ended very differently. He marched towards the girl, looking around in frank astonishment mingled with respect. "Your guards put up a hell of a fight girl, that's to their credit, Greenlanders though they be. But did you really think this castle would be enough to stop the tide? We are Ironborn girl, we pay the Iron Price and we take what we want!"

By that time Victarion was in front of the girl, and she tried to use her bow like a stave striking at him but he disdainfully smacked it out of her hands with his gauntleted fist. His other fist clamped around her throat lifting her off the ground by several feet. Her feet kicked out ineffectually against his armor and he laughed coldly. "You are a pretty one, it's been a long time since I've taken a salt wife for myself and you would be a prize beyond compare. But tell me, why?"

"Why did you try this. You **baited** us girl, and I'll admit the defenders here put up one hell of a fight, but the outcome was never in doubt! You could've run, could've left the Mander behind and taken refuge elsewhere. Why? Why did you invite the tide upon yourself?"

"For..my... duty..." Margaery gurgled through his hold on her throat. "For my people! Couldn't defend Highgarden, had to stop you here."

"But you didn't stop me fool girl, you gave me the keys to that city, **you!** What will your family do when they see you trussed up on my bowsprit? What will the defenders of your precious city do?"

Victarion was not his brother Euron, who would have already raped the girl and carted her off to his ship naked, nor was he Balon, who would have raped her then killed her, sticking her head on his bowsprit. Victarion was not ruled by his passions like that, but neither was he compassionate. No, the girl was a means to an end and that end would be a prize greater than any Ironborn had ever taken: the city and castle of Highgarden, home of one of the two richest families in all Westeros.

Just then shouts from out in the corridor and further into the keep caught Victarion's attention. Unfamiliar war cries were being shouted, and he could hear a few familiar voices shouting in dismay and even fear in some cases. He turned towards the door, and that was when Margaery struck. Rather than beating on his hand ineffectually, one hand quickly moved to the back of her own neck where she had stowed the holdout dagger underneath her hair, tied there by a small piece of rope that was hidden underneath her dress.

She pulled it out quickly, raising it in one hand. Victarion turned back to her, and the dagger was thrust down straight into his eye and through it into his brain. Victarion Greyjoy died instantly, his body spasming as he fell to the ground.

No longer being held up off her feet Margaery fell too. She sprained her ankle as she fell awkwardly on it, but ignored the pain quickly pulling the dead man's grip off of her throat. She spent a moment massaging it before hobbling over to where the body of Igon Vyrwel lay, going to her knees next to it and gently closing the older man's eyes. "May the Warrior and the Father know you as their own, dear protector." She murmured. That was where Garlan found her as he and his men barreled through the keep looking for her.

The death toll was atrocious all around. Garlan had lost about 2000 men taking on the longships in the river but that was almost the totality of his own losses, he had only lost a hundred more men once his force was in Oldflowers attacking the Ironborn from behind. The Ironborn had never suspected that any other force was in the area and hadn't posted any watchers on the wall as they burst into the keep, so they were taken completely by surprise.

Moreover, by that point the defenders had reeked a horrific toll on the Ironborn. The Ironborn had started this battle with 19 longships, all of them having their own crews and as many more men besides as they could carry. That amounted to a little over 4000 men. The defenders had never had more than nine hundred, and had been stretched thinner and thinner as the battle went on, but even so had gutted the attacking force. They wouldn't have won without Garlan's sudden arrival, but there would have been few enough Ironborn left alive for Victarion at least to realize how dearly the battle had been won.

Those same defenders had paid the highest price that could be demanded of them. Only twelve men of the castle's entire complement were still alive when Garlan led his men into the keep from the same entrance that the Ironborn had used to gain access to the keeps interior. More than half of the survivors were injured, many crippled in some fashion.

Even so Castle Oldflowers still stood. Margaery was still alive, Garlan was alive and with his forces more than halfway down the Mander. Moreover the Ironborn fleet holding the Shield Islands had suddenly lost a little under half of its

strength. It had also lost its commander, Victarion Greyjoy, an even worse blow in terms of the fleet's combat ability. Both of these losses would begin to tell in the months to come, not just for the fleet holding the Shield Islands, but all the Ironborn.

OOOOOOO

Despite how busy they had been since arriving in the town, the Northern army finally left Harroway four days after their arrival, leaving behind a force of 400 to guard the walls. From Harroway, Rickard was sent off, leading a force of a combined arms force of eight hundred, most of which came from his own House, heading towards Saltpans. His orders were to find out what was happening there, and if he decided it was not to the North and their allies' benefit, do something about it.

When he arrived in the Saltpans, Rickard would learn that Lord Ryger's prediction had been accurate in what was going on, though he was incorrect on which side the two houses that held Saltpans had chosen. The Knightly House, Cox, had chosen neutrality, favoring waiting to see more evidence, while House Hawick had decided to come in on the Lannister side in return for gaining full control of the town. They had received aid in the form of a hundred armsmen and they had moved to arrest House Cox. Ser Cox fought back, and the two sides had exhausted themselves fighting for a town which that very fighting had wrecked.

With no one ready for an exterior force arriving, neither side had posted watchmen on the walls. Rickard moved in quickly, subduing both sides with minimal loss of life to his own men but significant loss on both sides after they foolishly tried to attack his men. Within an hour, both Houses had been nearly wiped out, the remainder was under Lord Karstark's control, as was the town. Normality began to return, something the townsfolk, caught in the middle as always, were ecstatic about.

Another five men were sent to Maidenpool with a message from Daenerys to Lord Mooton, who Daenerys knew was one of the contacts her brother and Illyrio had been trying to cultivate. That message contained some information about her return and her dragons as well as calling that house to join their cause. Maidenpool was too far out of the way from the Westerlands march up to face the North so hadn't been touched yet. That would make it and the lands around it incredibly important in the days to come when Ranma and Daenerys began to try to heal the damage that the Westerlands incursion had caused, and after that when they marched into the Crownlands.

Daenerys hoped to bring Mooton in on her side rather than her brothers, but had only a faint hope it would work. Both Daenerys and Ranma were a little leery about it, knowing that Mooton would be in a position to push for concessions since they would desperately need the aid of his land and town. Moreover neither of them had a very good handle on his personality, and their advisors for once were unable to help them with this. Lord Mooton had never been seen in Riverrun, Brynden had never interacted with him, and Dmeric had never travelled to Maidenpool before leaving for Essos.

At the pace the army marched it only took them half a day to get to Darry, which allowed them to rest the Army for the rest of that day, which was raining again, before heading out the next. Ranma and Daenerys found that Darry had also been ready for them with the foodstuffs and other bits and pieces that they had demanded be ready for their arrival were indeed ready.

Lord Darry was a tall boisterous fellow, but his eyes were calculating, and when he greeted the two royals, he seemed to be watching them closely. He seemed to take their laying down of conditions for him in stride, though he somehow made both Daenerys and Ranma uneasy.

That night Ranma and Daenerys met with their senior commanders once more. "Who knows the lands around here best? Specifically, what are the lands like between here and Harrenhal?"

There was some muttering about that and Ser Blanetree frowned. "I served as Master-at-arms at Harrenhal before my father passed away and made me the head of our House, it's about a week's march for a normal army from here. But it's a tough nut to crack even as badly battered as it is and I don't think we've heard any rumors about it or the town around it facing much in the way of the depredations of the Westerlanders. I'd recommend ignoring it, if we can get between it and the rest of the Westerlands army, we can cut them off from any support House Whent might offer in the way of supplies. Which wouldn't be much frankly, lady Whent and her house aren't very powerful, and she isn't the best land manager either."

"Agreed," said Lord Jason frowning as he stared at the map laid out on the camp table between them. Ranma and Daenerys had decide against staying in Darry itself, saying it was because the castle couldn't house their entire army. The reality was both that, and the fact they didn't really trust Lord Darry, and didn't want to tempt him into doing something foolish.

Jason knew that and respected their decision, but concentrated on the current discussion. "I've met Lady Whent several times and she doesn't really have the stomach for battle. She bent the knee to the Lannister's right enough, but I doubt that she was very enthused about it one way or the other. So long as the garrison the Lannisters placed in her castle is too large enough for her own men to overcome however, she won't turn against them either. But neither will she take any offensive action."

"Hmmpf..." muttered Greatjon shaking his head. "I remember that castle, and if I was the Lannisters I'd put in a powerful enough force to hold that regardless of what the lady would want. But it's doubtful they've got enough men to sortie against us with or without Whent's cooperation. What exactly are you thinking of?"

"Considering that I don't intend to actually attack, at least not conventionally, the fortifications on the Kneeling Man's Ford, I don't think we need the entire Army with us. That means we might be able to use half the army to relieve Raventree Hall or move to siege Harrenhal. If the group there is no threat, then the first option sounds better. Whatever the case, we'll make for Sallydance first, then take the lay of the land and decided what to do next."

OOOOOO

Three days march down the River Road from Darry the army should've been in sight of a small village, called Sallydance, but what they found was horror. They had seen signs of the depredations of the Westerlanders before this of course. The trials in Harroway, the tales of the smallfolk passed on in Fairmarket, the empty and abandoned farms the abandoned village of Ramsford along with others, even a few empty towns here and there along the Kingsroad showed the disruption and in some cases horror of the war the army of Tywin Lannister had brought to the Riverlands.

But all of that paled to a town whose inhabitants hadn't, for whatever reason, been able to run in time. The town was utterly demolished. There were no fires now, this had either happened long enough ago that they had burned out, or the rains that had come and gone since the battle against Tywin's forces had put them out, there was no way to know which. But there were still bodies, and there was still a stench discernible by Fenris leagues before Ranma could even see the town: the smell of death and decay.

He looked over at Ser Blanetree, who was the local guide at the moment, then over at where Meera and her men were coming back swiftly down the road. The scout group had been much reduced in the fighting on the other side of the Red Fork and reduced further by the need to send a few of them with Brynden and a few again with Rickard as he went down to the Salt pans.

That left Meera with only six men skilled at scouting to move toward the army, which had forced Ranma to use Fenris as a scout around the army's flanks and back just in case. Meera had seconded a few of the levy units from House Roote since that house's dissolution as local experts though.

Meera's face was pale as if she was trying to hold in her bile, her jaw clenched. Before she could speak however Ranma held up a hand shaking his head. "Don't tell me, the village is gone, right?"

Meera stared up at him then glanced over at Fenris, who had come up to stand next to Ranma from where he had been scouting the southern flank of the army. "Yes, it's, it's not a pretty sight." she said gulping again at the memory. "We didn't get too close, but the outskirts of the town was bad enough. I'd recommend cutting off into the woods to go around it."

Ranma turned to Greatjon and his son along with Patrek and Jason. "We'll go far enough around so that Fenris can't smell that stench anymore then come back towards the road."

He turned back to Meera looking at her. "Were there any looters or anyone still around?"

"I don't think so, not with that smell in the air."

Ranma nodded, staring further down the road towards Sallydance while behind him the army began to leave the road. He actually wanted to go and look, to see the devastation firsthand, to see what the Westerlanders had done to the areas of the Riverlands they controlled. Yet he knew it would be dangerous to come any closer than this to an area with so many bodies that had been left unburied. That was a hive for flies and disease, and he wasn't about to chance that, even with his own life.

But in the end he didn't have to do so to get a further taste of the hell the Westerlanders had brought to the Riverlands. Sallydance had marked the intersection between a small road heading towards the House Blackwood's lands and further down the River Road, making it a small but decent hub of local trade. As such it had several smaller

outlying farmsteads, and one of them was on the route that the army took to get away from the stench. There weren't nearly as many bodies, but those that were there were horrors.

The body of the man who had possibly been the patriarch of the family had been strung up on a nearby tree, his entrails hanging out from a cut that had opened him right below his stomach from one side to the other. His two sons had fared little better, one having had his head chopped off next to his body, the other having seemingly been pulled apart, possibly by horses or something.

But the worst was the younger daughter and mother. The mother had been placed on top of a stake which had been driven deep into her stomach, hopefully after she had already been dead but there was no way to tell. Her body was also naked showing that even if she had been alive when impaled, it might have been a release from the hell that had become her life in those final hours. The same had been done to her daughter a girl who looked only six or seven years old, including the stark evidence of rape.

Ranma couldn't take his eyes off those bodies, his face showing horror and a rising rage at the sight. Daenerys, when she came up with the rest of the army, also stood there, struck dumb by the sight. Merry was again sharing a horse with Daenerys. She took one look then buried her face in the older woman's hair, shuddering.

Greatjon and Jason were both veterans, and had seen such things particularly in the battles against the Ironborn when they came in after a raid. But the royal army hadn't exactly been gentle to the smallfolk either, nor had the Stormlanders or even the Northerners until Lord Stark had put his foot down and executed one out of every five rapists to stop such.

Smalljon and Patrek however, thanks to Ranma's rules about such things hadn't yet seen what an army could do to a village or town when the blood was up and the fires blazing. They joined their king and queen staring at the destruction though none of them dared come close enough to bury the bodies, it'd been so long since they had been placed there it was possible that disease had already set in.

"Get me some fire arrows." Ranma said softly. Though the voice was soft, there was something in it that made practically everyone in hearing him bolt back toward the supply horses.. Smalljon was the first to come back, carrying one of the spare bows and a fistful of fire arrows. Ranma wordlessly took them from him, and with unerring precision sent a single fire arrow into each of the bodies that they could see, then another into the remains of the farmhouse.

As they began to slowly burn Ranma shook his head. "And these people call themselves men? These people think themselves nobles and knights? These people call themselves **human**?" Daenerys had no answer for him, simply taking his hand in hers as they stared at the fires for a few more moments before turning away to rejoin the rest of the army.

Not even an hour later they intersected the road leading towards Blackwood land on one side and then back towards the village on the other. Here Ranma called for a halt, letting the Army have a quick lunch while he consulted with his commanders. "We've got the bit between our teeth now," he said rubbing Fenris up under the chin for a moment as the direwolf rumbled in pleasure, thankful as his human was to get away from the stench of decay. "I mean to keep it, and I am in no mood to allow the Riverlands Houses that have thus far supported the Westerlanders to have the opportunity to turn their coats."

"What do you plan to do?" Greatjon said gruffly. Jaded he might be, but even he had been shocked by the sight of that farm. Yet he was still able to keep his mind on business. "Remember we still don't know any clear or hard number of the men that Tywin was able to pull out of our trap. Less than half his army for certain, but that's not exactly a small number is it?"

"I have faith that Brynden has been pressing them hard, and with the distance to cover he'll have lost even more men, especially with Ser Wendel's assault on his camp during the battle. That Army won't have the morale for any kind of heroic assault, and we'll still have the pikes. My read on the land around the Kneeling Man's Ford is that it'll be open enough for us to form a pike square if we can." Ranma paused looking at the Riverlands lords who all looked at one another before shrugging or nodding.

With that sign of agreement Ranma went on. "We'll take one of the regiments of pike and half the archers along with the irregular infantry all of the light cavalry that we have and a small portion of the heavy cavalry up with us. We'll send another regiment of pike and the rest of the army with all the food they can carry down towards Raventree Hall."

"Why did you mention all the food then they can carry?" Patrek asked.

"Because I mean for that army to move even faster than we normally do. I want you to catch the force down by



Raventree Hall before any word of the fall of Darry and Harroway can reach them. If we do that you can take them by surprise. The rest of the army will continue to move towards the Kneeling Man's Ford. Once we get back on the road how long d'you think it'll take us to get there Ser Blanetree?"

"As fast as were moving, another 2 and a half days," the older knight said promptly. "Even if we keep most of the supply horses with us, we're moving at a faster clip than most armies can manage, we might even beat Tywin back."

"If we can do that I mean to take those defenses at a run and be in position to hold the fort against him." Ranma said seriously. "With us on one side and Brynden on the other, he'll either surrender or die and frankly at this point I don't talking care which."

Gone from Ranma's mind were all his long-term needs to retain a portion of the invaders as a workforce, gone was his desire to not punish the levy forces so hard for the crimes of their masters. No, he wanted to slaughter everyone last one of the Westerlanders, and if he had to he would do it gleefully.

Daenerys frowned for a moment. "With the use of my dragons taking those defenses shouldn't be difficult, especially if the force there has somehow received word of the disaster that Tywin walked into. Even if Tywin beats as there, that army will be heavily demoralized, low on food and any other kind of provisions. It won't try for an open field battle, not unless they're desperate enough to try to charge our pike again. I would recommend that you go with the other army Ranma, while I retain command of the other portion and push up to the Kneeling Man's Ford."

Ranma frowned thoughtfully, then Daenerys leaned in, whispering so as to not be overheard. "We've proven that we can both mete out justice and can deal with matters of law and politics, but I still need to prove that I can lead battles for us to be seen as true equals."

Her husband continued to frown, then shook his head slowly, replying in a whisper as well. "No, you got a good point but I want to be on hand just in case. Tywin's a cunning old lion, and if he does something surprising or has somehow managed to keep his force under control after all this time I want to be there."

"Which could simply imply that I'm not your equal in this field. Send me along with Greatjon, Ser Barristan and Jason to advise me, and that will be enough." Daenerys insisted.

"Your Majesty." Jason began delicately, indicating the royal duo's conversation had carried despite their whispering. "I realize your point, and it's a good one, but I don't think this is the time." Everyone looked at him and he shrugged. "Tywin knows his options are becoming less and less, and that will make him both dangerous and unpredictable. For that we need our best military minds, and that is Lord Ranma, I'm sorry to say."

"Cley, get me my map of the Riverlands," Ranma said before Daenerys could say anything. The others were silent for several moments as Ranma went over the Riverlands, strangely enough not concentrating on the area near the Kneeling Man Ford, but down further south. After a moment he shook his head. "Sorry Daenerys, but I think I do need to be with that force. With Stone Hedge still in our hands, Tywin won't be able to even think of holding if he get there before us, which he might."

Ranma carefully did not look at Fenris, keeping his eyes locked on Daenerys whose eyes flickered that way once then nodded slowly, seeing his point. "If he retreats will Lannister try to get down towards Wayfarer's Rest and retreat to the Westerlands, or further south?"

"I think he'll retreat straight south." Ranma said promptly. He tapped the map for a moment on the Tumbler's Falls. House Harlton controls this land and they joined the Lannisters willingly so he can expect aid there, and if he's fast enough he might get there before us."

"And then take barges down the Blackwater Rush." Daenerys thought nodding your head. "That makes sense. If he knows Wayfarer's Rest is held against him, he certainly won't be able to go that way, you're right. Which would mean a long chase..." Daenerys nodded again. "I withdraw my suggestion." She winked at the others laughing as she took Ranma's arm. "Never let it be said that I am not open to the voice of sweet reason."

This caused everyone around them to laugh, even Ser Barristan, but after a moment Jason asked. "Who will you put in charge of the force to relieve the Blackwoods then?"

"You Lord Mallister, Ser Barristan and I believe, Smalljon. No offense Smalljon, but I think we'll need Patrek with the army still as supply officer and you'll be of better use helping to shatter what resistance there is outside of Raventree Hall." Patrek's arm had healed by this point, though he wasn't up to fighting with it just yet. He had however taken to the exercises Ranma had shown him easily. He would never be the match of one of the Wolfsworn, never be able to

use ki like all of them could to power their weapons, but he would still become far better than most swordsman could be.

Smalljon nodded, his hands working on the hilt of his greatsword while his father thumped him on the back. At the same time Jason looked at his son proudly

"I think we should send Tristan and House Ryger's troops as well." Daenerys suggested. "A force of light cavalry like that will be good to chase down any survivors, and it'll still leave us with the majority of the light cavalry we have." *Plus in a battle like that, Tristan will be able to win himself some glory, which he feels he needs to. Ranma might not have noticed his growing desire to prove himself, but I have.*

Ranma nodded and clapped his hands sharply together. "It sounds like a plan Sers and ladies, let's get it done." Within an hour, the army, now fed its midday meal, was once more on the March in two different directions, the dragons once more flying over the portion led by Ranma and Daenerys.

OOOOOO

Tywin smiled grimly as a cheer went up all around him, the army at last seeing the friendly fortifications on Kneeling Man's Ford, and men on the other side began to see the army. The march these past few weeks had been hellish.

The weather of course played its part in that. Few among his men had warm clothing, let alone rain proof clothing. Their tents were proof against rain, but thanks to that spoiling raid by the Northerners, most of the army's tents were gone along with much of their other camp supplies. Because of that and the rains that came every third day or so, many of his men were sick with colds and fevers. This was made worse by the lack of bedrolls and food.

With the Northern barbarians on its heel, the army couldn't stop and forage, which made hunting impossible most of the time, and the food had slowly run out. Most of his men hadn't had more to eat than small chunks of stale bread. And the northerners themselves did their part, never able to catch up with his army, they still continually pressed him hard, ambushing his back riders several times, attacking his flank with small forces and generally causing carnage.

Tywin had tried several to reform his army and hold at locations he thought he could use to his advantage against the Northerner's dogging his heel. Each time he found them either already holding those positions, or attacking him in such a way the geography worked for them instead. And always their archers would go to work, either as a large body or ones and twos. Ten men here, a hundred here, four hundred lost here, the losses to the Northerners, desertions and deaths by other causes had added up, halving his army again, leaving him with slightly over five thousand men.

*Nonetheless, I escaped your jaws young wolf, your outriders were never able to slow my army down enough to bring up your infantry. Now come, come and try to beard the lion in his den. We will see what those pikes of yours can do against a prepared position.*

Unfortunately this slight uptick in his mood did not last Tywin very long. "What?" He said coldly as he looked at Lord Stackspear, who had remained in command of the fortress here.

"Stone Hedge and Wayfarer's Rest have both fallen my Lord." The man said shrugging his shoulders uncomfortably under his Lord Paramount's icy gaze, his own shock and worry at the losses the main Westerlands army had taken apparent, but he'd had enough to worry about the past few days. "We think the raiders got into Stone Hedge by impersonating the regular supply convoy, some of our scouts found their bodies hidden along the road to the castle. Wayfarer's Rest was taken in an assault, but as Stone Hedge was the closer issue, I felt it better to concentrate on that first."

"I sent the majority of my men down to try and reclaim it under Ser Greenfield and news of the castle's fall spread quickly to the force besieging Raventree Hall. Lord Bracken pulled his men out of the siege immediately and marched up to take part of the siege. Neither of them have reported any headway however, so it is anyone's guess if they will win through."

"And our supply situation?" Tywin knew all too well how much of the supplies gathered here at the ford he had taken to feed his army on the march, but hopefully those losses had been made good since they marched.

Lord Stackspear shrugged. "I don't have exact numbers for your army my lord, but the land around here has already been foraged out by my own men. I doubt we have enough supplies to feed both my men and yours for more than a few days, and there is no way the rest of our supplies can make do your losses."

In an uncharacteristic show of tiredness Tywin rubbed the bridge of his nose for a moment before asking "Do we even know who took Stone Hedge? Was it some Riverlands brigand or some group from one of the houses that swore for us?"

"The man who reported the castle's loss to me said that he saw the Stark banner my Lord." the camp commander replied. "But, but my lord there is more. A party arrived here from Harroway with a man from further north, one of your spies. He brings information, I, you need to hear it firsthand my lord, else you call me a liar."

Tywin looked at him then nodded. "Send for him then, but tell me, how many men did you send to take Stone Hedge back?"

"Around 3000 my Lord, nearly my full complement, I left a thousand men here under myself." Stackspear replied, while sending his servant out of the cabin. "I felt that the defenses here would've made up for numbers lost if we were attacked, and I could not bring myself to think that there was a second force strong enough to attack us here as well as take Stone Hedge. Information I've gained since making that decision have called that into question, but recalling those forces wouldn't have helped if that information is true."

Tywin quirked an eyebrow but underneath his habitual self-control he was getting a little worried at the fear he could see in Stackspear's face and body language.

At that point the servant returned with another man following him. Tywin took a moment to look at the man following Daven, trying to place where he had seen the face before. "You... would be the majordomo of house Wayn correct? Why are you here when you should be in place to pass on the movements of the Riverlands lords?"

Tywin's voice was mild, but violence glittered just underneath the surface. Without those lords deciding to break their neutrality the disastrous battle against the northern pike would never have happened, and Ranma would have been trapped there, unable to get around Tywin's army and escape once more.

"My Lord," Crenlock said going to one knee. "I traveled as quickly as I could, and as surreptitiously as I could as well which was not easy. I know I should have stayed in place my lord, but my normal means of passing on information were discovered, and I felt this information was important enough to risk bringing it in person." And of course his own life had been in danger too, even before the attempted assassination he had planned, which evidently had not worked. "A disaster has occurred my Lord, the return of the dragons!"

Tywin froze, that was the only word for it, his normally unexpressive features closed down entirely, his eyes growing colder than ice, and his hand which had been lightly tapping the hilt of his sword gripped it so hard his knuckles whitened. *I had heard rumors to that effect, but none of my spies had passed on any **real** information, and Ser Addam didn't see any sign of it. How could the Northerners have kept that a secret, and why would they allow the dragons to return at all?*

The Lord Paramount of the Westerlands didn't know anything about Alayaya and Domic, or their ability to ferret out spies. Nor had he ever given much credence to either the Faith of the Seven, or the smallfolk's resentment of his armies actions since arriving in the Riverlands. The smallfolk had long memories, and Septon Sparrow had decided that whatever side he was on was most certainly not the Lannister's. And when the smallfolk were asked by their septons not to pass on information to the invaders, most obeyed, some even under torture. Those that didn't were known to their neighbors, and began to have 'accidents' over the past few weeks.

"Start from the beginning." Tywin ordered.

The man did so, detailing the arrival of the northern host with Lord Brynden and Greatjon Umber, their inability to make any headway with local lords, and then the second arrival via the Blue Fork which included the Umber heir and Lord Mallister. "It was only when the two of them and their servant entered the inn which Lord Wayn and the others had taken for themselves that we learned who she really was."

*Disaster upon disaster*, Tywin thought Crenlock finally finished, having detailed how his fellow spies had been outed by Brendan and a few others, how he had organized an assassination attempt of Daenerys, which must have failed given the rumors that had almost outpaced his progress from Harroway to the Ford. Crenlock finished by saying. "I shared enough with the knight in command of the Harroway garrison to warn him about the dragons, but he refused to pull his men back, but came with me to the Ford."

Here Stackspear spoke up. "We've since received word that House Darry has switched sides and they would only do that if the Targaryen girl was still around and if the northern army had crossed the ford."

"They plan to attack us from the side then." Tywin thought, his mind and voice cold. *Ranma planned for this, perhaps not the fall of Stone Hedge, but he wanted me here, right here in my defenses, surrounded by log cabins and wooden palisades and wooden siege weapons. Would he threaten me with the dragons while all the while my army starved perhaps, or would he have simply used them right away? And it hasn't rained for the past two days, if that continues... It matters not, I need to retreat before the northerners get here. We don't have the supplies to stay here, and our earthworks facing the east aren't nearly as good as those facing the Ford.*

"Lord Stackspear, it is clear to me that we are caught in a cleft stick. As such, we need to make some hard decisions." Tywin said aloud, then began to detail his orders, noticing but not caring as Stackspear's face first fell, then congealed into stone. Tywin would do what he had to in order to survive and see his family did the same, if that meant sacrificing the majority of the men he had here, so be it.

OOOOOOO

It took barely a day and a half for the now only 5000 strong army under Ser Barristan and Jason to reach the Blackwood lands. They stopped at the outskirts of a small village, resting the army a full day before marching on rapidly, coming within sight of Raventree Hall early the next day.

Thanks to the months of rigorous marching and exercise the army was still in good fighting condition when they arrived, and immediately fell into battle ranks. Sir Barristan had watched the battle at the Ford with interest. He knew that the pikes use of close formations, and the depth of that formation along with their better armor had made the pike not just an anti-cavalry weapon but an anti-anything weapon, so made that the center of his combat formation as they marched into sight of the army surrounding Raventree Hall.

He left Tristan and his House's troops to one side and back as a mobile reserve but mostly, he confided to Tristan who commanded them, to make certain that they were not engaged in the actual fight until the enemy broke. The heavy cavalry under Smalljon was to his other side, directly in front of the wing of archers for the moment. He wanted to hide the archers numbers from the enemy as much as he could, which wouldn't be much if he was honest, but that also put the archers closest to the nearest copse of trees which could allow them to retreat their just in case.

Though Ranma hadn't commented on it, Jason and Ser Barristan between them had decided to make one attempt to call for the Riverlands forces attacking Raventree Hall to surrender. It was doubtful they would, considering that news of the turn in fortune Tywin had run into wouldn't have reached them, and with the speed of the Northern army it was doubtful that even the fall of Harroway or turning of Darry had.

Still the two of them moved forward, under flag of truce along with Smalljon to talk to the leaders of the defenders. Ser Wode, Lord Keath, and Lord Harlton rode out to meet them, their own army quickly forming into a defensive formation facing the newcomers at the back of the earthworks they had thrown up around the castle. Evidently they hadn't even had scouts out, and even from where they sat on their horses out of bow range the Northern delegation could hear cries of consternation and shock at the sudden arrival of an enemy army.

Jason knew Ser Wode as a honorable man, one who had often chafed under his House's allegiance to that of Whent of Harrenhal, but despite being the most experienced man here, his contingent of the army was no doubt the smallest so Jason doubted he would have much say in what was about to happen.

He was proven correct in this assumption when it was Lord Keath who spoke up. "How the hell are you here Mallister?" he growled. "The last we heard, you and your men had just reached Fairmarket."

Lord Lucas Keath was a swarthy man, large of waist and shoulder, with small deep-set but intelligent eyes. He had always wished to make his house stronger than it was, holding lands near the God's Eye and House Vance of Atranta. That ambition was no doubt why he had joined with the Lannisters, not any belief in the rightness of their cause or anything else.

"You're forgetting the rumors we heard of late from the men," said Ser Wode, staring hard at Smalljon for a moment then moving on to the others nodding cordially at Tristan, which the younger man returned begrudgingly, and then Jason. "Is it true Darry and Harroway have fallen, Jason?"

"Yes," Jason replied simply. "The Northerners as you can see from Smalljon here and the pike behind me, are on this side of the Trident. Another army is moving up to take the Kneeling Man's Ford away from Tywin and hopefully trap him there. Stone Hedge has also fallen but you already know that else I would see Jonos here. I presume he pulled his men out and raced up there already?"

"He did," said Keath, his belligerence now abating somewhat as the true magnitude of the reversal hit him. There

were only about 700 Westerlands men with their army and if they had to be subdued that could be dealt with easily enough. The commander was Ser Tybolt Hetherspoon, and he had not impressed any of the Riverlands lords with his martial prowess up to this point.

Lord Harlton was an older man than Keath, but he too was just as ambitious, and it had been that greed, along with the urging of his wife, a Peckledon, that he had taken up the Lannister cause. He'd long desired to add the Stony Sept to his holdings, and Tywin had promised to see to that after the war was over. However, he was also a realist, and knew when to cut his losses. "What are the terms of our surrender?"

Jason winced. This part wasn't going to go over well, but he had to do it. He didn't know Keath or Harlton well, but he hoped they would see reason. Wode he was certain would if given the chance. The terms of your surrender that I am allowed to offer you in the name of King Ranma stark and Queen Daenerys Targrayen is as follows," he said, pausing as all three of his listeners jolted in astonishment. They had heard rumors about the dragons returning and even a few sightings connected with the fall of Harroway, but they hadn't heard that the two families had actually joined.

After a moment Jason went on. "Complete and total capitulation and surrender of your men and yourself, whereupon you and they will be placed on trial. If you or any of your men are found guilty of any crimes against the smallfolk of the Riverlands, you will be tried as anyone would be for such crimes in times of peace."

That part his listeners had no problem with. None of them had allowed their men to pillage Blackwood lands, though Jonos Bracken had not been as wary. Nor had they taken part in the rapine going on anywhere else, having only joined the Lannisters after they won the battle at the Kneeling Man's Ford. But it was the only part of the terms they wouldn't have a problem with.

"As houses that have agreed to aid the invaders of the Riverlands, an act of treason against your Lord Paramount, you will also face harsh penalties, not only you but your men as well. If found innocent of further crimes, your men will be forced to work for the crown on various public projects for five years or take the black. Any levy forces or smallfolk that you have added to your army will be forced to work a year on those self-same projects. Their food and shelter will be provided for them, but that is all."

At that Harlton and Keath began to mutter angrily, though Ser Wode seemed to perk up somewhat.

"You and your House will be facing severe monetary penalties to be decided after the Westerlands Army has either been destroyed or driven out of the Riverlands. However thereafter your house will no longer be able to raise more than fifty armstrongs at any given time, and you will be held to that by crown oversight." The angry glares sharpened at that, and Keath seemed about to interrupt but Jason went on bleakly. "And you yourselves will have to step down and either be exiled to Essos, join the Penitent Brothers on the Quiet Isle, or take the Black. None of this is negotiable. But if you do surrender, I'll put in a good word for you."

By that point Keath it had enough. He bellowed angrily, "Those aren't the terms you give to an equal, those are terms you give to a supplicant! You don't have nearly enough men to win this battle that one-sidedly if you win it all. You expect us to simply bow our heads like that? At least when they courted us the Lannisters offered concessions in the future. Your offering the return of the dragons, which I'll remind you our Lord Paramount fought against in Robert's Rebellion and hard words of treason with no mead to help the swallowing?"

Jason shrugged. "Those were the two are terms I'm allowed to offer you, and I would think that Ser Barristan's presence here as part of the Queen's personal guard would show how much honor there is in our cause."

Ser Barristan spoke up then. "The pulling whelp that sits on the throne isn't legitimate, he has not an ounce of Baratheon blood in him, and moreover is a beast even worse than the Mad King when he sat on the throne. The Lannister's promises to you are nothing, their honor is nothing."

"You say that like it matters!" Lord Harlton spoke up, just as angrily as his fellow lord. "The Lannisters have gold, real coin, and were willing to pay for our loyalty! You honestly think we'll go into exile just like that?!"

Smalljon spoke up then holding up a hand. "Those terms were decided on before we came across the Trident," he said coldly moving his horse forward to stand in front of the others of the Northern/Riverlands delegation. His voice was deep and cavernous in his large chest and when he spoke his voice had the bite of anger and contempt. "You didn't do as the houses that gathered at the Ruby Ford did, sitting on the sidelines and defending your lands, you willingly joined the Lannisters in the rape of their smallfolk and their war against your neighbors! Have you been down the road here, have you seen what they have done to the town of Sallydance? That sight is everywhere throughout the Riverlands because of the Lannisters, and those are the people you have aided."

Harlton and Keath glared at him, but Wode looked away, shaking his head sadly.

Smalljon went on his voice becoming even grimmer. "We were asked by the Queen Daenerys to give you the opportunity to surrender. Personally, I would've already ordered the attack and slaughtered you and yours without remorse. Which is precisely what we will do if you don't agree to the surrender terms. And my lords, I should add that that doesn't apply to just your men here but to your Houses. Your women will be forced into the silent sisters or into exile, your lands seized and your keeps, if the men you left behind are foolish enough to try to stand against, us will be pulled down. Your houses will never again be noble houses or even knightly ones, they will simply cease to be entirely, just like Haigh just like Vypren, just like Erenford and House Frey."

As the list of already wiped out houses went on his listeners paled, but still glared back defiantly. Ser Wode looked more contemplative, but didn't say anything. "If you think you can take us," said Ser Keath growling the words, "you come ahead and try." With that he turned along with Harlton. Wode took a moment to nod his head formally to Ser Barristan before turning his own horse around and trotting back to their army with the others which by this point had finished forming up into battle lines.

"A diplomat you are not Smalljon." said Ser Barristan laughing quietly. "Ser Wode at least listened, I don't doubt that he and his will split off soon enough."

"The others will run." Jason said as he led the way back to their own army. "I know their type, all bluster and fury on the surface but I think they've taken the measure of our army well enough to realize they really don't have a chance of fighting us, not given the fact that I know Tytos Blackwood and his men will sortie the moment battle is joined. They'll be caught between our two forces."

"I can't say I care one way or another." said Smalljon growling slightly under his breath. "They've made their bed, now they can fucking well sleep in it."

Jason called over Tristan as soon as they were back in with the rest of the army. "Keep your men separate, at least a few of those lords are going to run and I want your force ready to split off and head after them as soon as they do."

"Agreed." Tristan said, then he smirked. "I take it that the discussions didn't go well?"

"Never bring a walking talking giant to a political discussion." said Ser Barristan shrugging his shoulders. "Though given the terms her majesty authorized us to give them I doubt that a battle could've been avoided really. The king and queen showed their youth there."

"You think so?" Smalljon said turning to him with a smile that was somehow humorous and grim at the same time. "I think they've shown remarkable intelligence really. After all, Houses that turn their coats like this once might be tempted to again. And after the war is over, their lands can then be incorporated into other loyal Houses."

Sir Barristan paused then nodded thoughtfully not having thought of that.

Not ten minutes after the two groups of delegates had moved back to their opposing armies a horn bellowed from the northern side and the pike regiments began to move forward along with the archers, who shifted slowly behind the pike. The heavy cavalry moved slowly moved with them, still shielding the archer's flanks.

Archers on the other side also began to move forward, firing at the pike and their fellows, but plate armor and helmets the pikemen used was as heavy as most heavy cavalry could wear, and so at a distance Riverlands archers couldn't penetrate them, even having trouble penetrating the chain mail the pikes wore on their arms and legs. The northern longbows however began to tell on the opposing side, and soon the infantry on the other side broke into a trot racing towards the pike.

In response the pike regiment began to spread under Smalljon's firm control and horn commands, turning into a triangle shape. One flat end faced the enemy, with the archers now securely inside the triangle along with the heavy cavalry and majority of the light cavalry. The only exception was Tristan and his men, who had broken off from the army directly backwards, then to the side, entering the copse of trees on the left flank.

This was a move that Smalljon, Ranma and his unit commanders had discussed several times, though it would be the first time that it would be used in battle. Pikes were after all vulnerable on their flanks, the weapons were so long they couldn't be turned quickly. The battle against the Lannister army near the Ruby Ford had occurred in an area where the pike regiments couldn't be encircled. It had been deliberately planned that way in fact.

Here the land was flat, former farmland, good rich farmland that would hopefully yield another cropped after this battle

was over. That meant the army might well be encircled. And Smalljon didn't have any of the irregular infantry with them. However the triangle formation protected the archers and the cavalry from taking any losses, while not allowing the pike to be flanked.

The two armies met with a resounding crash, and the pike once more proved effective against infantry as well as cavalry. The cavalry, what limited numbers there were, couldn't break through the front ranks of pike, the horses shying away from the solid wall of steel. The infantry crashed into it as well, though their losses weren't quite as high in the initial push as the cavalry's.

Quickly however the infantry realized they couldn't get through the wall of pike four lines of pikemen thrusting their pikes in a single direction. In response and seemingly without any orders from their commanders, they began to spread to both sides as Smalljon had predicted. For a moment the enemy infantry must have thought they had found the edge of the pike formation, only to run into more pike at the corners, then being frustrated by running into two more walls of pike stretching behind the northern formation.

Seating on his horse Ser Barristan was in the center of the formation, and saw all of this happening. The archers too began to tell, hundreds of men on the other side dying as the powerful longbows did their work even on heavy plate, which was not in much abundance over there anyway.

The moment the enemy force had come around both sides of the pike's front side there came a loud horn blast from the Castle. The portcullis came down, slamming into place as the gate behind it raised. "Our roots are strong!" shouted a voice, which Barristan could hear even over the clamor of battle. He watched with a faint smile on his face as House Blackwood forces poured out of their castle to attack the army that had besieged them for the past several months in the rear.

Lord Tytos Blackwood was a canny commander and ordered his archers to remain in place the moment they were within their own long-range, then ordered his cavalry in first to hammer the opposing army from behind, quickly bypassing the earthworks the besieging army had created around Raventree Hall. Those earthworks served to funnel his heavy cavalry into five smaller units, each led by him and his sons, but they still struck hard. This series of hammer blows shattered what little formation they had for his footmen to exploit, racing after them.

The former Kingsguard commander nodded over to one of the pike regiments troop commanders. Not having memorized the horn blows to command them Barristan had to rely on the other man to pass his orders along. "Signal the pikes to open at the back, let our own cavalry out to play." Then he waved a large Red Flag in the air. This was a signal for Tristan to begin his own attack from the flank.

"I suppose I need to get to work then." Jason chuckled, then nodded at Sir Barristan, before flicking his helmet's visor down moving to join the heavy cavalry.

It was only moments after the enemy army found themselves stuck between two opposing forces that the men of that army began to break. The first to do so were Lord Keath and Harton, who raced off with a force of 100 light cavalry to the south the moment Blackwood had slammed into the back of their army. Of course most of that army was already panicking, but that seems to be the final straw, and dozens, hundreds of men threw down their weapons and raise their hands in the air shouting parley, surrendered, or settings "King's Justice!"

This was the call men gave to throw themselves on the mercy of the crown. Hearing it now showed that the men had heard at least some of the terms their lords had so angrily turned down. But a year or even five years of hard labor were much better than death in battle, especially in a battle they had no chance of winning.

Those hundred were caught by the forces of House Ryger, and for some odd reason neither of the Lords survived that encounter.

Ser Wode did not run, surrendering with his men the moment the Blackwoods attacked the back of the army's formation. And having moved his men back from the forefront into the center of that formation he saved most of their lives, though his own future remained uncertain.

An hour later watching as the new prisoners were rounded up Jason nodded at the older man. "I'll put in a good word for you. I believe their Majesties will take into account that you surrendered willingly, and that you are merely following House Whent into your treason."

Ser Wode nodded. "I will willingly go into exile if it means my men's lives will be spared for now. I'll have you know that none of my lads had anything to do with any of the atrocities the Westerlanders committed elsewhere, or even here on Blackwood land. I executed two of them who did."

"Will they be willing to stand as witnesses to any that were?" Asked Jason. "Their majesties like to have witnesses to such before passing sentence."

Again Wode nodded wearily, impressed at how much justice and the rule of law seems to matter to these two new young royals. *That speaks well of the future, even if I won't be here to see it.*

At that moment Tytos rode up, pulling his helm off and laughing delightedly. "Jason, you old fox! By the old gods, what is happening elsewhere to let you have a force like this here so quickly!" He looked over at Smalljon who was walking up, cleaning the point of the pike he had borrowed for the battle. His greatsword was nice, but it didn't have the range to let him join the pike regiments without taking up one of their weapons.

"A lot my friend," Jason said reaching up and catching the other man's arm in a grip of firmness. "I don't suppose you and your house can feed my army can you? We've got some food, but we split off from the main force with only enough food to get us here with a little more as an emergency."

"I can do that and more." said Tytos, laughing again. "I pulled back my smallfolk and all of the foodstuffs they could gather into Raventree well before we were besieged, and I've always had more than enough supplies to last months on hand in any event. I think I can safely say that you and your men earned a few days provender on my accounts. Now," he said seriously leaning forward eagerly. "Tell me what's been going on, and what's the meaning behind that banner of yours?"

OOOOOO

Years later when the historians were finally able to take the time to write up the history of the War of Reformation they would call this the Battle of the Breadbasket. This was a humorous name for the battle that, in many ways, was the pivotal moment of the Stark/Lannister portion of the war. Historians argued about that, but those in the know said that if he still had the supplies that had been stored in Stone Hedge, Tywin would have either escaped entirely or forced Ranma and Daenerys to slaughter his army, which would have had major implications later. Of course it wasn't simply one battle, sieges weren't like that. It was instead a series of clashes, some of them light desultory exchanges of arrow fire. But some were very heavy indeed...

A man next to Arya went down with an arrow through the eye. She unhesitatingly reached down grabbing up his bow and began to fire back at the men stationed on top of the very rickety, very makeshift siege tower. It was little more than three stories tall, and thus wasn't actually very useful in sending men onto the wall. But it made for a very good forward fire position, allowing them to shoot up at the wall with **much** better accuracy than anyone among the defenders was happy with.

To make matters worse the hides protecting the siege towers, had been liberally dosed with water, making them all impossible to light on fire. Luckily the towers at each corner of the castle as well as the main gatehouse could still fire down into the archers on top of the tower, and she watched as more half a dozen men went down from fire from the nearest towers as well as one of the oxen that had pushed the tower into position. There wasn't enough hide to go around to make some kind of cover for the oxen, or for the men who were now desperately trying to move the tower back out of arrow range.

However the tower had still done its work. All around Arya siege ladders had slammed up against the wall that had been badly denuded of defenders, and she raced along pushing at the nearest one, trying to push it off the wall. A second later Arya ducked as several other archers from another siege tower began to fire on her.

Edd waved at her from further down the wall by the nearest tower, motioning her to stay down for a moment. Looking at him in confusion for a moment she then spotted why. In one hand he was whirling a length of rope whose end had been set on fire.

Whirling it side-along Eddy tossed it high into the air over the siege tower to land among the oxen behind it. The oxen bellowed and terrified began to pull hard at their leads. The entire rickety structure of the tower shook as they both bolted in different directions. Fire arrows from that same tower began to streak down, not at the men on top of the siege tower but at the oxen and the men trying to control them.

The fire finally did its work and with wrenching sound of tortured wood the oxen finally went out of control, pulling segments of the tower out with them. The entire structure was so rickety that it began to collapse to the screams of the men that had been on top.

By then more men had rushed out of the tower behind Roger, led by Dacey while she raced towards Arya. Arya took the opportunity to stand up again, turning rapidly and racing back down the way she came pushing more siege



ladders off but several men had already made their way up onto the wall, killing four more archers that had defended it. They were being held up however by two Mormont men, both of whom had better armor than they did.

The two of them held their end of the wall while Dacey and Arya attacked the invaders from behind. Dacey's strength and sheer ferocity served her well on the parapet with its close confines, but even she had to shake her head at Arya.

Arya took to the air like a true master of Rannar's aerial style, leaping here and there, her feet and Fang flashing out with equal deadliness despite the fact it put her in danger from the enemy archers. At one point she actually twirled around in midair to dodge an arrow, allowing it to pass within a bare pinky length of her chest before she landed feet first into an enemy arm'sman's face. Fang flicked out, taking the only attacker who was armed like a knight in the visor, cutting deeply into his face.

She then flipped forward, her legs latching onto another man's head before he could raise his blade. Then Arya twisted her body so strongly she threw him off the parapet before landing on the stones herself, Fang blocking a strike from a short sword at the same time.

Eventually they won through, pushing the final siege ladder off the wall, once more, both sides having taken heavy losses. Elsewhere a shout went up from the front of the castle. "Battering ram coming up!"

Arya and Dacey looked at one another and Arya nodded. "Go, we've got this." Dacey nodded back then turned, racing along the wall.

The battering ram in question was a much more serious example of the breed than the one the Westerlanders had used in their initial attempt to storm the castle. It had a roof and that roof had even been covered by heavily watered down leather. It didn't have wheels, and it looked to be very cumbersome, but it gave the men carrying it some defense from the defender's fire.

Dacey stared down at it from the vantage point of one of the arrow slits in the gate tower, frowning heavily. "You think they'll be able to get through the portcullis with that?" Asked Roger, coming up beside her to stare out over her shoulder.

"Possibly," Dacey said shaking her head. "Eventually anyway. The outer portcullis will defend the actual gate well enough, but we'll need to do something to dissuade them."

"Burning pitch?" Roger gestured to a murder hole directly over the center of the gate, behind which a large cauldron stood. From the top of the cauldron came faint wisps of vapor. "I don't know how well that would work on the ram's sloped roof though, unless it's too small to either side to protect the men under it."

There was a loud "Boom!" as the battering ram slammed into the outer portcullis, causing Dacey to frown even more. "I don't think that will work, we need some way to attack the men on the ram, but that won't work?"

"Light it on fire." Edd stated, coming in from the door that led out onto the wall. In one hand he held a bow, in the other a fire arrow that hadn't yet been lit.

"You really missed your calling didn't you, my friend?" Roger asked almost whimsically, though his eyes were narrowed in thought. "You should've been a pyromancer. That could work though, not certain how well the fire would catch on the wet-leather covered roof though, and we need to be careful it doesn't spread to our own gates."

Below the battering ram boomed again, and Dacey frowned. "Let's wait on the fire idea, Roger's right it'd catch on our own gate."

Edd actually pouted slightly, then smirked at the other two. "In that case, we could hurl down caltrops. That'd force the ram's users to pull back. Then we could toss the cauldron out to land on it far enough away so the pitch couldn't spread to the gate, and **then** light it up."

Roger rolled his eyes, but nodded at that idea, to the backdrop of another boom from down below. "That actually sounds like it could work."

The two men by the cauldron were both Mallister men who had been seconded to Dacey's command because they could swim. Not as used to the strength every Wolfsworn could call upon they looked a little dubious at the idea.

"Roger and I will toss the cauldron, you toss out some of the caltrops and then get ready with that fire arrow of yours Edd." Dacey ordered.

The Karstark youth grinned in anticipation, moving over to a heated brazier for a moment. Dacey and Roger were easily able to heft the cauldron, shocking the two men there. The heat of it was highly uncomfortable, but it was bearable thanks to their gauntlets and armor.

A moment later the two of them were on top of the gatehouse's tower. "Ready, Edd?" Dacey shouted to be heard over the sound of the ongoing battle.

"Ready!" Came the shout from below.

The battering ram had indeed been forced to retreat for a moment, while a few of the men who had been carrying it howled, having not seen the small caltrops until they actually stepped on them. Now it had pulled back from the gate, allowing some other men to rush up under the cover of their shields to see if they could remove the small, jagged pieces of metal that the castle's blacksmith had prepared for the defenders.

Roger and Dacey looked at one another, then began to count down, backing up from the edge of the parapet. Then raced forward. "1,2,3, go!"

At the word "Go!" The cauldron flew out from the tower. Cauldrons of course were not very aerodynamic, and the cauldron only went about twenty feet before it started its downward descent.

Halfway there it turned over in the air, dumping its contents out onto the back and rightmost side of the battering ram. The stream of pitch hit, and an instant later Eddy's fire arrow 'thunked' down onto the leather covered wood that made up the top of the ram amongst the pitch. The pitch ignited instantly, and as it spread so too did the fire.

A few of the men who had been using the ram screamed as the pitch carried the fire underneath the protective roof of the ram, quickly retreating out the back of the ram towards the attacker's lines.

Dacey watched as the ram, not covered by the wet leather, caught fire. She smiled grimly as she saw the attackers elsewhere around the castle retreating in disorder. "It seems the fight has gone out of them today."

OOOOOO

Hathan sighed softly, shaking his head that evening as he stared at the other Wolfsworn around the table. "60 men dead today, another twenty four injured." With his injuries he had been relegated to the position of supply officer, and as with everything else he did he took it seriously. "We can't sustain that sort of loss very often. We're also running out of bandages and burn salves, though the rest of our supply situation is simply excellent."

"Don't think we'll have to. The army out there's beginning to have problems, you can tell." Dacey said shrugging her shoulders. "It's slightly too large to live off the land even here in Bracken territory, since that first Westerlands force scared off most of the smallfolk. They've only got a few more oxen after today's action, after that they'll have to resort to manpower."

"The storms haven't helped their position at all." said Arya with a smirk on her face. One storm had hit only a few days after the initial Westerlanders arrival, and another had hit three days ago. She'd loved watching the violent storm hit their camp, while she was safe and snug in the gate tower. "Their camp also is not as organized as Ranma's made all of ours while on the march. I don't doubt they'll start seeing diseases show up soon enough."

She smiled and nodded at Bess was serving them. Arya really was thinking of asking to take as a servant when it came time to leave Stone Hedge. Since she wasn't knight she couldn't really have a squire, but a page could work couldn't it? It wasn't only men that could have them right?

"Even with our losses today morale is still good." Hathan replied. "And you're right, I doubt they can say the same."

"Any news from the four-legged grape vine?" Roger asked.

Arya grinned evilly. "Ranma's across the Trident and is within two packs hunting territory of her, though he's moving up towards another packs territory or former packs territory actually, since they vacated the area by the river."

"He is attacking the fortifications at the Kneeling Man's Ford." Dacey said nodding her head. "Makes sense, he can always swing down from there to attack this army from behind he needs to."

"That's not all..." said Arya in a singsong voice, pulling the younger girl down next to her with a grin and rubbing her head affectionately. "The dragons are flying in front of the army every day." Bess gasped, not having heard any of the rumors about the dragons among the man before this.

"Then they're really going to use them..." Dacey said her eyes thoughtful. "That should send a very powerful message, though I'm not certain what kind of message really. Dragons were so feared during the reign of the Targaryens, we might be hitting a hornet's nest if we actually use them in battle."

Roger shrugged. "They were already used in battle a few times, remember? Ranma and Daenerys told us about them fighting against the Shadow Warriors and the smugglers out of Three Sisters. I take your point though, since the rumors of their use would spread a lot faster if they were used around here, but I think on the whole it would be more helpful to see them in action, especially if Ranma and Daenerys are not... frivolous I suppose, with their use. I'm also wondering where Tywin and his main army is."

"Can't help you there." Arya said, sipping at her mulled wine. "Wolves can't see colors, and patterns on cloth mean next to nothing to them, so they're not very good at telling one group of men from another."

At that moment Edd came in sitting down with them and sighing wearily. "They're going to try a night attack."

All of them stiffened. This wouldn't be the first night attack, but following up a heavy day's assault with a night attack was something new. "How do you know?" asked Roger.

"They're preparing fires out there, and I saw several of the oxen moving into position at the back of the army's fieldworks around the main gate. They have something back there I can't tell what, I thought initially it was initially another siege tower, but it looks like some kind of covering for the oxen. I think they're going to try to rope the outer portcullis and pull it out of its hinges.

Arya frowned, gazing over at Nymeria thoughtfully. "Are they still attacking?"

"We're only exchanging arrows for now. I think they're trying to lull us into a sense of complacency for the night attack, though I don't think even Lord Bracken is stupid enough to think that at work. "Sorry girl," he said, looking at the youngster. "But your father hasn't exactly impressed us since this battle began."

Bess shrugged unconcerned. Many noblemen really didn't have much to do with the rearing of their daughters, seeing them as simply pawns in the great game. While Lord Bracken wasn't quite that bad he didn't have much time for his youngest, who saw him as a stranger who sometimes patted her on the head in passing. That attitude had quite a bit to do with the fact that Lord Bracken and his wife hadn't had a son yet, and with every daughter he had become more and more irritated by that fact considering the number of sons Tytos Blackwood had produced. There were questions of manhood involved.

"They really are getting desperate lately." Dacey said grimly. "I wonder if it's just that the food issue, or if Lord Tywin is returning, or something else. Now we just need to think about combating it."

Arya laughed. "You know, Nymeria's been feeling left out of things lately. I wonder what the oxen would do if she suddenly howled as near as we could get her to the oxen they're going to be using for this attack of theirs."

"Excellent idea." Edd said snapping his fingers. "Wait until right before they try to hook the device they're trying to use up onto the portcullis, then have Nymeria howl out from right inside the gate tower. That close, it'll panic them."

"Hmm... that is a good idea." said Dacey nodding her head. "And here's another one, I want every archer we have ready for tonight. If they're trying to grind us under, I think we need to show that they aren't having any effect at all, that we're still here and still strong." All of the Wolfsworn agreed with that idea, and Arya went to the stables to find Nymeria.

In the deep of the night Arya and Nymeria stood him in the him gate areas directly above the gate, with Nymeria sniffing the air. *Meat, meat-animal, four-legged, strong beast creature, slow, easy meat.*

Arya shook herself, she had been trying not to warg with Nymeria ever since the siege began, except when hearing messages from her brothers, but sometimes she seemed to almost unconsciously slip into it like moments like that, when Nymeria had caught the scent of a prey animal. Direwolves after all were not kept beasts, they lived to hunt. Being inside Stone Hedge only being fed prepared meals had irritated Nymeria quite a bit. She understood or at least was willing to go along with things for now, but the irritation was getting to her.

Arya nodded over to where Dacey stood, looking out of the nearest arrow slit, the fires that normally burned here in the gate tower damped down for now. "They're coming."

At the same moment, the sounds of a battle began to be heard from the back of the castle. Several of the remaining makeshift siege towers had been moved into position to rake the wall there with arrows. However Roger was over

there, along with half of their men. For a moment Arya wondered if the strength of that defense would convince Bracken to pull back for the night. After a moment however Nymeria once again nudged her in the side of her head whining very softly. The prey beasts were getting closer.

Forgetting her reluctance for a moment, Arya quickly linked to Nymeria. With the direwolf's enhanced eye vision night vision Arya could actually see the beasts coming, along with many two-legs, all of them covered by something which looked like a giant tent, but with leather sides.

Evidently they had simply removed the top of the battering ram from that afternoon and men were actually carrying it over the two oxen that were linked together to some kind of winch system the end of which was being held by other men. Those winches ended in four grapnels held by more men, and would no doubt be thrown to hook into the portcullis so that the oxen could be used to pull it out of the stone.

Arya didn't honestly think that two oxen would be enough for that, they were supposedly strong beasts, but that strong? But she didn't really have that much of a history with them not just because she was a lady and had never farmed in her life, but because the North didn't have any of the animals. Moose, elk and other hardier beasts were used as beasts of burden in the North. The Karstarks and the Umbers in particular made use of moose.

"All right," she said finally. "I think they're close enough." She broke the link between her and Nymeria patting the giant creature under for her job. "Do your thing." Nymeria seems to huff in amusement then leaned back on its haunches and began to howl. "AWOOOOOOO!"

The sound was loud, wild and unadulterated. This wasn't a howl intending to carry any specific bits of information, this was simply a howl to say "here I am!" in as bold and as loud away as possible. It told any creature that had any sense that here came the ultimate predator of the forest, of the field, of **anywhere** it damn well pleased, and you either better run or be able to climb a tree.

"GROOHHHOO..." The oxen outside certainly got the message. They squealed in panic, slamming against their leads and once again it didn't take long for them to shatter the contraption they were tied to, much like the oxen that Edd had scared the day before with fire. The men around them tried desperately to control them, while a few began to shout for the retreat, since it was obvious that their attempt at a sneak assault had failed miserably.

Dacey now added her own bit to the battle, nodding her head over Edd, waved his hands outside the tower. "Now!"

All around the wall men who had been hiding undercover of the parapets stood up, and began to fire down into the men clustered around the gatehouse. Other men suddenly pulled off the tarpaulins that had been covering the braziers in the gatehouse, lighting up their fire arrows and firing them out into the night quickly, not really aiming at first just giving the other archers light to see by. Not two minutes later, both of the oxen were dead on the road leading up to the gate, unable to get out of arrow range before they were felled, and the attackers had retreated in disarray to the army's camp.

The attack on the back of the Castle had also ended quite badly, where Roger had also made liberal use of fire arrows, not to light up the siege towers themselves, but to like the night enough to give the rest of his archers the ability to fire much more accurately than otherwise. Two of those siege towers had been emptied of their men, though they remained where they were, a potent threat until their hides dried enough to have them be set alight at any rate. And the other had collapsed, a lucky fire arrow had gone over the top of the tower to hit a bit of the tower not covered by the watered down hides, quickly lighting it on fire.

Roger watched all this from one of the towers, chuckling quietly. "It's not been a good day for the Brackens and their Westerlands allies has it?" The men all around him laughed then went back to fire more arrows at the stragglers of the assaults as they retreated back to the rest of the Army.

OOOOOOO

The next day Arya was sleeping in, as were Dacey and Roger, though Edd was once more on the wall. He had conked out the moment the assault last night had ended, while the others had stayed up just in case. And now he watched frowning thoughtfully as in the distance a loner messenger on a horse that most definitely looked as if it had seen better days arrived. He turned to one of his men and said "Go get Dacey and the others up, I think something's about to happen."

OOOOOOO

Lord Bracken stared aghast at Ser Greenfield. "You can't! If you pull your men back..."

"I'm not the only one being ordered to pull my men back Bracken." said Ser Greenfield irritably. "You are too. Lord Tywin is ordering a full retreat and that means your men as well."

"No, dammit!" Bracken said slamming his hands down on the small table that was set between them. "We have those Northern bastards on the ropes, we can't pull back now, that's my House's seat! By the Seven I will not..."

"We don't have them on the ropes and you damn well know it! If last night's debacle didn't show you that, you're stupider than I expected." Greenfield barked out. No great military genius himself, he knew that they had not been doing well since the siege began. Last night was indicative of the troubles they were running into.

They didn't have the tools to really build proper siege weapons, or to dig tunnels underneath the walls, and their makeshift siege towers, while a good idea, hadn't been enough. One of his men had been a remarkably bright fellow in the number of different makeshift siege weapons he came up with, and Greenfield was going to do his best to see that man survived, his mind might prove to be an asset in the future. But they just didn't have the tools or other supplies necessary to build the weapons they needed to get into Stone Hedge.

Personally Greenfield blamed Bracken for all this despite the fact that it had been Lord Tywin who had ordered Bracken to take most of his men down to besiege Raventree Hall, leaving only a small force behind to hold his Castle. It really should've been enough of a force, but apparently it had been taken by subterfuge something they had learned since the start of the siege from accounts of a few of the local smallfolk.

*And of course those smallfolk aren't helping us any longer, even if their Lord is with us. Dammit, my men aren't saints, how can they be expected to act like eunuchs?* Greenfield scowled angrily shaking his head and concentrating on the present conversation once more. "We've lost Bracken, we need to pull back. If Lord Tywin is in full retreat, then something major has happened elsewhere."

He turned to the messenger before Bracken could respond staring at him. "You have any idea what that is?"

The messenger nodded grimly. "Lord Lannister suffered a major defeat against the Northerners and was forced to retreat to the Ford, but the Starks have married the Targaryens and they've brought dragons! Lord Tywin ordered the Ford abandoned, we're pulling back now."

For a moment the mention of dragons struck both Bracken and Greenfield speechless. Not just the fact of their return, but that they were going to be used in war once more. After a moment, Greenfield shook his head asking, "What are our losses?"

"Horrible." The younger man bluntly. "We were down to barely half the army after the battle, and we lost a few thousand more as we retreated. Even with your men added to our force, I doubt we have more than six or at best seven thousand men. "

Greenfield's eyes widened then he gulped loudly at the enormity of the disaster that had befallen in the Westerland Army. No wonder Lord Lannister was retreating, if he lost any more men, he wouldn't be able to stand against even Stannis, let alone the forces of the Reach. "We're pulling out." said Greenfield, turning to a few of his own messengers. "I want us moving..."

"No!" said Bracken, pulling out his sword on the other man. "I'll not abandon my seat like this!"

Greenfield rounded on him as the men all around them reached for their own swords, the men behind Bracken also going for the weapons. The Westerland knight growled angrily. "If you want to stay here with your men and keep trying to hammer your way through a mountain, then you're welcome, I'm taking my men and retreating!" Inwardly he winced knowing that Lord Lannister would not like that, but it would be better than taking the losses trying to subdue Bracken would cause.

"Fine, flee you coward!" Bracken blustered angrily. His men had been at the forefront of the last few days fighting, and he was down to only about nine hundred effectives, and about six hundred wounded and sick. Arya and the Wolfsworn had been correct, disease had begun to move through the man a few days ago, such things always moved faster through encamped armies that didn't take care to organize themselves, especially with the weather helping things along.

Jonos Bracken knew he couldn't win this siege without the Westerlanders aid, which added another few thousand effectives to his force. Still, he had one more thing to try, and it was not in his nature to show weakness. "Go, flee, run back to your lord like the craven dog you are. The Lions of the West, hah! The Wolves have had your number from the fucking start, I just wish I'd be there to see the Stark pup take the old lion's head!"

"Lord Lannister will return, you'll see Bracken, winning a battle or even a campaign is not the same thing as winning a war! The North and their allies will learn that to their cost!" Greenfield barked back, slamming his half-drawn sword back into its sheath angrily before turning back to his messengers. "What are you fools waiting for!?"

At their commander's order the messengers raced out of the command tent quickly. Greenfield turned back to Bracken and the two men spent a few moments glaring at one another before Jonos snorted and turned away, leaving the tent with his men. By the time the sun was right overhead, the Westerlands portion of the besieging force was ready to go and soon enough they marched away, leaving only House Bracken's men behind to try and reclaim Stone Hedge.

OOOOOO

Ranma, Daenerys and their portion of the army arrived close enough to the need in of the Kneeling Man to send Meera and her few remaining scouts forward, but what those scouts reported was surprising.

"They're abandoning it!" Meera reported quickly. "I think Lord Tywin and his army arrived yesterday, and they're already pulling out retreating southwards, I saw a force leave in that direction."

"We need to get in there now," Ranma said sharply. "If they keep falling back they might be able to break contact. But if we can sweep them away we can bring Brynden across and use his men to keep the pressure on. We might even be able to encircle them if we hurry."

He looked over at Daenerys grimly. "I think it's time."

Daenerys nodded back just as grimly, then with Merry holding her in place in her saddle concentrated on her connection to her dragons. Both of them had spent that morning in the small carts that were their home whenever they were resting from flying, the only carts that remained with the army after Harroway in fact. She smiled at them both as they lifted themselves out of their cars in front of her then leaned forward scratching them under their chins before mentally ordering them into the air. With her guiding them Sunfyre and Rhaegon quickly flew ahead of the army towards the forward.

While Ranma was busy ordering the army to advance at a trot, Daenerys saw the defenses at the Kneeling Man ford from her dragon's eyes. Already panic could be seen men below as they spotted the dragons well out of bow or even scorpion range in the sky above them. Luckily the defenses didn't include any scorpions, but still there were too many archers down there for her comfort even if very few of them had more than a few arrows apiece.

*My little ones have gotten very good at dodging, but this is going to be a very chancy affair* she thought to herself, taking care not to send her worry across their leg, only assurance and pride. She watched as the army below finally realized they had an attacker on their flank, not just her dragons to fear, causing even more consternation. She even spotted Tywin for a moment, before he ducked into a tent which quickly came down, and then she couldn't spot him again.

*The man must have exchanged his normal gold and red enameled armor for a normal armymen's armor in that tent! Smart of him, but if he thinks it is going to save him, he should think again.*

Meera and her scout fell back as the army advanced, moving to cover its southern flank just in case Tywin had the idea of trying to send out a spoiling raid into the flank of his own attackers. The pike regiments formed up on the River Road in full view of the army that was still busy trying to decamp. Daenerys could also see dozens of men simply making a run for it, fearful of the dragons and too badly demoralized to try and stand against the Northern army.

Moments later the Northern and Riverlands army marched fully into site of the Kneeling Man forward the dragons still circling above it. Now Fenris sat on his haunches and began to howl. This added to the fear of the men inhabiting that camp. The army began to hear the shouts and screams of fear as well as the whinnies of a few horses, trying to bolt away from the sound of the alpha predator.

*Psychological warfare at its finest*, Ranma thought grimly. He looked over at Daenerys. "How large an army are we looking at?"

"Counting is hard through dragon eyes, beloved." she muttered gripping Merry's hands where they were around her waist tightly. "They have one, pack, herd, that's about it. I think, I think we're still looking at least a little over a third of the army that retreated from the battle back on the other side of the Red Fork. I thought I had Tywin himself in my sight, but he disappeared into one of the tents, and though my dragons can see in colors, they're not very good at patterns or pattern recognition yet. He must've changed his armor, I can't..."

"Daenerys, it's alright, really." Ranma said soothingly, reaching up to squeeze her leg lightly. "Do they look like they're going to try to fight?"

"They're already turning some of the catapults to face this direction." she growled, trying to split her attention between her two dragons and Ranma's questions which was extremely difficult. The human mind was not supposed to be able to see from two different angles! Added to that was the need to command her dragons and to have enough presence of mind to answer Ranma's questions.

"All right, in that case we should begin."

Daenerys nodded grimly, and raising her hands in an unconscious gesture then moved them down slowly. Sunfyre and Rhaegon both obeyed quickly, diving down towards the army's encampment. Arrows began to fly up at them, but by this point they had become very adept at dodging those, and their flames had, while not becoming any hotter, could last far longer. And instead of hovering in place to concentrate their fiery breath on one place like the two dragons didn't stop for even a second. Instead they strafed past the catapults and ballistae below.

Rhaegon was first to get in range of his target. He let loose a long tongue of flame, which impacted the top of the ballista, spreading quickly despite two men who had tried to throw up buckets of water onto the wood of their siege weapon. Rhaegon continued to blast out his flame, catching one man and then setting the next ballista in the line before pulling back up into the air. Adding insult to injury he did a little roll in the air to dodge a few arrows before he was out of range.

Sunfyre went for a ballista near the outskirts of the Westerlands earthworks, burning it to ash with a single tongue of flame. Holding his fire in for a moment he banked slightly to the left, then let loose a ball of fire that burst onto one of the small log barracks that had been constructed here. The logs of the barracks immediately caught fire and screams of burning men soon added their own horrific cadence to the chaos. Sunfyre then turned again moving away from the came out and away slightly while swerving this way and that to dodge the few arrows coming his way before ascending back into the sky.

Daenerys gasped opening her eyes as she saw something that hadn't been obvious before. "They're nearly out of arrows!"

"I told you supplies don't just mean food, they need fletching, they need good seasoned wood for arrows, and arrow points. Arrow points are important, no one seems to think about these things." Ranma chuckled evilly. He then nodded over to Greatjon. "The army will advance."

Greatjon guffawed and raising his hand to the men all around, shouting. "you heard the man, **forward!**"

Ranma turned back to Daenerys whose eyes had glazed over again. The exultation her dragons felt when using their flames was almost but not quite sexual in nature, and Daenerys was having trouble controlling the link now. "Destroy the other catapults, then call your dragons back." he said softly, reaching up to tap her arm gently to get her attention. "Okay?"

Daenerys nodded, smiling faintly at his concern. "Okay. It's not the first time I felt that, it was just a little more **intense** this time."

In response Ranma nodded, patted her on the shoulder again before nodding at the men all around her, men he had assigned as guards for this mission. Then he pulled Ice out of its sheath before pulling himself up onto Fenris' back. "Winter is Coming!" He bellowed, then shot forward with the army all around him.

"For the King and Queen of the North!" came the reply all around him. The heavy cavalry broke into a trot behind Ranma, the pikes forming up in dense, company size blocks as they too marched forward, the irregular infantry spreading out to let them through before taking up positions each company's flanks. It was a sign of the discipline and organization Ranma had instilled in them in the march down from Winterfell that this move was accomplished with only the initial orders coming from him. Even the heavy cavalry was disciplined, not charging every man for himself, but keeping to a line abreast.

At the sight of those disciplined companies advancing remorselessly on their gutted fortification men began to throw down their weapons and surrender in their hundreds. This was hastened by the very short arrow duel that occurred a moment later, with the Northerners winning it easily and wiping out several dozen men on the opposing side. With their catapults destroyed, no arrows, and having not fed very well at all in the past few weeks plus dealing with all the other little issues that crop up when an army is cut off from its supply line just didn't have the heart to fight.

Of course that didn't stop Ranma from ordering the army to encircle the camp, and they turned back several dozen men who had tried to make a break for it. Hundreds more broke out over the ford, only to be caught by Brynden's command and killed to a man.

Lord Spicer was in charge of the men left in the fortification, and after a moment he came forward to kneel formally to Ranma. "I surrender myself and my men, placing us in your hand and at your mercy." The older man said formally. "We have no food, we have no arrows, many of us have no weapons, and with those dragons overhead we have no hope."

"I only ask that you do not turn your dragons on us, Lord Stark, Lady Targaryen" he said looking over at Daenerys, who had just ridden up, still surrounded by her momentary guard. His eyes widened slightly seeing her and the princess sharing a horse and seemingly close to one another, but he quickly turned his attention back to the Young Wolf.

Ranma nodded then gave him the same terms he had spoken about to the Sparrow so long ago, while Greatjon led a search of the camp for Tywin Lannister. Spicer frowned, but given his men's current position had no choice but to agree. With that the Northerners moved in, the men they had captured throwing down what weapons they had, and were quickly tied up, chained or otherwise detained, before being moved away from their weapons. They would be sent in small lots up to Fairmarket and from there to Seagard, with Lord Mallister sending the majority of his men back to guard them.

During this process Greatjon's search came up empty of the old lion, though he did return with a younger Lannister. The youth looked a little older than Ranma and his attitude more resembled that of someone who had just had his world view demolished but he was still able to answer Ranma's questions.

His voice trembled and had a monotone quality to it, showing he really was suffering from shock. "Lord Lannister and the rest of us arrived back here yesterday, where he heard a report from one of his spies and then pushed on immediately with the best armed and fed among us. We were supposed to follow up quickly today in small groups."

Ranma nodded thinking hard then sent a messenger across the ford to find his uncle Brynden and his men. He turned to address Greatjon and Daenerys, but before he could Lord Spicer spoke up. "My lord, what kind of treatment can my men and I expect under your care?"

Suddenly Ranma saw the image of that ruined farmstead, the bodies of men and women they had seen here and there as they marched down the River Road. A terrible fury gripped him, and his hand clenched on Ice's hilt. Now Ranma hovered on the brink of striking Spicer, an unarmed prisoner, down in cold blood, then ordering the massacre of his men.

Thankfully for the prisoners and the future of Westeros Daenerys and Merry were both there. The two of them saw the flash of fury in Ranma's eyes and without any discussion the two girls moved to either side of him, linking their arms with his. Still Ranma stood still as a granite statue, his eyes burning with fury. Merry whispered into his ear from one side. "Don't Ranma, please, you're better than that, don't stoop to their level. Remember, you and Daenerys are supposed to stand for justice, not vengeance, no matter how tempting."

Daenerys shot the other girl a grateful look before leaning in to whisper in Ranma's other ear. "Remember that night when you found Sansa's message and we pledged to help one another with our darker urges my love? You helped me with mine then, now it is my turn to help you. The man I love might feel the rage I can see in you now, but he wouldn't act on it. My Ranma is a Stark, a man of honor who would not give in to fury and rage instead of justice. Do not do this."

For a moment it looked as if the two girls hadn't gotten through to Ranma but after a moment he closed his eyes shuddering in place as he fought back the fiery rage that had gripped him, condensing and controlling it until it was a thing of icy purpose rather than fiery passion. After another moment he opened his eyes, then released his grip on Ice's hilt. He nodded thanks to both girls, who smiled and moved back slightly.

Then Ranma turned back to face Spicer, his eyes, face and voice as cold as winter. "Your fate Lord Spicer will be much kinder than the actions of your Lord and your army deserve. If you personally took part in any of the atrocities here in the Riverlands, you will be executed, and any of your men as well. If not, you will be held as prisoner until the hostilities between the Westerlands and Riverlands have ended, whereupon your fate will be decided. If you and your men have not taken part in any of the atrocities here, then your family's power will be greatly reduced, but as you merely followed your Lord Paramount into the folly of backing his bastard-born grandson, you will retain your life and lordship."



The Lannister youth had recovered enough by this point to try to glare up at Ranma from where he was being forced to kneel by Greatjon. But one look at Ranma's cold dangerous eyes caused him to flinch and was quickly led away to be chained up well away from the other prisoners.

With that done, Ranma turned to Greatjon, and the others. "Let's get this lot organized and sent on their way, I want us after Tywin as quickly as possible." After that Ranma and the other commanders got to work of organizing the prisoner detachment and leaving enough guards on them as well as supplies for both. Once Brynden came across the Ford with his portion of the army, Ranma stripped the rest of the army of nearly all of its horses to give remounts to his men. Seeing the state of Brynden and most of his men he left them there, taking only the light and heavy cavalry that had been part of his own army and leaving Brynden there with Daenerys. Not an hour after Brynden's force crossed the ford Ranma stood at the head of the group he was taking, a little over two thousand men, light cavalry, heavy, and archers on horseback, made to move fast and strike hard. He looked up at Greatjon astride his horse and shared a nod with the older man before staring around at his troops. "The Lannister bastards are trying to get out of the noose! I'm not about to let that happen, how about all of you?" There was a roar from the mounted men. Ranma nodded grimly turned around and without another word raced off, with Fenris by his side.

Going by what Lord Stackspear had said, Tywin had barely beaten Ranma and his army to the ford by a single day, and Ranma found himself feeling a bit of admiration for the man for his quick reaction to the news his spy had reported about the dragons. *Tywin knew he couldn't stand against us here, and he was ruthless enough to strip his entire army of everything he could use and then ran with a small enough group to last but a big enough one to be a training cadre later on. He really is smart, too smart to let him get away.*

Left behind for the moment Daenerys, Ser Blantyre Patek and the others set to organizing the prisoners, bringing in more foodstuffs, and sending word up to Fairmarket to send her copies of the information they had gathered there on the depredations. The army, minus the Mallister men sent to guard the prisoners, would regroup at Raventree Hall.

For the next four days Ranma and his men pursued Tywin, coming close a few times but never quite catching up with them. The Lannisters were in far worse shape, but they had four remounts to Ranma's two and they were simply running away. Ranma was still wary of being lured into an ambush of some kind which slowed his forces progress, so even with Fenris ranging in front of the army they were moving much slower than they could have.

It was that wariness that allowed Fenris and the scouts with his army him to spot the force coming up from Stone Hedge to meet Tywin at the ruins of Acorn Hall. When his scouts reported that Ranma frowned thoughtfully scratching at the stubble on his face, making a mental note to shave it off as soon as he could. He hated the stuff and Daenerys had voiced her own opinions on facial hair months back. "If they're that close we're in danger of being caught between them. I wonder if it was planned that way."

"Doubt it," Greatjon scoffed spitting to one side. "Fog of war lad, sometimes works for you, sometimes works against you. What are we going to do?"

"This new force is fresher than the force we've been chasing." Ranma replied. "That makes it more dangerous. We'll turn and deal with them."

"We could take them both you know, try and trick Tywin into attacking rather than running and wipe out both forces." Greatjon said.

"No," Ranma said shaking his head. "We might be able to win that fight, in fact I'm pretty sure we would, but our losses would be heavier than I would like to see at this point. No, I think it's time for a little bit more subterfuge, coupled with a **lot** of force." Ranma tapped Fenris on the side and Greatjon's eyebrows quirked up right before he shrugged.

Ranma was able to choose the battlefield where he would meet this second Lannister force. He decided on a somewhat hilly area, covered with small knolls dotted with clumps of trees around what looked like shallow riverbeds.

The Westerlanders coming from Stone Hedge had no idea there was an enemy force nearby and weren't even sending scouts out, a horrible mistake here in what was barely friendly territory. They walked right into the ambush, losing 100 men before they even knew what was happening to the archers Ranma had set up on one of the small hills. Then Fenris howled, and once again the voice of the direwolf did its deadly work on spooking animals that hadn't been inured to it. That took out the cavalry of the enemy, while the horses in turn disrupted the Westerlander's lines.

With the archers dismounted and working from their hill, the rest of the cavalry came around that knoll in two waves. One wave was comprised of the light cavalry and led by Ranma on foot. A few months ago that might have caused some very odd looks from most of the army, but after so long around their King such a thing wasn't very surprising.

The other group was led by Greatjon and consisted of the pursuing force's heavy cavalry, a bare two hundred men.

Ranma hit first, Ice slashing through two men in one swing, cutting the first one cleanly in half at the waistline despite his leather armor and only gutting the second before he was in and among the infantry hacking away. All around him the light cavalry smashed into the Westerlands infantry at an oblique angle then wheeled away rather than get stuck in with them like Ranma had.

The Westerlanders tried to pursue, it was an automatic human reaction to being stung by something that was then running away. Then the heavy cavalry hit from the other side riding down the side of their formation and getting deeper as they went. In this manner they smashed almost entirely through the weakened Westerlands line on that side of their march, since they hadn't yet tried to create an actual line of battle.

Attacked from both sides and with arrows still falling among them, here and there men began to run away. After the past few weeks of making no headway against the force holding Stone Hedge and hearing what had befallen their comrades elsewhere, the troop's morale was in the cesspool. Most of them were not in the best of health for various reasons, and the shock and fear of the ambush did its work quickly.

Ser Greenfield had lost control of his horse when that damn direwolf had howled. Once he was back on his feet he tried desperately to rally his men, or barring that, leading at least a significant portion of them away back the way they came. But suddenly there was a wild, brown-haired, blue-eyed youth wielding a large greatsword, thrusting straight at him. Greenfield barely got his shield up in time, but the point of the sword smashed into and through his shield as if it was made of thin bark rather than iron.

Ser Greenfield screamed, his arm impaled on Ice's point. He tried to grab at his sword, which was still in its sheath, but never got the chance to draw it.

Ranma let go of Ice for a moment, jumping up quickly and bringing around his foot in a roundhouse kick that connected with the Westerlands knight's face throwing him backwards with a crunch of broken bones and releasing Ice from where it had been buried in the man's arm. Landing Ranma rolled under one man's desperate slash with a short sword, his elbow catching the man in the center of the chest and flinging him to the side before he picked up Ice again.

Then Ranma had to bring Ice around to block the blow from another great sword, throwing that man off-balance for an economical backswing that caught the man through the eye-slit of his helmet, blinding him. Ranma whirled again blocking another blow, kicking out at the same time in both directions smashing two other men aside like nine pins. Nearly surrounded, Ranma kicked, punched, hacked and cut, until at last people all around him began to surrender, throwing down their weapons. "King's Justice, King's Justice!"

Greatjon hacked one man who was still trying to fight down then rode up next to Ranma. "We broke them lad!" He roared gleefully. "I don't think more than a few hundred got away!" Then the older man sobered shaking his sword to clear it of viscera and blood. "Took too long though, and was probably too damn noisy. That tight-assed old lion will be long gone."

"He'll keep running." Ranma said coolly, cleaning Ice on a dead man's tabard. "Leave one of the unit commanders here with a hundred men or so to guard the prisoners." Looking around Ranma noted that that would actually be a bit of overkill unless the light cavalry brought back some more survivors from those that had tried to simply flee. He frowned momentarily, wondering how many of those men and gotten away, and knowing they would turn to banditry was a problem for another day however, and he turned back to Greatjon. "Reform the men as quickly as possible, I want us back on Tywin's heels before sundown."

That night the Army camped five leagues away from where that battle had begun, south and east of Acorn Hall, barely six leagues behind the Lannister force, which was pushing itself on through the night. It wouldn't help them, not with Ranma and Fenris on their heels.

Ranma also knew now where Tywin was going. Knowing that Wayfarer's Rest was held against him, he wasn't going to try to cross the Red Fork and try to get around the keep that way. *He's going for the Tumbler's Falls, he can expect to find friends there. But only if he reaches it...* Ranma thought to himself, watching the progress of the Lannister 'army' through Fenris' eyes as the wolf hid nearby.

That night Ranma out of his army's camp, sneaking past the very vigilant guards he had hand-picked to guard the camp at night. They were proud of being chosen for that duty knowing how Ranma was worried about Tywin trying some kind of ambush or sudden night assault. Of course, with Fenris out there watching the Lannisters it wasn't really necessary, but Ranma wanted to hide his ability to warg with Fenris and as many of the subtler abilities the

direwolves had for as long as possible.

He needn't have bothered even with Fenris though. Tywin knew he had been beaten, and he knew that if he was captured or killed, the future of his house would be in dire straits. Tywin wasn't a coward, but he did fear for the future of his House if he passed. His brother was good as a second-in-command, but lacked the will to be the one originating the orders.

Ranma met up with Fenris about twelve leagues to the west of the direction the Lannister force was moving. Once again Ranma opened his in Fenris full connection, and after a moment Fenris began to howl.

OOOOOOO

Jonos pulled his men back from the castle for a time, sending most of his men out to gather up men from the smallfolk who were in the area, a much harder job than it should have been after the past few weeks, but eventually they had a sufficient force for Jonos's desperate plan. The workers began to dig a tunnel to undermine the outer walls of Stone Hedge, something that Greenfield had attempted, but failed at since Stone Hedge was situated mostly on a rocky outcropping.

The 'mostly' was a secret Jonos had wanted to keep, since if it got out, then the only real weakness of Stone Hedge would become known to others, something his family had kept secret since the castle was built. This had forced the besiegers to try other means, and they had paid for it, but up until the most recent attack Jonos had been able to force Greenfield to use his forces, husbanding his own Houses' men. That was no longer the case, but if he could get into the castle Jonos felt he still had enough force superiority to win the day.

The southeastern wall was not in fact built on the rocky outcropping of the rest of the castle and it was there Jonos sent the smallfolk to work. While his men kept up small hourly attacks on the gatehouse and the front of the castle pulling the defenders attention away the smallfolk worked day and night on creating a tunnel. The end result was a small, narrow tunnel leading up to the wall. Then it was supposed to move out to either direction under the wall but that never happened.

Before the tunnel was ready, the news began to spread that the Westerlanders were in full retreat, and there was a northern army moving to relieve Stone Hedge from the burned ruins of the fortifications at the Kneeling Man's Ford.

Jonos heard this in his tent, and he ranted and raved, but there was nothing he could do. His desire to keep his castle's one real weakness a secret had backfired badly. *NO! No, I won't just sit here and let them take me. I'd rather die!* With that thought in mind, Jonos ordered his men to form up for a pure assault. The Westerlanders had left their grappels and siege ladders behind, so there were hundreds of them ready to be used.

The archers were first moved around the walls, striking where they could all at once, forcing the defenders there to keep their heads down. A few men with ladders would then rush forward, trying to get up the wall. Despite the archers fire however, they could not win against the defenders, who had nearly every advantage in the book. Dozens of men were lost, but still Jonos urged the archers to continue to move around the castle, then, on the exact opposite side of the castle he send his entire remaining complement of battle-ready armsmen, leading them himself.

This surprising mad rush actually caught the defenders by surprise. Dacey had ordered half of her men to rest at all times, fearing that the Lannisters would return with reinforcements, Fenris not having sent news just yet to Nymeria, being too busy elsewhere at that time. And she had also not realized that the attackers still had so many grappels and siege ladders. So there were only about three hundred men on the walls, most of whom were archers concentrating on the archery duel, moving with the attackers along the wall.

However, Eddy and Arya were both on the wall with a dozen men of House Mormont and Mallister spread between them. They had been waiting, spread out between the towers when the alarm was raised from the other side of the castle.

By this point Jonos and more than three dozen men were already up on the parapet, racing along it to get to and hold the doors into the towers while more men kept pulling themselves up the ladders. Jonos himself led the way into the tower where Arya was.

The first two men through the door had died to Arya's blade before a lucky blow from a mace numbed her arm even when she moved with the blow, forcing Arya to back away from the door. The same mace wielder dueled with a Mormont man for a moment, pushing him back to allow his fellows access to the tower. Jonos barreled in with his men, scowling as the armsmen right in front of him died, his throat slit right where his helmet didn't quite meet his chain mail. Jonos' scowl worsened as he saw the man's killer. "You! The little wild bitch, I've seen you on the wall

before this. Let's see how..."

Arya growled, leaping forward and interrupting Jonos with a furious assault, pushing him and the man next to him back, but the room was now so crowded she couldn't use the full aerial style. "This is a fucking fight, so fight traitor!"

In the next moment two of the Mormont men with her were down, leaving Arya and two others to try and hold back the Bracken men. Arya held the center of the line against Jonos and his fellows, while the two Mormont men concentrated on defending her back and each other.

The battle in the towers seesawed back and forth, but the defenders held long enough for Dacey, Roger and the others resting in the keep to be warned and move to reinforce their fellows. Nymeria, who had been getting a brushing down from Bess, bolted toward the tower where her mistress was fighting.

The wolf raced up the steps, smashing into and through the inner door of the tower's room, and into several men who had just been able to circle around the trio of Northerners. Those men went down to her fangs and claws with wails of agony, and Jonos and his fellows to a man stepped back in fear.

Arya smiled coldly, holding fang point first in one hand held above her head, her other hand empty and thrust forward. "Awww, are you big strong men afraid of the big, bad wolf?" Her smile disappeared and she charged into their middle with Nymeria at her heels. "Winter is Coming!"

The Bracken men weren't cowards, and they stood and fought desperately now, but the sheer strength and power of Nymeria turned the tide against them in that tower, while Dacey and Roger had already relieved Eddy. Together the three of them were pushing along the parapet, clearing it of attackers while behind them their men took up position, hacking at the ropes and siege ladders, spilling the men climbing them back onto their fellows below.

Again Arya and Jonos met sword to sword. The older man had a reach advantage, and was a decent warrior, able to use his hands and feet as well as most. But Arya was something else entirely. She moved constantly, here there and everywhere, and her martial skills were better than any opponent Jonos had ever faced before. It was only because his men kept on trying to interfere that allowed Jonos to survive for long against the young Stark girl.

But when the last of them fell to one of the Mormont armsmen, Jonos found himself all alone. Before he could try and run back out the door onto the wall, Arya locked blades with him, then kneed him in the corotch hard before wrenching his blade out of his hands then a brutal jab smashed into his armored head, sending his helmet skittering away over the bodies of the dead piled hear in this room.

Before he could do anything Jonos was on his back looking up blearily at Arya, whose blade was poised to plunge into his heart, chain mail and all. "Do it" Jonos ordered, his voice a croak due to the pain of the last few moments. "Do it! I'll not live with Blackwood lording his side's victory over me!"

For just a moment Arya raised her blade to thrust down, eager to end this threat to the pack, but just as quickly it was gone, and the flat of her Fang slammed into the side of Jonos' head, sending him into darkness. "No, No I won't kill you traitor, not like that. I'm a warrior, not a monster, not an animal. And I don't want to have to tell Bess I killed her father."

OOOOOO

Two days after the chase began it was raining again and Tywin was still barely ahead of Ranma's army, but they were closing fast. He knew his men were on their last legs, but they were only a bare day's journey from the head of the falls, where he would find House Keath and the barges he had ordered prepared via a messenger before he left the Kneeling Man's Ford. After learning how the Targaryen girl had arrived at the Ruby Ford, he had realized how badly he had overlooked the way river travel could aid his army, something he wanted to correct in the future.

At present those barges would let him get away from his pursuers using the power of the incredibly fast current of the Blackwater Rush. Using the river Tywin planned to head down towards the Golden Road or even King's Landing, though that was doubtful. He had a bare two thousand men left under his command, not enough men to do anything against the might of the Reach and Stormlands army under Renly, not even enough to face Stannis and the houses allied with him. Even if he could have met up with the nearly thousand men he had assigned to hold Harrenhal, he still would not have had enough men to take the field once more.

Tywin shook his head once more at the totality of the disaster that had befallen him and his army. The might of the Westerlands had marched into the Riverlands crushing all before it, forming into a massive fist that should have been enough to deal with the Starks in their allies before turning to face more dangerous foes. But instead he had been

outmaneuvered and out fought at nearly every turn by a youth young enough to be his grandchild. The thought was galling, but Tywin shook it off quickly. *My current strength can be used to form a training cadre for my next muster. And besides, there are other ways to wage war young Stark, you will find this out to your cost. You might have won a campaign, but...*

Just then there was a howl of a wolf, nothing unusual these days, but his nephew's gasp alerted Tywin there might be something more to it. "What?" He barked angrily. "It's just the Stark's damn direwolf again trying to spook our horses." That had happened more than a few times eventually the beasts had become desensitized to it.

"I don't think so my lord." Daven said, loosening his sword in its sheath as he stared ahead grimly. "Not unless he somehow got in front of us."

Tywin didn't bother to gape at the youth or argue and try to say that was impossible instead he simply whirled to face his men. "To arms, 'ware front!"

A second later the arrows began to hit his men from the right flank and front where the howl had originated.

OOOOOO

While interesting things happened elsewhere, Jon Stark had been having it relatively easy the past few weeks since taking Wayfarer's Rest. There had been a point where he thought they might have been attacked when a few Westerlands scouts were spotted, but no attack appeared. Then came the news from Nymeria that Arya and Dacey had taken Stone Hedge, changing the makeup of the campaign beyond what Ranma and Jon had anticipated.

Then a bare five days ago came the call from Fenris, saying that the lion had retreated, and that the wolves were after them. The howl didn't really offer a lot of information, but it covered enough for Jon to know to lead a small force out to try to interject Tywin's advanced towards the falls.

It was a very small force, only twenty men with all the horses his company had taken from the defenders of wayfarers rest in the first place. But 15 were archers, while the other five were clansmen, directed to defend their fellows up close. In the rain that would be very important, though it hampered his archer's ability to aim. But with the Lannisters as packed on the trail as they were at present, that really didn't matter.

Nearby Ghost howled, a slightly lower timber than his larger brother's but still bowel loosening to all who heard it. He then joined Jon in charging out of the woods to slam into the front of the marching column with the force of a battering ram. At the same time all around them Jon's archers began their deadly work.

Tywin had responded quickly, sending out two-hundred men in the direction the arrows were coming from the forest in front of him while bringing up his few remaining archers to try to find the archers attacking from the flank. That those men would be a write-off as the rest of his force raced on their way was something he was willing to bear.

But Ranma and his force were quite a bit closer than Tywin had anticipated. Fenris had been at work all day, killing the scouts Tywin had covering his rear, allowing Ranma and his army to be practically on top of the Lannister column.

"King of the North!" came the bellow out of the rain, and suddenly the back of Tywin's column disintegrated as it was struck by mounted men in heavy armor, slamming into their fellows and the mounted infantry, while behind them the light cavalry spread out all around Tywin's army.

That was the final straw for many of the armsmen and even some of the knights. The hammer blows had never stopped coming since that battle on the other side of the Red Fork, not letting the Lannister army have any respite. The Westerlands armsmen were good, loyal men in the main who had given their oaths to their lords and would keep them. But there was only so much you could ask of any man and this was simply one too many shocks. Dozens broke, surrendering or scattering, making the Lannister's attempt to create a shield wall impossible.

Tywin barely had a few moments to rage internally at the sudden upheaval in his fortunes, to rage at Ranma Stark and wonder how the boy had been able to contrive this, before he was forced to defend himself from a northern heavy cavalryman riding up out of the pouring rain to attack him head on.

Tywin was old, and had never been the swordsman his firstborn son was, but he was a decent one, and his opponent was already wounded having taken a straight arrow somehow in the side. He blocked the first few blows, then wheeled his horse around to parry still another one before thrusting his sword forward to catch the man under his armpit. The northern barbarian gave a death rattle and fell out of his saddle and Tywin turned, his hands going for his reins and now only thinking of escape.

"RAARRHHH!" A huge monster of a direwolf suddenly leapt at him, bearing Tywin and his warhorse to earth. His horse went down with a whinny of fear then was silenced forever by a single blow to its throat which crushed its barding and neck.

At the same time Tywin found his arms gripped in a steel vice. He stared in horror at the sight of his arm being clenched in the direwolf's mouth. He tried to scramble for a weapon but the grip of those jaws increased, and he desisted.

Nearby Stafford had been unhorsed as well, and he raised his greatsword trying to charge to his Lord's aid but screamed as something bit into the back of one of his knees almost tearing his entire leg off. He went down still screaming only to be silenced by a blow that knocked him unconscious despite the agony by a young man racing up with the wolf. The two of them turned back to back, slaying several more Lannister armsmen before smashing another blond haired youth to the ground. Another lay nearby, an arrow through his jaw and another in his side.

Daven fared somewhat better than the rest of his family. He was a better swordsman than either his Lord Uncle or father, and slew two Northerners in quick succession, getting underneath their horses and hamstringing the beasts to spill their riders to the soggy ground after being unhorsed himself. Then he found himself facing a giant who stood at least two feet taller than Daven and twice as broad across the shoulders.

"Not bad." The giant said almost conversationally, before unleashing an overhead strike with a greatsword that Daven barely blocked. His arms tingled with the aftershocks of the blow but he tried desperately to riposte, flicking his longsword forward in a vicious lunge. But the giant's shield blocked it, smacking his sword aside. Daven hurriedly turned with the force of the blow while ducking, taking several steps away from the giant and bringing his sword up again to block the blow that he knew was coming from the great sword.

But he just couldn't get enough strength into it. His longsword was smashed out of his hands, and then a fist like that of a god slammed into the side of his helmeted head. It actually crumpled the metal there, and he fell to the ground while around him, the battle slowly died down.

Ranma patted Greatjon on his shoulder as he strode up, Ice nearly black with gore. He tapped Fenris' jaw lightly, getting him to release Tywin's arm unharmed. He smiled coldly down at the older man, before leaning down and hefting him up in one hand by a grip on his chest plate. "Lord Tywin Lannister, I've been looking forward to this for some time. You my lord and your family members here are my prisoners."

## End Chapter

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Okay, several scenes in this chapter were damn tough to write. Getting the tone of the Ironborn scenes was hard, and I'm not certain I did them as well as they could be. The need to keep everything straight in terms of a time frame was tough as well. The scene with Renly and Loras was very tough, very much out of my comfort bubble. I have no problem with people who write yaoi, but it simply holds no interest to me, and just yeah...

Initially I had thought that Tywin and a small cadre would be able to escape the Riverlands entirely to die/make trouble elsewhere, but decided given Ranma's warging ability to send information and the fact his portion of the Northern army hadn't faced real combat for weeks and was thus fresh it made no sense for Tywin to get away. Tywin's fate is still undecided, either to take the black or execution in the distant future, but until then, he is a hostage to the good conduct of his family. The Westerlands families are going to have a lot of their own issues to deal with given the debacle of their Riverlands campaign nor is Ranma and co. quite done with them just yet.

Those of you who might be worrying about Ranma curbing-stomping everyone else as a general, don't. Tywin as a general was severely overrated, as was mentioned in the last chapter. Ruthless yes, politically dangerous yes, but that doesn't equate to being a good general.

On the battlefield, Stannis is by far the most dangerous opponent among the humans. When they face one another it will be a far more even contest, made worse by other enemies making themselves known. And Remember, even after the War of Reformation ends, Ranma will have to face the Others and their forces.

Anyway, hope you all enjoyed this chapter as much as I did writing it and hope that at least some of the things that happened in it came as a surprise as well. As always read and review please.

## \*Chapter 15\*: Chapter 15

Wild Wolf 15

I do not own ASolaF or Ranma, god damnit.

I'd like to give a shout out to Antony444 for his aid in editing this, though again we are still dealing with odd 'space missing' issues.

For those wondering I will have the next chapter of ATP out by the end of October, possibly along with the next chapter of this story but I don't want to make any promises there. Also, Xata? Not cool dude. RL is an irritant as always, but I will also be putting out a bit of a surprise at the same time, a sort of hint to what I'd like to do when WW is finished simply because a specific interest of mine has been fed rather well of late. As such, there won't be a small story chapter out two weeks from now, sorry. Though I have sort of decided where I'm going to go with those and the poll.

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### Chapter 15 The Players Change, the Game Goes On

While Ranma was pursuing Tywin events elsewhere events continued apace around Westeros and even beyond its shores.

"Be gone lest our arrows fly!"

Viserys continued to stare up the Dragonstone's walls angrily, shaking his head. "Then I will take back my family's ancestral home by force! And you will all be put to the flame, men, women and children! Not one traitor will be left alive!"

With that Viserys turned away, riding his horse back down to the small but extremely well-designed port, which he found practically empty, the poorer houses abandoned and the large, stone houses, almost small holdfasts, were shut tight. From the dock he was rowed out to the fleet resting at anchor all around the island of Dragonstone, well out of catapult range.

The fleet had lost one of their ships to a lucky catapult's stone before Viserys realized that simply showing up with the Targaryen flag wasn't going to convince the inhabitants of his family's ancestral home to relinquish their usurpation of it. He had responded quickly however, ordering the fleet out of catapult range before moving in under flag of parlay.

He was pulled up over the side of the large transport galleon that was his flagship, staring up into the sky for a moment to see where Balerion was circling, doing his daily exercises. *If only he was larger still! He is a monster for his size, but he can only carry me for short amounts of time yet. He's responding well to verbal commands, but I can't trust him in a combat situation just yet. If I could, this battle would be much shorter than it's going to be.*

Pausing he forced himself to nod to the Dornish sailors that had helped him aboard, before moving on brusquely to the captains quarters which doubled as his and his wife's quarters and their makeshift council room, shivering slightly. The turn of the weather had surprised him after the came around the Broken Arm, and worsened the further north they went. It wasn't an issue just yet, the army had enough warm clothing to get by for now since nights in the Dornish deserts could be quite cold, though they would have to create winter quarters at some point if it became even cooler.

Viserys stared around at his commanders, his wife, and the two Sand Snakes that had decided to accompany her. The two of them were named Elia and Nymeria, and they were as different from the one he had met previously, Obara, as night and day. For one thing, they were both attractive, if Elia was still a little too manly of form for Viserys. And they were both very intelligent.

Elia was a mistress of horses, and before they had left Dorne Viserys had been amused to watch her actually out-joust some of the Dornish knights. She had been an aid to Viserys when he began to train Balerion to carry first a saddle and then Viserys himself. Not with the dragon, since the 'black beast'; as all the sailors called Balerion, would not let anyone but Viserys near him. But she had given Viserys a lot of ideas on how to deal with that aspect of the dragon's training.

Her older sister Nymeria was almost as gorgeous as Arianne, with dark eyes, skin the same olive color as her cousin and long silky hair worn in a complicated braid bound by copper and bronze hoops. She was a master of daggers and

diplomacy and had given Viserys a lot of good advice over how to approach House Velaryon, and indeed had been the one to convince him to do that before coming back to Dragonstone. She was also going to be the army's connection to Prince Doran's spy network once they landed.

After looking at them all coolly, Viserys imparted the news they all no doubt had seen coming. "Diplomatic talks have failed. Whoever Stannis left in charge is a firm believer in R'hllor. He and Stannis's wife, who he left here with his daughter, firmly believe that this R'hllor will protect them from a dragon's flames so long as they remain loyal to the 'Azor Ahai'." He sneered as he said the last two words.

"Stannis takes that seriously?" Arianne asked, astonished. "I thought that was a vague rumor, or at best that he was simply using that title and this Red Witch to his advantage without ever completely buying into whatever mysticism she was trying to sell him."

"He might be." Viserys said, calming down slightly but still vibrating with rage inside. "I can't tell you his inner thoughts. Regardless, right now it means that Dragonstone is held against us."

"Your Majesty, that poses a tremendous problem." Jorah Mormont murmured. "Dragonstone has many natural advantages that make it almost impossible to siege without incurring horrific losses."

"The Bear is right your Grace." Nymeria murmured from her place by Arianne, using the name she and her sisters all used for the Mormont Exile. "We of Dorne are made for light skirmishes, quick hit-and-run actions or at worst holding a defensive position of our own against attackers. We are not entirely unskilled at sieges, but besieging Dragonstone poses several problems that I don't think we can overcome easily."

The other Dornish lords that had come with the army with their men talked about it amongst themselves while Viserys strode over to stare at a map of Dragonstone that Doran had given him back in Sunspear, cursing all the while inside. "We need to take that castle." he said aloud, effectively ending the conversation behind him. "We've taken Driftmark without a fight, but Dragonstone is the key." The families on Driftmark had been Targaryen supporters for untold generations, long before even the conquest of Westeros, and with Nymeria's aid Viserys had easily talked them into supporting him once more.

"Does anyone have any suggestions?" He asked the room at large. Viserys was perfectly willing to order a full-scale assault on the castle, even knowing it would be bloody beyond belief, but he wanted the suggestion for such to come from someone else first, just in case it actually didn't succeed. If it succeeded he would be perfectly willing to take credit for it no matter how many people died, but he was well aware that the Dorne were wary about taking casualties.

The fact that Dorne had still not recovered from the losses they had taken in Robert's rebellion had honestly come as a shock to him. The army they had given him numbered around 10,000, and that plus the remaining 8000 that had been sent with the mercenaries and Oberyn was almost that totality of the Dornish military strength. A few castles on its front facing the Prince's Pass in the Boneyard still retained men, and the other Houses had of course retained enough men to defend their homes, but if he lost this army it would be generations before Dorne recovered, and all of his Dornish commanders knew it.

Even so, there were those willing to take a chance. "I have a suggestion my Lord" said Ulwyck Uller standing forward and boldly gesturing at the map of the island. "The problem with taking Dragonstone is threefold. One, the island's only real port is deeply inside the range of the castle's catapults. Two, the island itself has no natural woodlands to make siege weapons from. Three, the strength of the castle itself. That would force us to attempt a full on assault take the walls, and as Lady Nymeria already said, that does not play to my countrymen's natural strength."

"However, there is one advantage that we can make use of." Ulwyck Uller, brother of Lord Uller continued. "Many of us are master skirmishers, able to move over the harshest terrain without being spotted. My own houses men are trained to move across flat deserts without being spotted!"

He looked proud of that while more than one of his fellow lords discretely rolled their eyes. House Uller was deep in the Dornish desert, and many felt that the heat and sun had done something to their brains, making them wild and somewhat insane. That Ulwyck would be the one to come up with an idea to assault Dragonstone therefore surprised none of them.

Ulwyck didn't notice this and continued. "If we use some of the ships here as a diversion, we can land troops at the furthest point of the island and march overland from there, sneaking our way closer to the castle to begin to assault the walls."

Arianne and the two Sand Snakes exchanged a glance, and with a flick of one hand Arianne consigned of the current



discussion to Elia, who was the one who knew most about moving silently. The youngest of the trio spoke up quickly, her voice showing no hesitation to take part in the discussion. "Even if we get close to the actual castle, those walls are tall and powerful, and grapples make noticeable noise when they hit. Even if we were able to get there, which is not, I hasten to add a certain thing, getting up the walls would be incredibly tough."

"Not if, say, around two thirds of the men with us lay down cover fire." Ulwyck replied triumphantly. "With that we will be able to scale the walls."

"Yet even if you can do that, winning from that point supposes that you have larger numbers than the defenders. I'm not certain why you think that could be a case."

"Surely a so-called King so strapped for people wouldn't have left a strong force behind, not when he has that pirate fleet guarding his back." Said another one of the younger lords, from House Jordayne.

"Stannis is many things," said Ser Valan Toland, a nephew of Lady Toland. "But incompetent is not one of them. The force he left will be strong enough to hold Dragonstone. Two hundred men in that castle could hold it against a full assault for weeks, more than six hundred could hold out against an entire army, even if we had brought along siege equipment. No, this is folly. Driftmark has resupplied us and added another six hundred men to our cause, we need to move on. We can't let ourselves be pinned here at Dragonstone by the pirate fleet."

"How long until the pirate fleet could get word about what has occurred here, and how many ships do you think they could send without breaking their blockade on King's Landing?" Viserys asked, joining the discussion once more as he turned from the porthole where he had been watching Balerion flying around.

Most of the more thoughtful lords frowned at that, slowly turning to Lord Gargalen of Salt Shore, who was the acknowledged seaman among them. When he was younger he had actually served on a merchant ship at one point, and that plus his House controlling a small port under their castle gave him insight into ship movement that most of them lacked. He frowned heavily, one hand fingering a thin scar set below one ear and running along his jaw line. "I think that the main problem from their perspective is the blockade and receiving orders my Lord."

"Elaborate please." Viserys said politely, his voice mild. He was always in a better humor after seeing Balerion fly around.

Lord Gargalen nodded and went on. "From what our spies recently reported about the ship numbers that Stannis has gathered to blockade King's Landing, he has around 72 war galleys, and another 34 pirate vessels. With the need to stay out of the range of the trebuchet we know were built in King's Landing, I would estimate that Saan would need at least a third of his available ships to blockade the city. In the autumn season it should take a fleet about a week for a ship to carry word of what happened here to them, then another week and a half, possibly two weeks to get to Dragonstone from King's Landing. But while the pirate vessels might be willing to act as they see fit, the war galleys won't be, they'll have to receive orders before leaving the blockade."

"That's true." Nymeria said reluctantly. It had been she who had gone ashore near Sharp Point to contact those spies, who had forwarded their messages to a signal spy living near that castle. "From my own read of Stannis, he isn't one to encourage independence among the majority of his commanders, certainly not on the captain's scale."

Viserys frowned thoughtfully then his eyes lit up as he realized what had grabbed his attention about what Lord Gargalen had said. He rushed over to his seat chest, with the conversation pausing around him as he hurriedly pulled out some of the notes on fine parchment that Doran's spy network had passed on before they left Planky Town. Finally he held up the note he was looking for and said triumphantly, "162! There are supposed to be 162 war galleys in the Royal Navy. We found and took what 25 or so from Driftmark?"

"27 actually." Arianne replied looking at Lord Gargalen thoughtfully then at Viserys. "What are you thinking of, My King?"

"If our numbers up on fleet blockading King's Landing is accurate, then Stannis had to have left the others war galleys somewhere. Which makes sense, since we know a large part of his army comes from the Royal Navy. How long would it take us to send a, what is it called, a cutting out expedition to Duskenale?"

"Four days or so to get there and another six to get back my winds would be against you for at least a portion of your journey coming further out of Blackwater Bay." Lord Gargalen replied quickly, his face shifting into a rather rakish smile. "That's an excellent idea though!"

"You will see to that then my Lord." Viserys said magnanimously. "How many ships do you think you should take?"

"15 should do the job my Lord, fully manned war galleys. I'll actually take 15 of the ones we've commandeered from Driftmark, that way if those ships are defended, the defenders won't notice anything different until we're within attacking range."

"Good thinking." Viserys said then turned back to Ulwyck. "As to your suggestion, would you and your house be willing to take on this dangerous task? If it succeeds of course the glory of taking Dragonstone and the riches it contains would be yours. All I want is the castle itself, in particular the Painted Table. That is a treasure of my house. Anything that the bastard Baratheons might have added since their occupation can be yours."

House Uller did not have much in the way of riches. They specialized as Ulwyck said in skirmishers, archers and saboteurs simply because they didn't have enough money to pay for decent enough armor for anything else. So Viserys was not surprised when the other young man's eyes looked up eagerly. "I'll take that castle for you my Lord, leave it to me!

To one side Arianne and the two Sand Snakes glanced at one another, shaking their heads. This was going to be a disaster but Viserys was so set on taking Dragonstone that even attempting to talk him out of it would probably mean their banishment from this counsel. Arianne couldn't afford to let that happen, who knew what Viserys would do without her around to handle him?

Arianne then glanced at Ulwyck, hoping the man succeeded. Viserys might have set him up to enrich himself if he won, but if he failed, Viserys would just as easily turn on him. And Arianne was not certain the man would survive that, given her husband's fury.

OOOOOO

The battle began that very evening. Several war galleys moved in close to the port, as if they were trying to land troops. Almost immediately they came under attack from the castle, its catapults having a much longer range than the scorpions the war galleys had. They retreated, but came back in again and again dodging rocks as they came out of the sky always changing courses whenever they could. It was harrowing for the men and women on those ships, since even one boulder could have spelled doom for a war galley if it was hit.

One of ship lost its rigging to a stone that arced directly over the ship almost, not catching it abeam but taking with it the war galley's rigging. Several men died from the splinters of the collision, and two more were pulled over the side by the falling rigging. Another ship, one of the Royal Navy vessels they had manned from Driftmark was hit directly on its nose. It's crew immediately piled into the rowboats as the ship began to sink.

The rowboats tried to make for the port, but there they came under fire from the scorpions up on Dragonstone, which were much more accurate than the catapults. One of the rowboats sank, taking with it all hands, but the second was able to disembark its first load onto the quay, where they ran into fierce resistance from a group of 100 heavily armed armsmen that had been stationed men had been ordered to attack any group smaller than themselves, but retreat in the face of any larger group. They ruthlessly cuts down the Dornish men, pushing their dead bodies back out into the water.

The rowboat returned to its doomed parent vessel, taking off two more loads and rushing them to the nearest vessel, but after that the ship had sunk before the ship could return for a third load. While the war galleys pulled back their rowboats went to work scouring the water for survivors.

Nonetheless from Viserys' point of view this assault was a success. The attention of the castle was entirely on the war galleys trying to make port, not on the trio of galleons that had moved around the island to the furthest portion of it from the castle and the port, slowly disembarking their troops throughout the night. By the time daylight gave anyone on the lookout from Dragonstone the ability to see that far, the ships had retreated back to the fleet, and House Uller's men, about 1,500 strong were ashore.

Ulwyck Uller grinned triumphantly, unaware of the losses the fleet had taken to get his men in position. "All right," he said looking at his knights, though the Dornish version were not knights as the rest of Westeros would see the term, they were simply slightly better armed and trained men who served as unit commanders. "Let's get a move on, I want us to be fully hidden before daylight comes."

The attack force was indeed able to succeed in hiding in small groups here and there scattered around the point of the island during the day. This area of the island was mostly uninhabited in any event, too rocky and too dreary even for the smallfolk of Dragonstone, so no one saw them there. The next night they began to make their way towards Dragonstone, reaching it just about as dawn began to creep over the sky. Moving over the rough, craggy and somewhat mountainous terrain of the island was difficult even for trained Dornishskirmishers.

But they ran into a problem as they neared Dragonstone. There was simply no place to hide beyond a single man here and there as they came closer to the castle. The area had been very carefully denuded of anything that could be used as cover for an attacking force, be it boulder, crag, or small brush.

Staring from a small crevasse he was hiding from, Uller grimaced. "I didn't realize there was so little cover, we won't be able to get any formed force near the walls. Still, we'll have to do what we can." He nodded two of his knights, the ones who were best at sneaking around. "Take a hundred men each, and lead them out there slowly."

"My Lord..." one of them said hesitantly looking up into the sky, "We're running out of night here."

"I know, trying to lay down covering fire on the wall won't be enough. Instead, we'll have to keep the attention of the attackers on us somewhere else. You lot head up the old abandoned volcano, then come down and assault the walls from 's got to be the weakest point of the castle, the walls there are shortest after all." Dragonstone was built on the side of the extinct volcano that had created the island in the first place, and dozens of tunnels led from the castle deep into the side of the volcano, allowing the castle to mine the dragonglass it was associated with.

The two men nodded somewhat dubiously, but moved off to relay their orders to the commands. Moving in groups of two and three they were able to scale the side of the volcano, moving slowly and hesitantly towards the castle that was now below them. They waited until they heard the sound of battle coming from below watching from a distance as arrows began to fly from both sides, and even some of the scorpions on the Castle got involved before they got moving again.

By that time however the sun was in the sky, a pale morning light shining on the dew all around. It made for very slippery going, with only lichen, moss, and a few hardy breeds of scrub brush here and there to soak it up. Moving even further towards the castle they had to stop several times waiting to see if they were noticed when one or the other lost his footing and crashed to the steep slope of the volcano. Even without having chain mail or anything else on them that could jangle, doing so still made a noticeable noise among the rocks of the volcano.

But with their black cloaks and black leggings the Dornish were able to blend into the background black of the volcanic rock all around them. Slowly they made their way towards the Castle, feeling very nervous as they entered bow range from its walls. They realized then that even here the walls were three stories tall, thick and forbidding.

Idly, one of the knights wondered if perhaps putting the archers up above the fort here would have been a better idea, but he realized it wouldn't have worked. For one thing, from what they had seen the towers at each corner of the wall were tall and well designed, which would negate any height advantage from being on the slope. Worse was the incline, which would have made it hard for archers to keep their footing and fire at the same time. Moreover there was no cover to be found on the mountainside, all of the archers would out in the open which would make their ability to shoot at the archers on the wall directly far less of an advantage.

*And that doesn't even consider the number of siege weapons they have up there,* the Dornish knight thought to himself, shaking his head as he heard the 'whump' of the catapults launching then a very distant splash. Evidently the ships had returned in an effort to take some of the attention of the defenders away from his assault.

By noon the two knights had safely reached the wall with some of their men then looked at one another as more and more of them came up. One hissed: "We wait until we have at least half our men against the wall, then we start throwing up the grapples."

His fellow commander nodded, fighting a sense of growing concern. Something wasn't right here. But as he couldn't put his finger on it, he didn't voice his worries, not wanting to seem like a coward in front of his fellows. Several moments later they nodded to the men who were holding grapples.

The grapples were tossed up, but almost immediately the castle above them, which had been silent so far responded teaching the two knights of valuable lesson: that just because defenders didn't respond to your approach didn't mean they didn't see you. It was a pity that neither man would have the chance to use that information. "Let them have it boys!"

From each of the towers on either side of the attack came dozens of arrows, and the men they had seen walking along the top of the wall went to work quickly on two closed top cauldrons, pulling off the heavy wooden tops to reveal slowly congealing pitch. But pitch was still flammable, and when it began to pour down over the men below the wall it was quickly ignited by a single fire arrow from one of the towers.

Both knights died screaming, and their men, both those near the wall and further away died. It was simply a matter of if they died from the pitch, or archer fire.

Elsewhere the battle was not going any better. With so little cover, Uller and his men were not doing at all well against the defenders, who were laying down a vicious aimed fire that had cut his men down to a third of his starting force. At last, hearing the screams from what had supposedly been a secret assault on the back of the castles Ullwyk ordered a retreat. The bedraggled and thoroughly beaten remnants retreated back the way they had come towards the tip of the island, under fire for quite a bit of its length by the scorpions that could clearly see them in the light of day, losing even more men.

OOOOOO

Viserys had watched all this through a spyglass that Doran had given him, his hands clenching so hard on the metal to of it that his knuckles were showing white. "That plan seems to have failed." He said his voice a snarl that roused Balerion from where the dragon was sleeping behind him, only settling back when Viserys scratched it under its chin with a heavy wire brush.

"We will have to think of something else. Oh, but don't feed Balerion his midday meal." He smiled grimly, yet his eyes showed a certain hidden delight that made Arianne and the others who noticed it shudder. "A message has to be shown to the army about the price of failure."

OOOOOO

"So you represent the Iron Bank? I can understand why you have come to see me my Lord," said Renly, moving from where a detailed map of the Crownlands was laid out on a field desk over to where several small cabinets of expensive wines sat in the corner of his tent. "May I trouble you to have a glass with me?"

One interrogative eyebrow rose as he looked at the man who his guards had allowed into the tent. He was the same Iron Bank representative that had talked to Cersei, though his head looked like it was in need of a shave, and his calm manner seemed somewhat in abeyance. His clothing was travel stained, but the iron and gold torque still hung from his neck down his chest.

"I understand you were sent from King's Landing to Duskenale in attempts to find my brother before coming back here to meet with me? That must've been a thirsty journey and a pointless one as well." Renly smiled thinly holding out a glass to the man who had not replied. "Though since my army had yet to arrive here I can at least understand the reasoning behind it."

That was truer than Renly knew. Not only was the Iron Bank representative unable to find Stannis at Duskenale, he couldn't find the older Baratheon brother's army in the field not having any contacts out in the countryside to enable him to find its trail. He had also been attacked by bandits once, losing two of his ten guards. "Thank you my Lord I believe I will." he murmured, reaching out for the wine and sipping appreciatively. It was good aged wine, with a hint of some kind of fruit to it that he couldn't quite place. "A magnificent vintage my Lord!"

"Thank you, I find the newest vintages coming from the Arbor to be quite exquisite, they've begun to import some kind of fruit from the Summer Island to add to it. It makes for a hint of a new taste to the wine. I hope that the Ironborn don't do too much damage to their vineyards before Garlan Tyrell can toss them out." Renly sighed, taking a last sip then set his glass down sharply on the field table, though calling it a field table was a misnomer. It was nothing like the tables used by Stannis or Ranma, simple folding affairs with leather for a top. This one was large and wooden, and could only be called a field table because it was slightly lighter than most normal desks. "But to business, I assume you are here to discuss the debt that my family incurred to you while my oldest brother was King, correct?"

*That is promising* the Iron Bank representative thought, nodding his head politely. "Indeed your Majesty," he said buttering the younger man up by using that title. "During his tenure as King, your brother Robert and his queen accumulated a debt to us of upwards of 1 and a 1/2 million crowns."

"Really?" said Renly leaning forward now slightly his eyes narrowing. "I had heard it given to a tune of 3 million at one point, before Lord Stark became Hand and began to work at offsetting it. Is that one and a half million crowns a solid number from your own books?"

"Yes your majesty. We have gone over our books exhaustively looking for any sign of falsified records and have found them to be clean."

Renly nodded thoughtfully, leaning back now. "Well, if that is indeed a solid number on your end, then all that remains is for the crown to make certain that it matches what we have on ours. Unfortunately," he smiled thinly waving his hand towards the tent flap and the city beyond. "I do not as a point of fact possess those books at the moment. The moment I do rest assured that one of the first tasks I will set myself to is going over them, and making certain that the

totality of this debt can be proven. Needless to say if they cannot on our end, then I will see no need to pay you what you claim. If the Iron Throne actually did not receive the full monies that the Iron Bank agreed to lend, then it would fall upon whoever diverted those monies to pay off the debt."

"But surely you can see that no monetary fault could be accrued to the bank your Majesty." the man across from him exclaimed. "We can hardly be faulted for working with who we thought was a fully accredited representative of the Iron Throne."

"No of course not," Renly said calming him down slightly. "But neither would any debt accrued to the Iron Throne if the Iron Throne did not in point of fact ask for those monies. Instead it would be on the part of House Baelish to repay the debts."

The Iron Bank representative actually smiled thinly as Renly came out and said who they were talking about there. "And yet my Lord, is it not the place of the King and the Hand to know what their ministers are doing? That is the way it works in business after all, a manager can be called upon to right the wrongs or pay back the debts of his overseers."

"That would be true in the course of normal events of course." Renly said nodding his head solemnly. "However, let us be frank my Lord. My brother had no interest in actually ruling, he took the throne in the first place because he didn't want anyone else to have it and because Jon Arryn rather foolishly insisted he take it. And considering the fact that the man in question fooled you and your bank's local factors, how could someone without a head for business at all be expected to see through his lies?"

The Braavosi man scowled a little, unable to refute that. Indeed, the Iron Bank had carefully 'trimmed' some of its factors in King's Landing, hiding their deaths among the chaos of the siege since his last report. He had in fact set those deaths in motion before leaving the capital.

Around him some of the other Lords present frowned, in particular the Stormlands Lords. All of them had revered Robert to a certain degree, his ebullient personality, his sense of humor and above all his skill on the battlefield as a warrior and general was something that all of them looked up to. They looked at one another, wondering not for the first time if they had been correct in following the youngest Baratheon. Renly hadn't done anything yet to show he was worthy of the giant boots that Robert had left behind. Yet at the same time none of them could truly argue that the man hadn't really had a head for numbers, and not making an outright enemy of the Iron Bank or indebting them and their nation to said bank was a good thing.

"However." Renly said, magnanimous now as he knew that the man couldn't argue that point, at least not well. "If the Iron Throne's accounts meet our own I will agree on my name as Renly Baratheon to honor the payment plan that Lord Stark put in place before the start of hostilities. I'll go even further, and will say that we will pay off half of the debt immediately upon the surrender of the Lannisters from captured gold." That cheered up all the Lords around him immensely, as they dreamed of some of the same gold falling into their own pockets. "Will that suffice for you my Lord?"

The Iron Bank representative stared at him, then slowly nodded, thinking it might be the best offer they'd get. Stannis had still not been found, and he was loath to go in search of the man since he didn't think that Stannis would offer any better plan than Renly from the Iron Bank's point of view. He knew another agent had been sent to talk to the Stark youth and the dragon girl had found them, but not the outcome of that meeting. He was interested to see how that went and if he had met with Lord Tywin as he was supposed to do since the initial meeting between himself and the Queen and Joffrey had been unsatisfactory.

The two of them were due to meet up in Maidenpool. That town and its environs had not seen any combat as yet and it had a decent port which made it a good meeting place if they had to escape from Westeros quickly or had to meet with other representatives in person. It would also allow them to meet up with Viserys Targaryen, whose banner a factor had seen arrive in Dorne.

But there was still one way he could pressure Renly. "That will do nicely but the Iron Bank understands that accidents can happen in battle. Should a fire begin during your assault on the Red Keep or some other event occur that causes the destruction of the Iron Throne's ledgers, we will immediately call in the full debt we are owed by what our own books say."

Renly's was barely able to keep a scowl off his face at that, but nodded. "Of course."

"Would you be willing to put that in writing your Majesty? I am not disparaging your given word of course, but in these parlous times and given the problems that the former Master of Coin has caused for us, a written account with your

seal and script on it would carry far more weight."

"Oh, of course." Renly said again, smiling thinly but allowing the man to have his little victory. Later he watched as the Iron Bank left the command tent frowning thoughtfully wondering how much of the Lannister gold he'd have to send to the Iron Bank rather than spend on his own projects. He had plans for that money, oh yes.

With a sigh he picked up his glass again turning back to the lords gathered around the map. "Staedmon, you had reports from your scouts to share?"

By your leave, your Majesty." The man said bowing his head and when Renly nodded, placing a few small stone markers down on the map. "My scouts have reported back and they say that if he continues at his present rate of march Stannis and his army will be in sight within five days rather than the two my last report indicated. Since he is marching overland rather than by road the rains have slowed him down but more importantly the army changed course slightly. They'll be coming down the northern embankment of the Blackwater rather than a somewhat straight route from Stokeworth."

"Interesting." Renly murmured, not seeing the point of that, nor did anyone else other than using the river to guard one of his flanks. That in itself was a good idea, but really not important enough to comment on.

"Your highness, I think we might have an opportunity here." Randyll Tarly spoke up. "We have already begun to consolidate some of our army once more from our siege positions around the capital. If we march out to meet Stannis we might be able to attack him on our own terms. We could encircle his army and use our numbers to pin him against the river."

Renly thought for a moment then shook his head. "No, I don't think so. For one thing, that would remove our best commanders from near enough to King's Landing to deal with any surprises from that direction. Furthermore, it would paint us as the aggressor, unless we stop to parlay, which would of course allow my brother more time to prepare. No, I am in no rush to be seen as a kinslayer, let the world see my brother attacking me, not the other way around."

Randyll scowled but nodded, not liking the idea of making a military decision based on propaganda and political needs. Though Renly had a good point on how marching out would remove him from being able to affect events around King's Landing.

"Very well my Lords." Renly said sighing deeply. "I would like us to go over our numbers once more and continue to reform the army here at the King's Gate." He sighed sadly shaking his head. "It is a sad day when brothers battle, but I will not allow Stannis to sit on the throne. He would ruin Westeros with his new religion and his cold, uncaring nature."

Around him the others all nodded, though most seemed to be rather ambivalent about the idea save for the uneasiness they all shared about Stannis' following this Red Witch. "My Lord Tarly," Renly went on, looking at him. "I believe you had some new ideas on how to pare down our cordon's numbers further?"

OOOOOO

Lord Rupert Serret leaned back at his desk, massaging his forehead wearily. Going by the rumors and the growing examples of violence in the city that Petyr and the Master of Whispers had passed on it was evident that the news of the plague hadn't quite spread throughout the city yet, but it was only a matter of time. He had prepared orders for the defenders of the walls in the event of a general uprising, but he knew it would not be enough.

*We might protect some of the walls and the towers leading up to them, but we're going to lose everything else. Thank the Father we already moved most of the remaining foodstuffs and consolidated our men. I hope that the High Septon doesn't try to argue with my men I sent this morning to escort him to the Red Keep. If he does I'm more than willing to leave him and his oh so Devout out there to the smallfolk's tender mercies.*

Rupert shuddered a little shaking his head sadly as he stared out into the cloudy sky outside the Hand's Tower. *We always seem to forget the smallfolk, or not forget but simply not take account of them in our plans. But when they are roused like this, you truly understand how **many** of them there are! Thousands have died in the recent weeks in various outbreaks of violence and riots against our men here and there in the city, casualties that would've broken any army I've ever heard of. But there are still hundreds of thousands left, more than enough to tear us all down, more than enough to even stack their bodies up against the walls of the Red Keep and just keep on coming if they had the willpower for it. Thankfully they're not a formed force, and they certainly won't be looking to get into the Red Keep, just away from the plague. But even that will be a problem for the defenders on the outer wall. And for the besiegers I suppose, but that's somewhat more doubtful.*

The Hand's thoughts were interrupted as the door to his office opened without preamble, and Varys stepped inside, bowing his head slightly. "I apologize for this sudden intrusion my Lord Hand, however something has come to my attention. Indeed it came to my attention several weeks ago, however I wished to make certain of my findings before coming to you."

Serret sighed, leaning back and staring at the bald, not so fast anymore eunuch with scant favor. "And what exactly is this bad news you wish to discuss?"

"Lord Edmure Tully is dead my Lord." Serret sat up abruptly, staring at him in shock and rising concern. The Master of Whispers held up his hand, and then went on calmly. "He did not die because of neglect or simple starvation. Those at least would have been somewhat understandable given the straits we are in even here in the Red Keep. However, he did not die in that manner instead he was tortured to death, tortured in such a way that I have never seen before outside of my agents reports on the Vile One, a connection I made almost immediately upon hearing the manner in which Edmure died."

As Rupert began to slump back into his chair, his face showing shock and loathing now the other man went on. "It took me the intervening weeks to discover who had access to him, and how they had gained that access." He sighed sadly shaking his head. "Everything I have discovered points to Petyr Baelish having done the deed."

"What!?" Rupert bellowed, jumping to his feet and slamming his hands down on the desk in front of him, glaring at Varys angrily. "In the name of the Seven, why! This can only weaken the Lannister position!" *But*, his mind rather treacherously thought, *Petyr has never been counted upon as a loyal ally, only a useful one.* "No, I can answer that question at least, but what possible motive could he do for going to that extreme?"

"That took some digging my Lord." *Or rather fabrication* Varys thought to himself smirking. The Lannister's own spies even in the Red Keep were now almost nonexistent, mostly concentrated on protecting their family from poisons and other dangers, and they would not be able to confirm or deny anything Varys passed on from his own 'agents'. "Apparently he has been in communication with House Martell of Dorne, and they wished Edmure to die to lay it at the Lannister feet. A prisoner such as Edmure dying in your care after all will be large mark against the Lannister name, and will certainly push Riverrun and House Tully into Stark's arms, further destabilizing Westeros."

"I doubt Petyr would have gone through with it would if he thought that his own position was made stronger staying allied with house Lannister. But the news out of the Riverlands about Tywin having been forced into retreat must have changed his mind."

"That still doesn't say why he went to such extremes as you have said he did." Rupert said quickly. "Killing him fine, I could even see that, but torture?"

"For that you would have to look into their personal histories my Lord. Did you know that Petyr was a ward at Riverrun when he was younger? And he apparently fought a duel with Brandon Stark?" Rupert shrugged, not having heard this story before, and the eunuch went on. "The duel was over Catelyn Tully's hand, apparently Petyr was quite enamored with her when he was younger."

That Rupert could well believe. He had seen Catelyn Tully time or two before Robert's Rebellion, and even now she was marked as a great beauty. Not quite up to Margaery or Cersei's level, but still a very beautiful woman.

"In any event Edmure had apparently threatened to geld Petyr if he ever even looked at his sister that way again, and might have said things along similar lines to Petyr and his men when they came to kill him. Beyond that, I have also found evidence that would link Petyr to the rumors of the Vile one. My agents have reported that at least six times when there was a Vile One attack found Petyr was not seen in his rooms or quarters the night prior."

"Not all of them?"

"My Lord, my agents are merely human." Varys said reproachfully. "And Petyr is a guileful and cunning opponent. That we were able to figure out that he was not where he was supposed to be six times is in itself a minor miracle."

"And one of your agents spotted him entering the prison?" Rupert asked skeptically.

"Yes, though unfortunately the man himself has left the keep, which was why it took me so long to connect all the dots. I had to organize a method of getting information to me that would not force me to leave the keep or allow him to reenter it."

That made sense Rupert thought to himself then nodded decisively. "If you have evidence and witnesses Varys,

that's enough for me to at least act." With that he stood up striding around his table and towards the door. Opening it, he barked orders to the guard outside. "Timon, gather twenty men and tell them to meet me in the courtyard." With that taken care of he turned back. "Now, Varys, tell me more about this evidence, then I'm going to want to question two of your witnesses on Petyr's nighttime movements."

OOOOOO

Petyr actually had more eyes than even Varys knew about in the Red Keep. That was how he was able to find out within moments of the discussion starting that Varys was going to sell him out. The length of that discussion led to Petyr having a small head start, and he used it as best he could.

*I suppose I could fight this, and possibly even win considering I have a lot of evidence to show that Varys has been screening what he tells the queen and the Hand, and with Joffrey's backing me I might win. Yet that backing is not as certain as I would like, I gained influence with the boy but no control over him, aiding his acts of sadism. And frankly if what my spies have said about the Northern host being seen in Harroway is accurate it was becoming time to leave the Lannister side of this war anyway.*

With that in mind, Petyr turned to his personal bodyguard, Osmund Kettleblack, the oldest of three brothers of that family who owed their allegiance to him. "Gather your brothers, your father and Lothor, we're leaving."

Osmund looked at him askance. "You think the plague is going to be able to get over the walls?" He and the others had just found out about the plague a few days prior.

"I don't know and I don't care." Petyr replied bluntly. "My position here is no longer worth fighting over. It is time for us to head to greener pastures."

"I'm not interested in fighting an entire army." Said Osfrey Kettleblack, coming in from his position guarding the door at his brothers summons, looking at Petyr sternly. These were bought men, and they would follow him willingly, but taking on impossible odds like that wasn't in their nature.

"Don't worry." Petyr said smiling thinly. "I'll get us through the siege lines, you just get us there if we run into trouble."

Osmund nodded, and soon enough the six men left, none of the Kettleblacks caring overmuch about what happened to the armymen they were leaving behind. With Petyr leading they made their way through the holdfast down into the kitchen where Petyr opened a secret passage set behind a large cupboard, pushing at a small piece of filigree on the direct top of it to open the passage. The men had to crawl for a few moments, but soon they were out into the catacombs, the warren of secret tunnels and passages that Maegor the Cruel had designed just in case he needed to escape the keep that he had commissioned. Petyr had spend years exploring them, and felt he knew them better than nearly anyone else alive, save perhaps Varys, who had served as Master of Whispers for two kings.

They moved silently, pausing often to listen. Petyr switched off with Lothor Brune, his paid sellsword, who was the best at sneaking around unseen of his bought men. Following Petyr's whispered instructions he made his way down the indicated tunnel, leaving behind the torchlight Petyr and his servant the Kettleblack patriarch held.

Several moments later Lothor came back, nodding his head grimly as he came into the torchlight, holding up four fingers, then slowly running his thumb across his throat. Osmund and his two brothers nodded agreement, pulling out small knives, their blades darkened with soot as not to reflect light. Then they moved forward after Lothor.

Petyr and Oswell waited silently, and moments later heard a faint, choked off cry and two gurgles, followed by the sound of steel on steel and a cry of, "Over here, they're over he-gaah!" That cut off in a pained scream that ended quickly.

"Stranger take them!" Petyr groaned, hurrying forward with Oswell moving after the younger man as fast as he could. They found the man's three sons and Lothor standing over three bodies, armymen of House Stokeworth, and a servant that Petyr recognized as one of Varys' spies. Osney was nursing a deep cut on his forearm, his older brothers already beginning to bandage it.

"The young fool was assigned the servant which should have been the soft option, but he must have made some kind of noise that warned them about our approach." Lothor reported, staring at the youngest Kettleblack disdainfully. The only one of the brothers worth anything in his opinion was the oldest, the other two were not nearly as skilled.

"I did no such thing!" Osney retorted, wincing as his brothers finished bandaging his arm. "And you were the one who missed the fact he had a knife, this arm of mine is your damn fault Brune!"



"Enough! It matters not at all who allowed the alarm to be sounded, we need to move!" Petyr growled out. "If Varys knows enough of the escape route to post men here, he might have sent other men down here. We need to move, now, and quietly!"

With Petyr leading them unerringly through the catacombs the six men made their way through the tunnels, past piles of dragon bones thrown down here after the keep was taken by Robert in his war. Sometimes they had to crawl, sometimes they were able to run along, but finally they came to a small, carefully hidden door.

This opened out onto a small hidden trail that slopped along the cliff face that led along the seawall behind the Red Keep and down into the slums there. The trail was practically invisible from anyone above or outside it, leading down toward the slums. With Petyr still leading they all made their way down the cliff, then out into the ruined slums and beyond.

Moving through those slums, which were still intact for the most part though empty, they soon moved into the slums around the Iron Gate. The same slums that had been the sight of the wildfire started by Lord Harte. By the time they reached it night had long since fallen, which aided their speed, as did the full moon shining overhead.

Entering a small hovel at the outer edge of the slum which had survived the fire, they came upon 12 men wearing various Reach House colors. They were all levy armsmen, peasant archers and smallfolk who had probably been conscripted by their betters at the start of hostilities.

The Reach men stood up quickly, some of them drawing back arrows on bows as Petyr lead the others into the hovel. "Peace!" he hissed, one palm holding out a gold coin. "I'm Littlefinger, one of my men gave you some gold coin to let us through. And there is far more where that came from."

One of the men came forward, opening up a thieves lantern to shine its light into the faces of the five newcomers, while one of the others, a somewhat more clean-shaven and younger fellow than the others, followed, nodding slowly one after another. Finally the man with the lantern nodded "Yer don't seem to hav' the coughin' bloods, but don't any of you try to touch us e'en so! We'll be talkin' business now, before we' do anything. Yer man promised a **'undred** gold dragons each for letting you through!"

"Twenty now, and the remaining eighty when we have passed through the your armies lines." Petyr said sharply. "That was the agreed upon price." The men grumbled, and Petyr sensing that they were bulking at the last moment wheedled "I can go as high as forty now and an extra hundred later to be split between you beyond the agreed hundred."

Lothor's fingers twitched as he fought not to reach for his longsword, the bows some of these fellows had might be pointing down, but they had also moved back away from the newcomers. He hoped that these men had more loyalty to one another, or at least more stupidity than most sellswords did. Sellswords would have realized Petyr was carrying the gold they had promised then realized that they both outnumbered his men, and that the fewer allies they had to share with, the greater their own cut of the prize. *Though I suppose the plague might scare them too much to try and loot our bodies.*

At Petyr's offer greed finally won out over caution, and the man in charge nodded his head. "We'll wait 'ere until our shifts done, that's another two moves o' the moon, then we'll head back to our lines. After that, it's up to you an' yers to get away."

Petyr nodded, and the two groups waited tensely, with Petyr and his men waiting outside the small hovel. A few hours later, the Reach men began to lead Petyr and his men out of the slums towards the encircling army's lines. That was the most nervous moment, when they might have been sighted from both the capital's wall and from the surrounding army, but nothing happened. Soon enough they were back among the forces guarding the road out from King's Landing towards Castle Rosby.

Petyr found to his surprise that they were able to pass through relatively unchallenged. This area was controlled by House Florent, and Alekyne wasn't the most energetic commander, an attitude that had spread to his men in the easy life of the siege forts. They were halted twice by guards who had seen them coming, but the man in charge of the group they had met in the slums had the proper passwords, and none of these men could count or had indeed noticed how large the group had been when they left earlier that evening.

Once they passed the guard posts they entered the small camp, and Petyr began to hand out the money. At the same time he whispered out of the corner of his mouth "Secure us some horses Lothor, we have a ways to go before I want to stop and we're running out of night."

As the money was passed over there was a moment where the Reach men looked as if they were ready to attack to see what else Petyr could give them, but with the Kettleblacks already standing with swords out they all decided against it. The leader simply nodded one last time at Petyr, then moved off through the tents followed by his men.

Soon enough Petyr and his men had horses, taken from Florent's own herd. They moved far enough back of the camp to no longer be heard, then mounted their horses and raced hell for leather away from King's Landing and the Reach/Stormlands army. "Where are we going milord?" Oswell asked.

"There is a small cove near Castle Rosby, I have a on retainer by the name of Mikon who should be there. And then from there." Petyr shrugged, thinking about some of the news that had recently come to his attention. "From there we'll see. Either the Vale or some other destination will avail itself." He chuckled slightly at his own turn of phrase, then rolled his eyes as none of the other men noticed, then fell silent spurring his horse on through the night.

OOOOOO

Willas ducked behind a chimney while an arrow flashed towards where he had previously been standing. "They have several good archers over there." he commented almost conversationally, staring over at the men he shared this particular roof with.

Most of them chuckled. One however didn't bother replying verbally at first, instead sticking his bow lengthways over the roof and firing an arrow back in return. "So do we, look my Lord." he said then as a scream resounded from the archers lined up behind the advancing Westerlands mercenaries.

After leaving Old Oak with his reinforcements Willas had done everything he could do to convince the raiders pursuing him that he had not been reinforced. For one thing, he sent the majority of his heavy cavalry southwest under Ser Graceford along with all of the archers that Lady Oakheart had given him, skirting around the areas that had already been despoiled by the raiders. Then Willas marched out with most of the rest of his men to meet them in the open field.

From the beginning he had decided to give up land for lives, retreating after a series of small skirmishes that seemingly cost him more than they did the enemy. This ruse was caused by Willas sending off very small forces of light cavalry north and west after each battle while he and his force continued to retreat southeast. Those forces were under the command of some of his better men chosen by himself and Toulev, and they would reform further up the Silver River. From there they would follow its course down to either interdict any further Westerlands reinforcements from coming across the river or simply march down its western bank to rejoin the battle at the town that Willas had designated his target when coming up with this campaign.

The town in question had been evacuated long since. Willas had chosen it because most of the buildings in it had been made of stone from a nearby quarry, the same quarry that supplied several of the castles nearby with their stone. It had stood there since the time of the Gardener Kings and had been designed to be defensible even after its outer wall had been torn down to make more room.

Cautiously sticking his head over the side of the rooftop Willas stared at where the raiding force was forming up to assault the town. There looked to be around 3000, maybe 3,500 or so if you added in the archers. Most of them looked like mercenaries of some kind, a single unit from what he could see, along with some forces from House Turnberry and surprisingly a few Prester men with a number of men from House Swyft of Cornfield. "Always did find that a asinine name for a castle, and as to their banner..." Willas shook his head falling silent. Because at that moment he noticed that the three black dogs on yellow of house Clegane was still visible on clumps of men here and there among the raiders.

Seeing that hated symbol Willas snarled and backed away from the small slope of the roof. He moved over to stare down into the streets all around, where his own infantry waited, formed into separate units ordered to guard the houses where their archers were stationed. "Men of House Tyrell, men of the Reach, I speak as heir to your Lord Paramount, and I say this: No quarter will be given this day, no quarter for the butchers, no quarter for the rapists that have despoiled our lands! In the name of the Father, slaughter them all!"

He was answered with a roar, and the infantrymen rushed out to take their places near the outer edge of the town, blocking the attackers from moving further into the town. One man standing with Willas waved a black flag in the air, and archers appeared all along the other roofs facing the attackers. A vicious archer duel began as the Westerlands infantry and cavalry charged into the town, where they slammed into the waiting shield walls with a clang.

Willas gripped his sword tightly, fighting a **powerful** urge to make his way down there and fight himself, but at this point doing so would be foolish. Those attackers were finished the moment they tried to invest the town, even if they

didn't know it. Getting himself killed in the final battle of this campaign would be foolish in the extreme. *That doesn't mean I can't take part at all* however he thought to himself moving to pick up a bow and quiver. *I might not be the shot my sister and brothers are, but I'm decent enough.*

The battle continued for the next 15 minutes. The attackers tried to hammer their way into the town, while the archers kept their own archers at bay for now while also killing dozens of the infantry. Then, just as Willas was wondering if the runner he had sent to find Ser Graceford in the morning hadn't arrived, he began to see the glint of light on raised lances coming from beyond where the enemy archers had hunkered down outside of the town.

Their defenses were hay bales, a few overturned carts here and there, and the ruins of four farmsteads. Not enough to defend themselves from the light cavalry that roared them into the ground a moment later. Their shrieks and screams of fear caught the attention of their fellows who were trying to battle into the town, and most of the light cavalry and even some of the heavy cavalry that had been trying to make their way into the town turned, trying to race after the light cavalry that had just written down their own archers.

The entire attack on the town broke off as the mercenaries and Westeros land arms been retreated in small pockets and clumps to try and chase down the light cavalry.

But then from the southwest came the heavy cavalry that Willas had broken off at Old Oak, with the men of House Graceford in the lead. "**Work Her Will!**" They hit the disorganized clump of raiders that had fallen back from the town, shattering it further. All around Willas the archers were having a field day now not having to worry about their opposite numbers they were simply slaughtering the poorly armored infantry down there as well as the remains of their light cavalry.

Willas pulled back his own bow aiding his own arrows to the storm, bellowing "Press them Toulev!"

From down below came in answering roar. "Aye my Lord!" From the center of the town came the reserves, the other half of the heavy infantry that Willas had been husbanding for this battle. Moving out all around the town and racing forward to envelop the enemy while his levy forces, armed with long spears for the most part moved to help hold the lines leading into the town.

"The Reach and no quarter!" Was the warcry taken up by every throat out there as Willas' men began to pay back the raiders for all of their fell deeds since crossing the border. Knowing the battle was lost the man holding up the banner of the House Prester began to shout for quarter, only to be silenced as an arrow found his eye through his helmet. He and his banner fell from the saddle.

When the men around him saw this, what had been a battle became a rout as the raiders last vestige of discipline broke. By the end of the day not one of them was alive, rundown and sabered by the light cavalry. .

As the unit commanders saw to the execution of the enemy wounded and to the aid of their own, Willas met with his officers in the former mayor's office of the town. "We will rest here for a day no more." Willas said simply, gesturing at the map laid out on the table between them. "I'm going to send a messenger to Old Oak to tell Lady Oakheart that the battle has been won, and where to send supplies, particularly arrows."

The leader of the archers, a common born man who was ill at ease in the company of Lords nodded thankfully and Willas nodded back before going on. "Then we will march up to Red Lake, where will hopefully be able to pick up more men."

"Will we make for Crakehall or Clegane castle after that my Lord" said one of the knights. "The Crakehall land is richer, but we'll face sterner opposition as well."

Willas stabbed the map where it marked castle Clegane angrily. "No! The forces that ravaged the lands of Kidwell, Rowan, Inchfield and Redding came from House Clegane originally. I think it is high time that that pestilential place was burned to the ground. By this time next month my Lords, I want the three dogs on a yellow background to be only a dark memory. After that, we will do the same thing to House Swyft, and then move further if we can."

OOOOOO

Garlan looked up in shock as Margaery entered the office he had commandeered, moving around the desk quickly and enveloping her in a tight hug. "Margaery! Are you, are you well?" he asked pulling back to look into her face. He tried not to wince when he saw the bruise on her throat once more. It was an ugly black and blue thing, done apparently by the Victarion Greyjoy, who had been in charge of the attack here. Luckily it would heal, if slowly.

He was still shocked to have learned however that it had been Margaery's knife found in the man's eye. Say what you wanted about his morals or ability to think, but he had been a feared warrior. The fact that he had died to Margaery, a young woman with a little to no training was both astonishing and rather amusing. The tale of that had already spread to the bards among his men, and they were already trying to come up with a song about 'The Rose and the Kraken', and Margaery's standing with the smallfolk, which had been already incredibly high had risen to new heights.

But Margaery herself had fallen into a funk after the battle ended. The healer who had examined her said it wasn't anything physical, it was simply a mental shock. The healer seemed to think it was because she had killed someone, but Garlan was inclined to think it was because of that and Ser Igon Vyrwel's death.

Garlan understood that. He would miss the man as well, he had been a fixture in their lives when they were younger. It was also only Ser Igon's skill as a commander, something he had actually never proven before in his life, and as a swordsman that had allowed Margaery's gamble to succeed. And even then it was a damn close thing.

*The Ironborn attacked in a much more organized manner than they've ever shown before, and from several directions at once. Something we won't have to worry about from now on with Victarion dead. Yet if I hadn't arrived when I did...* Garlan shuddered to think of what would've happened to his sister and to Highgarden itself after.

"I am as well as could be expected, brother." Margaery replied in a soft breathy tone that showed that she was still having trouble speaking thanks to the wound to her throat. She turned in Garlan's arms looking around at the gathered lords and knights, all of whom had risen respectfully when she entered. "My Lords." They all murmured greetings, and there was more than one young Lord among them who looked at Margaery as if they had become newly smitten by her, and it wasn't just because of her looks any longer. The courage she had shown here had impacted them just as much as the smallfolk.

*It was a Seven-sent miracle that we arrived when we did,* Garlan thought not for the first time while he led his sister to a seat which one of the younger knights had already vacated hastily for her. That was actually a rumor among the men, that it really was a miracle. Many of them had even pointed to six instances along their route where they were aided by strange occurrences.

Garlan hadn't heard them all, but knew two of them. The Mander was deep and navigable for most of its route, but there were a few places where there should have been rocks or eddies that would've made their going much slower. They hadn't run into any, even in places where they should have been going by the map and the barge masters. Moreover, while the army was rained upon a few times, the wind was always with them, pushing them further down the Mander.

But the most bizarre moment came when they were forced to stop for supplies, and a local septon had enough supplies on hand to donate to the army to speed it on its way. The septon, who acted both as septon and mayor of that small village had reported that they had a truly bountiful harvest come in, one that allowed them to supply the army with enough bread and other foodstuffs to see them on their way easily. That despite rumors saying they had already taken in their last crop and had actually seeded the fields again only a week prior.

That was a miracle, the only one that Garlan could point to and say that it unexplainable through normal means. But weren't Seven-sent miracles supposed to come in sevens? Where were the others? Or, if you believed what the soldiers were saying the final miracle?

No one knew about the miraculous arrow that had slain the messenger Victarion had tried to send to his archer-laden galleys. If they had received that order, the archers would've transferred to the walls of Oldflowers. That would've made Garlan taking the castle back from the Ironborn far more costly, or possibly impossible given the lack of grapnels or siege equipment among Garlan's men.

Margaery captured Garlan's hand in both of hers as he made to pull away after seeing her, grasping it firmly and raising it to her forehead looking up at him. "It was your arrival that saved us, saved me and this castle." she said looking from him and then all around at the others. "I cannot remember much from the last few days, and I need to say this now in case I have not already. Thank you for your service, for your sacrifice and for the rescue."

"T'was our duty lady." said one of the knights from Hightower. He looked a little embarrassed at the emotion that Margaery was able to put in those words despite their low tones.

Margaery nodded then almost visibly changed gears, looking up at Garlan. "With the Shield Islands and the Arbor still in the Ironborn's possession, you can't leave many men here to guard Oldflowers and myself. So if you are thinking of doing so desist now."

Despite the fact she sounded like she was gargling rocks there was some of the old fire in Margaery's voice again, and Garland was not the only one to smile at hearing it. "I will leave you a force of 800 or so here sister, along with the wounded, which amounts to another 600. But the rest of my men are almost ready to go. We're just getting all our ducks in a row."

Margaery cocked her head quizzically and Gunthor Hightower spoke up. "We need to get to Oldtown to meet with the remaining Redwyne navy my lady, and first we have to decide if we're going to march overland down the Rose Road there, or continue to take the barges further down the Mander before marching overland to Brightwater Keep. From there we could take the Honeywine down to Oldtown."

"Has Lord Florent suddenly become an excellent organizer when I wasn't looking?" Margaery replied tartly, shaking her head. "Even at the best of times that man isn't the most capable, so unless you gave him quite a lot of time to prepare your new barges, I think you would be sorely disappointed. Surely you were not thinking of, what is the word for carrying your own barges overland? Portaging? That would slow you down tremendously, adding weeks to your journey, weeks which the Ironborn would continue to reave upon the Shield Islands and the Arbor. I shudder to think what is occurring there under Greyjoy dominion."

"You're not the only one my lady." said Lord Blackbar. Margaery remembered that before the war began he had been trying to organize a marriage between his young son and one of the Redwyne nieces.

Margaery nodded at him, then turned back to Garlan. "Moreover, you would be placing yourself into House Florent's hands. "Not a good idea considering the fact that Stannis Baratheon, who last time I checked is one of Renly's enemies, was married into that family."

"Surely you don't think they'd do anything my lady?" said in another one of the knights, a Bulwer she thought. "Lord Tyrell would never forgive such."

"I think that Alester Florent will strike out for the main chance, whatever will enrich him and his House personally. You do not sit at my grandmother's knees for as long as I have without learning politics and how an individual's desires can drive him, my lords. House Florent has long chafed under House Tyrell rule, much like others have under their major Houses." she said looking over at Gunthor who smiled equably not saying anything though both of them knew what she was talking about and specifically why Cuy and Mullendore had no knights or household members representing them here.

"So it's overland down the Rose Road," Garlan said, bring the conversation back to military matters, where he was much more comfortable. "That will take us probably a month alas, the road is in excellent condition, but the season is against us if we want to arrive with our men in any shape to continue the campaign." From there the men turned to the task of organizing where along the route the local lords should prepare supplies for them, while Margaery began to prepare notes that would be sent to those houses.

OOOOOO

Victarion Greyjoy's death and the decimation of his assault force were not the only bad news on the horizon for the Ironborn, though even that had yet to reach back to the Shield Islands. And even when they did learn of it, few would recognize it for the major loss it truly was. Even his brother Balon, when he learned of it, would not realize what Victarion's death really meant. The Ironborn did not take to discipline well, and did not really understand the need of it, so his death would not have much of an impact. To the northwest however another threat was looming which would not threaten the Ironborn fleets, but the islands they called home and with them, their very way of life.

The Lannister fleet, composed of thirty-four war galleys each of which was armed with four scorpions and fully manned, was leaving Lannisport. They also had six trade cogs with them, full of men but also with weapons and armor to supply even more, the output of every blacksmith in the city and within 20 leagues of it.

Kevan Lannister watched them go from the Rock, frowning thoughtfully as the ships began their journey. Personally, Kevan had wanted to split the fleet, leaving two-thirds here to guard their home waters and sending the rest with an invasion force to the Shield Islands. However when reports of the strength of the Ironborn Fleet in those islands had gotten back to him, he had decided to send an invasion force into the Iron Islands instead.

If he had known about Greyjoy's death of course that would have impacted his thinking. But while news could travel fast, it certainly couldn't travel **that** fast and news of his death hadn't even become common knowledge in the area beyond the Mander, yet let alone reached the ears of any of the other players in this war. Of course that wasn't the only news that had not reached Kevan Lannister, news of the disaster in the Riverlands hadn't reached even the Golden Tooth yet. The maester in charge of looking after the ravens for Tywin's army had died during Wendel's raid

on his camp, and Tywin had no time or ability to send any messages when he got back to the Kneeling Man's Ford.

*Putting Addam in charge of the invasion force was simple enough, though I am not so sanguine about Lord Prester being in charge of the fleet portion. I hope my idea of arming the thralls in the Iron Islands works. From what I can remember of the last campaign against the Ironborn it **might**, at least on most of the islands. That could be a major force multiplier to our invasion force, but we were only able to send 3000 men along with the fleet. And even that badly eroded our reserve here in the lands nearest Lannisport.*

In fact that only left Kevan with about 700 men to guard the Rock, which would be more than enough given its natural defenses, and another thousand to guard the city alongside the city watch. That might not be enough if they were somehow attacked while the fleet was away. *Still for now it seems as if my brother's idea of keeping everyone else on the defensive is working for us.*

In the days to come, as winter closed in, Kevan would remember that thought and shake his head at how foolish he had been.

OOOOOO

Of course, some events had been put in motion long before the campaign in the Riverlands reached its zenith, only to culminate in decisions being made now.

"Stranger damn you all, we have to get the word out! The Black candles are burning again, every single one of them! We all know what that means! Whatever you think of magic, my fellow archmaesters, we have a duty to tell all of Westeros that magic has returned! And you all know that might not be the worst of it either! You've put a decision on this matter off long enough, now I demand a response, else I will see to our duty alone!" The man who spoke thus was short with, huge, powerful hands and a large beer belly, a nose that had been broken many times in the past, coupled with a thick neck and a strong jaw.

Yet for all that he looked like someone who spent most of his time moving from alehouse to back alley wrestling matches, he wore the multi-linked chain of a maester, along with the ring and the rod of a Archmaester, but unlike any other of that order, his were made of Valyrian steel, signifying that he studied and was seen as a master in magic. Considering how magic was looked down upon in the Citadel, that made this man very much an outsider among his fellows.

Something one of the other Archmaesters around him in the conclave was very quick to point out. "Yes, yes, we know the old stories Marwyn, but a candle burning is hardly proof that magic has returned." Archmaester Vaellyn was a master of astrology in the Citadel, rarely leaving it's environs and disparaging of anything that went against the logic and mathematics that were central to his philosophy.

"True, but even so our duty is clear." Said Perestan, the historian. He didn't look happy about the thought, simply grave. "As part of our ancient covenant we need to send messages to the Lords Paramount and King's Landing that magic has returned, and with it, with it...." He paused, unable to say the words.

"The Others, the White Walkers, the ancient creatures of Endless Winter!" Marwyn growled out. "Saying their names won't call them into being or make them stronger, that's not among their powers. What is known about those is bad enough! And from last report I saw, the Wall's strength is at its lowest ebb in history!"

"That's actually not true any longer." Another Archmaester whose name and face Marwyn didn't recognize offhand said in a thoughtful tone. A tone, moreover which hinted at a northern accent. "I received word several months ago that there were reports of a King Beyond the Wall rising, and that many of the Northern houses had sent meant to the wall. In fact, I think the Wall is stronger than it has been for centuries now."

The maesters did not actually have a real spy network in most of Westeros, relying instead on the maesters themselves, situated as they were as advisors and healers in practically every important castle or keep on the continent. They did have one in Essos, but it's penetration of that land varied widely from city to city. Few of those maesters of course knew about the politics of the masters of the order, but talking to one another and asking advice or generally keeping in touch allowed the maesters to gather a lot of information.

There were exceptions of course. Many maesters outside the Citadel played the game of politics for their family's sake rather than the Citadel's, and then there were those who simply didn't communicate with the Citadel, like Luwin in Winterfell. That particular lack was the most irritating at the moment, considering they had received news about the massive amounts of steel coming out of Winterfell, coupled with other changes to the status quo.

But the Archmaesters had something more important than new ways to transport goods or create steel on their minds at present. "Then we don't have to worry about these mystical 'Others' at all, now do we? We will still send the messages Marwyn, but frankly I don't think they'll be believed at this point, the Lords Paramount have more important things on their minds." Another Archmaester said dismissively. "But the return of magic means something else, those rumors of dragons are possibly more accurate than we would like to think."

There was a moment of silence there among the highest Archmaesters of the Citadel, yet despite no words being spoken there was a lot of information exchanged in those few moments. No one but the highest members of the order, which, amusingly enough did not include the Grand Maester sent to King's Landing, knew the secrets these men were privy to. Even Marwyn, who was a not well-thought-of addition to this council, didn't know everything.

He knew that the Citadel had been destroying or hiding away any knowledge of magic they could get their hands on for centuries. Magic struck at the very foundations of what most maesters believed in, that the world was understandable and that nothing existed that could not be explained through logic and observation.

That was bad enough. Destroying knowledge because you didn't like what it said struck at the very heart of what he felt the order of Maesters should be. Worse it left the majority of maesters woefully unprepared to analyze or combat it now that magic had returned. Marwyn had done his best, but he knew they were woefully ignorant of many of the powers that magic could bestow on its users.

What Marwyn did not know, and never would if most of this council had their way, was that the maesters had long since taken that a step further. They had... helped the dragons disappear starting 270 years ago, having connected their existence to magic long before that. They had been in a silent war with the various orders of magic in Essos for centuries, and had been winning that war with the decline of their various powers.

Now most of the Archmaesters around the room were wearily certain that they were going to face a reversal of their fortunes there. But they would be damned if magic once again gained a toehold in Westeros. "I think sending a maester as an overture to this Stark-Targaryen union we've heard about might be a good idea. As for the other dragon reported, we'll have to wait until this Viserys and his forces make landfall somewhere and make plans from there." Said one of them, his face hidden in the shadow of the council room.

With Marwyn and a few others there who were not aware of the anti-magic conspiracy's full remit that was all that could be said aloud. It made it sound as if the maester would be their liaison with the Stark-Targaryen alliance, rather than their agent, and possibly assassin if need be. None of them realized they had already said too much, and Marwyn's beady eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

The discussion continued, trying to decide what to do and what information they had to send to the Lords Paramount, though many there were doubtful any of them would care over much. There was a war on after all.

The next day a maester specializing in healing had been chosen to send to Maidenpool, from where he could make his way to the Stark-Targaryen army. It would take a solid month and a half of travel by sea in autumn, but even so it would be much faster, and possibly safer than traveling by him the maester took twenty men from the citadel's security force, a band of semi-mercenary men who served as guards for Citadel and for maesters when they went into dangerous territories. He also brought along a few students, mainly to make his life somewhat easier.

The master healer didn't realize that one of them, whose name was Alleras, had worked with Archmaester Marwyn a time or two. Or that he had been assigned punishment duty that placed him near the Archmaester's quarters the previous evening.

OOOOOO

Stannis had finally allowed Melisandre to sacrifice the old septon, though he had insisted that it be in a duplicitous way that could in no way be linked back to her. A little bit of slow acting poison in his food one evening saw to that. The few maesters with the army examined him the next day and declared that his heart had finally given out on him. No one saw Melisandre enter the septon's tent, which had been given to him out of respect despite his prisoner status, and no one saw her leave as well.

If anyone had, they might have noticed that she was holding one hand up to hold her cloak tight against her neck to keep the large ruby fit into her gold choker from showing. And if someone was standing close enough and had good enough eyes, they might have seen just a small flicker of light under her fingers.

That light had faded noticeably however by the time Melisandre got back to her own tent, and she swiftly divested herself of her clothing before moving to kneel in front of the living flame that was burning brightly in a small fire pit set

into the middle of her tent. Even as she did so Melisandre cursed volubly. She was able to get a little bit of power from the old man's death, but not nearly as much as she had hoped, and it had begun to fade immediately after extraction.

Yet even so, it gave her a slight boost in her attempt to see through the skein of the present to what events were occurring elsewhere. After about 40 minutes Melisandre was able to see scenes what was going on elsewhere, battle and war everywhere she looked. Yet the images were so disjointed and the places so unfamiliar she wasn't really getting any prevalent information out of them. The old man's life essence was seeping away faster than she could hold on to it, and she was only able to stay in the meditative trance with difficulty, by the end of which she was despairing at getting any accurate information.

Then the images of battles gave way suddenly, to be replaced by a series of images that were obviously simply metaphors for events happening elsewhere. *A lion gutted, his throat torn out by a wolf standing like a man. A series of small fish trying to nibble and bite at what looked like some kind of thorny rose hovering in the water, yet dying in the attempt.* A fleet setting sail from a port, with nothing visible that Melisandre could use to see what port it was. *A fleet led by men who were not normal, made out of iron and hollow bits and pieces where their souls should be, while men made of roses but with thorns of steel were preparing to attack them from the South.* *A snake slithering up a compass etched into the ground showing it coming from the south, the ground behind its passage becoming dead and black with poison.* A dragon circling a tower she recognized having lived there for several months. *It was black and fell to look upon, and as the eye of the vision drew closer Melisandre could see its eyes gleamed with madness.* Though if the madness was its own, or its rider was something that Melisandre could not say with any certainty.

With that the images ended, and suddenly Melisandre was back in her own body, shaking her head and wincing occasionally at the burning at her throat. The gem at her throat was red hot to the touch, and it had burned her throat slightly but she knew she would heal, this wasn't the first time that had happened. After a few moments spent recovering and thinking, Melisandre pushed herself to her feet, to go in search of Stannis.

Leaving her tent she passed a few of her new acolytes who rose to their feet, looking at her adoringly. These were the women who she had saved in Stokeworth. Ever since taking them into her service, Melisandre had preached to them about the glory of R'hllor, and much like Selyse back on Dragonstone they had all fallen into her power, giving all of themselves to R'hllor, which was as it should be. She had plans for them in the near future, but not right now. She waved them back to their places, entering Stannis' tent.

"With the Blackwater on our right flank and with the rains we've been running into, we might have the opportunity to set a small trap for the Reach heavy cavalry that they love so much." Stannis was saying as Melisandre entered the tent, the guards outside not having bothered to announce her. Inside Stannis was going over some contingency plans for the upcoming battle if he could not convince his brother to give over. Personally Stannis didn't think that would ever happen, Renly was always a grasping boy and thanks to Robert's favoritism he had never been broken of the habit. But for the blood they shared Stannis was going to try anyway.

All of his commanders and lords were nodding grimly. They knew the upcoming battle would be hard, but they had been in several fights already, which had done wonders for the morale of the army. They might be outnumbered, though it was difficult to estimate what portions of the army Renly would be willing to pull off the cordon around King's Landing. However, they also respected and trusted Stannis, and fully anticipated that Melisandre would have some kind of magical aid to offer during the battle itself which, while they were not happy about, they were at least willing to accept.

"Acting in that kind of terrain will be difficult, but so long as we use only infantry for that first unit, we could get away with it my lord." said Lord Buckler frowning thoughtfully.

"Exactly. Most Reach lords look down on infantry and believe that heavy cavalry are the masters of the battlefield. I mean to show them that that is not always the case." Stannis smiled grimly. "And we have other arrows in our quiver as well, and not just on the battlefield. I've already sent diplomatic messages to specific lords. Though the men I sent with most of them haven't returned yet, given what is happening to the underbelly of the Reach I have no doubt that many Reach lords will be anxious to head home. That is an exploitable weakness."

After a few more moments discussion Stannis and his officers had planned as much as they could before they reached where Stannis estimated the battle would take place and broke up for the evening. As they did Stannis turned to Melisandre who had been watching quietly. He took a sip of camp water then set it aside on the small table looking at her coolly. "I trust the old man's death served your purpose?"

"It did, though barely." Melisandre said, not looking away from Stannis's hard judgmental gaze. "For more specific information, we will have to sacrifice someone to the flames but for now..." she shrugged. "Once again what



information my god allowed me to see was mostly and images. One fact however was prevalent throughout every other scene I saw. War has spread everywhere."

"Of course," Stannis said shaking his head. "But specifics please."

"I have very little specifics to share as I said. However near the end of my meditation R'hllor saw fit to send me several images, many of which are easy enough to interpret while others are not so much."

She described the images as they came to her, the first and most vivid shocking Stannis to almost lose control of his facial expressions for a moment. "So the Stark youth has completely defeated the old lion? Amazing. Even after your last image about the two of them I had not anticipated the Starks would simply win outright like that. I would have thought the two of them would continue to war with one another shattering the Riverlands as they did. I will have to make certain not to underestimate Ranma Stark the general when we inevitably meet."

Stannis couldn't stop himself from glaring angrily at Melisandre at that, since without her demand that he assault the ship with the Dragon Queen on it he might have well been able to bring the Starks in on his own side. But not now. Not unless he could unite the rest of Westeros against them, and that wasn't going to happen.

The next few images could deal with the Ironborn, but the snake was a mystery to Stannis. Melisandre had been unable to tell them what type of snake, and there were several families who had snakes in their heraldry which didn't mention people with nicknames that dealt with snakes. "If I had to make a bet, I would say it would might be about the Viper, but his making his way from the south, doesn't tell me enough."

"And what of my last image my Lord, the black dragon circling over Dragonstone, or about the fleet leaving a port? R'hllor favored me greatly to send me that image at all considering they were about something occurring overwater. If Dragonstone is in danger..."

Stannis laughed harshly. "I do not tell you how to burn people woman, don't tell me about war. Dragonstone might not be Storm's End but unlike Storm's End when I had to hold it against that idiot Mace, I prepared Dragonstone for war long before this. And I left 700 of my best men there under Jate Blackberry, one of my best and most loyal men. If that image is about something occurring now, he'll break the dragon loving scum on the walls!

"As to the fleet, that is something else entirely. Can you tell me anything about what the ships looked like, or anything that could distinguish them?"

Melisandre thought for a time, and then shrugged. "I could sense they were coming from Essos, but other than that... Perhaps, perhaps a golden hue about them my lord? Other than that, there was nothing about them to tell me about... my lord?"

Stannis had gone still, his eyes narrowed and hard as he thought what that could mean, then shook his head. "That... that could be a **lot** of trouble done the line if my guess on that is right." He shook his head. "For now, we will continue to deal with my brother and King's Landing. Then we will send a message to Saan. Davos and his friend will deal with the dragon lovers for us. All the dragon lovers, if possible."

After waiting a moment to see if Stannis would share what he thought the fleet might be Melisandre cocking her head to one side asking. "And the wolves, what of them?"

"The wolves can wait for a time. Even if Stark won his campaign against Tywin decisively he'll have to consolidate his position. And as long as the Golden Tooth is in Lannister hands they'll need to worry about their flank too much to allow them to march deep into the Crownlands. No, if events here go as well as we can make them we will be in a far better position to face them, possibly near Harroway or Maidenpool somewhere. Are your plans for the women ready?" He asked somewhat distastefully.

"Yes Azor Ahai." Melisandre responded bowing her head obsequiously, yet somehow the gesture was more arrogant than any kingly gesture Stannis had ever seen. "The Army knows we will be sending the women and the other noncombatants back to that last village tomorrow night before marching on to face a Renly, guarded by myself and many of your fire guard for a time, and I have let it be known that we will be picking up several crates as well there." She smiled thinly, though it quickly turned into a frown. "I will remind you that winter and the Great Other are gathering strength. We will need to start for the Wall in the next few months, six at the most."

"You do not have to keep reminding me about the otherworldly threat you seem to see around every corner!" Stannis said growling angrily. He didn't believe in the Great Other or whatever threat she saw beyond the Wall but he wasn't about to discount it either. He simply wished to concentrate on more understandable threats first. "When the time

comes we will march north, and this Great Others of yours will face the largest army Westeros can field, but I refuse to go to the Wall and leave enemies behind me!"

He looked up as the pattering of rain began on the tent's roof, then back at Melisandre. "If it rains like this when we deal with King's Landing will that affect your plans?"

"No mere drops of water will put out the flames of R'hllor!" Melisandre said, her eyes flashing angrily. "My flames will burn away everything, you will see."

OOOOOO

Closer to home at around the same time Ranma was about to close his final trap on Tywin, Daenerys and her portion of the Army had arrived at Stone Hedge, ostensibly to relieve the army there.

Inside the keep, Roger was taking a solitary meal while writing up notes of the siege for Domic. Back in Seagard Domic had asked all of the Wolfsworn to write their experiences down for him so that he could weave them into song after the war was over, and knowing that the battles here would be known as one of the turning points the battle against the Lannisters Roger was determined to put down everything that had happened in order to paint Dacey and Arya in the heroic light they deserved to be.

He paused in his writing when he felt someone behind him, but before he could turn, two feminine arms went around his shoulders tracing down his chest to his stomach. "What are you writing?" A breathy voiced asked his ear.

Roger rolled his eyes keeping a groan from escaping his lips with difficulty despite his father's training in etiquette. "May I ask why what I am writing would be any of your concern?" he asked, turning slightly to look over one shoulder at the young woman trying to drape herself over his back. "And I have asked you" he said reaching up gently with his own hands to remove her arms from around his shoulders, "to desist in these flirtations of yours."

"Your handwriting is very neat my Lord." said the girl, staring down at the messages he was writing, before backing away slightly yet still a little too close for Roger's comfort. "Would you like me to look it over for you?"

"I doubt the topic would in any way interest you my lady." Roger said taking the parchment from her quickly.

Barbara Bracken, the oldest daughter of the house smiled sweetly at him, letting none of the desperation she was feeling shown her face. But Roger knew it was there, her flirtations had become more and more physical in nature since Lord Bracken's capture and the defeat of the small force that he had led against the walls. Now with everyone of the Brackens under the North's thumb, she knew that they were truly at the mercy of the Northerners. Her mother had told her about Arya and what she thought would happen to them all, and Barbara wanted no part in that. She had been raised as a lady, and she would remain such even if she had to whore herself out to a northern barbarian.

She had picked Roger as her target because he was the most civilized looking one among the Wolfsworn. Edd was handsome enough, but not her type really, she preferred a more mature man. Hathan was injured of course, and his family wasn't one she had ever heard before. Roger had actually shared the story of the House of Shieldarm's creation, how Hathan had received Ranma's life and been awarded his own last name and holdfast in return. But that just meant he was not rich enough to interest her.

She did know however that Catelyn, her middle sister, had some designs on the northern knight. She had been the one to help him with his wounds, and the two had grown close. But how far that understanding would go, she didn't know. Which didn't even consider Bess and her relationship with Arya, the friendship that had sprung up between the two girls, almost an apprenticeship really.

Barbara moved forward, one hand reaching up to rub along Roger's cheek. Roger however pushed her away now shaking his head angrily. "I said desist lady, I am married, as I've told you before."

"Yes, to a wildling witch!" Barbara scoffed, shaking her head, her feminine dignity now raising its head. "Do they even acknowledge marriage like you or I would? Does she know how to read and write, to see to the running of a household, of politics or anything of real use? What could you see in such as one is her when you could have me?"

"I would choose Osha because she is strong enough to look after herself and survive winter when it comes." Roger replied coolly. "And while her people might view marriage as something only worthwhile so long as the man can prove you stronger than the woman, I take my vows seriously, especially since she has already given me a child."

The young woman scowled but before she could retort one of the guards burst in. "My Lord! An army approaches, bearing a banner I have never seen before, but the two dragons are flying overhead!"

OOOOOO

"You're telling me that we came here for nothing?" Daenerys asked, a wide smile on her face as she slipped out of the saddle after Myrcella. The two of them still routinely shared a horse, yet even so that horse was probably the envy of all the other warhorses in the army given how light the two of them were. She looked up, helping Merry from the saddle and taking a moment to hug the younger girl for a second, still amused by the joke Merry had been telling her as they rode under the portcullis.

"Blame Lord Bracken's moment of madness." said Dacey laughing lightly as she exchanged arm clasps with both younger women before looking at her and the others. "I take it the old lion is on the run?"

"Possibly not by this time." Daenerys said with a shrug. "He did not have that much of a head start, and I know that Ranma is going to push the pace as hard as possible to catch him."

Myrcella had moved over to greet Edd and Roger exchanging a hug with Arya before looking around quizzically. "Where's Hathan?" Myrcella like Hathan, he was quiet, but there was something solid about him, reminding her of Ser Oakheart in a way.

"He was injured taking the castle in the first place. His injuries are healing, but we would certainly like your opinion on them Myrcella." Edd responded.

Myrcella nodded, and Roger turned, gesturing her and her two bodyguards to follow him into the keep.

"We've kept Lord Bracken in the cells here along with the feel of his men that surrendered rather than simply fleeing. Did you run into any trouble with skirmishers on the way here?" Dacey asked.

"No, I doubt that after the drubbing you seem to have given them that they will have stomach for opposing a full army. I have no doubt they will have turned to banditry like so many." Daenerys frowned for a moment then shrugged. "I'd like to speak to Bracken now if you don't mind, make my own impression of him before we talk further. I want to know if he is like Vypren, simply striking out for personal gain, or if he has some small honorable justification for his actions."

Dacey nodded and led the way to the prison. In the end however, Jonos Bracken did not impress Daenerys. Even in prison the man was full of bluster, hotly defending his actions rather than admitting guilt. Daenerys decided then and there he would be exiled or executed.

After that, she interviewed his wife and daughters, and then turned her thoughts to the future, specifically, how best to deal with the Westerlands. *It is time for politics to once more come into play*, she thought as she sat down with Merry at the former Lord Bracken's desk, taking out parchment and quill. The two of them had a lively dinner with the Wolfsworn, Bess, Cley and a few of the pages outside net to the stables where her two dragons had been bedded down for the evening. But duty had pulled them away leaving Arya, Nymeria and the pages to keep the unwary away from her dragons.

The two girls rather amusingly could fit in the large chair Jonos had used, and did so now, laughing at the experience. Though for just a moment, as Merry leaned against her side, Daenerys had to fight the urge to lean down and kiss her, not on the cheek, but on the mouth. Thankfully Merry got up from the chair before that thought fully penetrated Daenerys' head, then sat across from the young queen.

With a jerk of her head Daenerys dismissed that sudden thought and turned to the matter at hand. "If we're going to think about using politics to either tame or bring the Westerlands under our control, I think that we should start out with what kind of carrots we can use to entice them. We've already shown them the stick after all."

"We should also limit our first round of ravens to those families still strong enough to be a threat, at least on their own ground." Merry replied, bringing one finger to her lips as she thought. "I don't think I saw any banners of House Lydden or House Serret, and very few for House Crakehall. Those and the, oh.... Darn it, the castle facing the Iron Islands... something dark." Merry scowled, unhappy at not remembering the name of the house in question after so many lessons from her mother of the noble Houses of the Westerlands.

"Those will do for a start, hmmm.... I seem to remember something about Lydden and Serret being wedded? Interesting..." Daenerys frowned, pulling out a map of Westeros, one of several copies of a general map Ranma had made back in Seagard. It wasn't very detailed, but it had some of the major castles marked out on it. After a moment she began to smile. "Hmmm... I think I have an idea. It might not be very popular with a few lords, but it might be with

enough. Now, what carrots do you think we can offer..."

The two young women put their heads together over the map, talking into the wee hours of the morning as they made plans for the dissolution of the Westerlands as a united nation. And if one or the other would break off occasionally to stare at the other, there was no one there to notice these little moments.

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Tywin stared at the young man who had so thoroughly outmaneuvered him on the battlefield and finally captured him with something beyond fury, yet also more than a little fear. Using all of his formidable self-control not to show anger or fear, he nodded his head slightly. "Very well, I know when I am beaten, what are your terms for my surrender and the surrender of my house?"

"Terms?" Ranma actually laughed shaking his head in something like admiration for Tywin's pure gall. "No terms Lannister. Your House's military strength is smashed, the Westerlands as a whole don't have an army anymore, I doubt that the remaining houses could field more than 10,000 at most for the next few months, and that would only be if they stripped their seats almost entirely. After this debacle do you really think any of them will be willing to do that for you? They might have respected and feared you old lion, but enough to put their own heads on the chopping block? Especially after so many heads have been chopped off already?"

Tywin growled, his teeth gnashing together unwilling to admit that the boy had a point. His house's pockets were deep enough that given time they could field another army, but after this debacle he wasn't certain if any of his few remaining lords could best the young man in front of him on the battlefield.

"No, if I have my way and since my bannermen declared me King in the North I do have my way whenever I wish, you'll be executed soon enough for the depredations you and your army have committed upon the Riverlands. That doesn't even go into your daughter's treason against the crown and you backing said treason."

"We tend to take those things rather seriously in the North." Jon remarked, pulling off his helm as he moved to stand beside his brother throwing one arm over Ranma's shoulder.

"Greatjon!" Ranma yelled over to the taller man. "Take Lord Lannister here and place him with the other prisoners. Watch them closely, and if any try to escape, kill him. Any of them." He said turning back to stare at Tywin making certain that he got the hint there. "I'll willingly forgo the pleasure of a public execution for you if you test my patience Lannister."

Greatjon guffawed, then picked Tywin up as easily as if he was a small child and moved over to where the other prisoners. There were only twelve of them, including the other Lannisters they had captured, though Daven was still unconscious and looked to remain so. Tywin remained silent as some men of House Umber tied him up, looking around with keen eyes even now. He knew that while Ranma had bested him on the battlefield, there still might be ways for him to escape or turn the tide, and if he could, everything he learned about Ranma and his army could help later.

Watching the prisoners be placed on spare horses, Ranma was not unaware of Tywin's thoughts but he had other things on his mind. He turned slightly pulling Jon into a manly hug slapping him on the back several times before pulling away looking at him closely. "You look well, I take it taking Wayfarer's Rest wasn't that hard?"

"Not after the initial battle no." Jon said with a shrug, grinning at his brother. "We had trouble crossing the Tumblestone, but the big problem was there were more in the keep than we had anticipated. It turned out that we attacked the place while one of the supply convoys was there at with its guards. But we still won the day. Or rather night actually." Jon corrected himself smirking little, "since we attacked at night."

He went on much more seriously however, shaking his head. "But Wayfarer's Rest is even worse a defensive position than great-uncle Brynden told us. It's not close enough to the pass to the Westerlands to close it, a force there could interdict any army coming out, but it's not large enough to have many catapults stationed there, and the keep itself is **pathetic**. Some work was being done to create an outer wall, and we had the locals continued that as much as we could, but it will take months to complete, at best. With the weather turning as it is, it might take longer.

Ranma shrugged, moving over to where Fenris and Ghost were becoming reacquainted the way of wolves all over, by roughhousing like little puppies. The sight brought a smile to his face even while he turned to stare off further south. "I thought it might be. The men you left behind, are they up to stopping any stragglers from getting past them?"

"Yes." Jon replied definitively. "Remember I took mostly mountain clansmen, they're fantastic at scouting and

skirmishing even in unknown terrain, and they've had time to get to know that area very well."

"Good, and your supplies?"

"Excellent, so good in fact we've been sharing with some of the smallfolk of the area." Jon shook his head sadly. "I don't know how they did it, but I would say one out of every five families was able to hide themselves while the Lannisters marched through." He went on much more softly. "I think at least two out of every remaining four were killed however. According to what the locals passed on, the area between Mummer's Ford and Acorn Hall is especially bad. One of the mercenary groups that Tywin used to start that skirmishing around the borders took Acorn Hall and then began to simply ravage the land all around it. There were rumors of the Lord of Acorn Hall being burned alive in his keep during the battle."

"I saw some of that as we passed through, the Lannisters have a lot to answer for." Ranma said with a nod. "Given how difficult it would be to try all of the prisoners we took one at a time, Daenerys and I decided to try them by their colors unless someone comes forward with specific names, though that hasn't happened yet despite Alayaya and Domic's best efforts. They could've changed since I left to chase down Tywin, but I doubt it."

"So you're thinking of simply using their banners and colors, if one Lord and his men were seen taking part in the rapine and looting?"

"Yes it's the best we can do," Ranma said with a sigh. "We'll try to dole out justice as much as possible, but in cases like this, that's the best we're going to get. How many men did you leave behind?"

"About a hundred and sixty archers and another hundred or so armsmen from House Grell, and something like five hundred mixed Wull and Liddle men. I left Muldan, one of the Wull men, in charge with orders to patrol the area aggressively already."

Ranma nodded. "All right, we'll send about four hundred more men down to help them from here, archers predominantly. We won't need all the men we've still got here to care for the prisoners or wounded." Jon nodded, and the two of them began to reorganize the army, burning the dead of both sides despite the weather and reorganizing the army around its losses, which were minimal after this battle. They had actually lost more men wiping out the Lannister force coming up from Stone Hedge near Acorn Hall.

Throughout this Tywin continued to watch, making note of things that his agents either hadn't seen or hadn't understood the importance of. For one thing, the weapons and armor of the Northerners were all of the same quality save the heavy cavalry which was somewhat better in most cases, which was to be expected. But it was a very rare Lord indeed who could armor his infantry as well as this. *So it wasn't just the pike units that received such quality weapons. How did the Starks do this?*

Usually the armor and weapons of the warriors called up to join a Lord Paramount's forces were supplied by those Houses, and so varied widely in quality. That was not the case here. *I see tabards of several Houses here, so it must be uniform across the entire army. I've never even heard of anything like that. Even as Tywin watched small unit commanders were getting their men organized and assigning them places in the march to come. They also seem to be trained to respond and to act as units irrespective of their original allegiance. These men are not just armsmen serving in an army, they're something new, the closest example I can think of is the Unsullied, but how was such a thing achieved?*

Over the next few days, Tywin began to realize how badly he had underestimated Ranma as a general, and a Lord as well. Yet it wasn't just him, the other one, Jon Stark (who must've been Jon Snow at one point though why anyone would legitimize a bastard was beyond Tywin) was just as interesting. The two of them were consummate warriors, they practiced every evening and after watching them once Tywin concluded both were as dangerous as his own son, possibly more so. They also discussed politics and the need for their army to get some rest, and some plans for the future of the Riverlands that sounded both interesting and like they would work.

Ranma and Jon were also thinking about the next phase of the war, though they did that far enough away from the prisoners so Tywin couldn't overhear those discussions. Over the next few days they discussed some ideas with Greatjon. "Taking the Golden Tooth won't be easy." Greatjon said shaking his head. "It's supposed to be one of the toughest keeps to take. Not quite as bad as the Rock, the Bloody Gate or the Moat, but bad. I like the idea of it taking it for a lot of reasons, but I'm just not certain that even if we can raid the gold mines that it'd be worth the blood we have to pay for it."

Golden Tooth was the seat of House Lefford, which guarded the mines around the Golden Tooth which were in turn the source of much of the Lannisters wealth, owned directly by House Lannister. House Lefford was one of the most

loyal houses to House Lannister, but their land could not sustain a large population being so mountainous. So while they were an important house, the Lannisters had never allowed them to be a large one, their men were very well trained and very well outfitted, but it was the Golden Tooth itself that was the main source of their strength thanks to its strategic position.

"It's the only way to secure our flank from further incursion." Ranma said with a shrug. "We have to take it, besides..." he smirked a little. "Daenerys and I have been talking, and having the Golden Tooth in our control we'll add an exclamation to the messages we're going to be sending to various Westerlands lords in a few weeks. Besides, I'm not thinking of taking it in a conventional assault. You should know that I don't do that kind of thing, Greatjon."

"True enough!" Greatjon laughed, though he looked at the two younger men shrewdly. "But what do you have in mind?"

"A job for the Wolfsworn." Ranma replied, shrugging his shoulders. "We'll drop the old lion and the other prisoners off at Raventree Hall, reform the army there and then we'll lead a small force down to Wayfarer's Rest and from there down to the Golden Tooth. Though we might rest the army for a time first, I think we've pushed the men hard these past few months, and it's starting to show in their gear."

"We should also send a small holding force down to Harrenhal from there." Greatjon said nodding his shaggy head towards the west. "I doubt the Lannisters left a large force there, but if they get they could do some damage."

"Hopefully Smalljon's already taken care of that." Ranma's replied chuckling a little. "He and the others that went to relieve Raventree Hall were free to act how they wished, and I know Smalljon would think of that."

Jon nodded, and the discussion turned from there.

Over the next few days Tywin began to try and inveigle some of the guards to let him go, promising wealth beyond their imaginings. Most of the time they didn't even respond to him, other times they simply sneered. One of them however did report to his Lord, Greatjon. The next day as the prisoners were being lead into their single tent, the Lord of House Umber came over to stare down at Tywin. "My men say you've been trying to bribe them." He smirked, the expression visible despite his beard.

"I have." Tywin replied frankly. "And I would be willing to offer the same deal to you only more so. Join with me, and I will give you your weight in gold Lord Umber."

Greatjon stared at him for a moment then burst out laughing. "You, you think," he said between gasps of laughter "that I would betray House Stark?" Suddenly Greatjon became serious, and one huge hand reached out grasping Tywin by the throat and lifting him off his feet. "I am Lord Umber, I gave my oath, and I keep it! You think I will betray my **honor**, my **King**, and my **gods** for your shit-stained gold!? You think any of us would!?"

Tywin gasped as he felt his throat constrict under the grip of the Northerner. Then he was hurled back to join the other prisoners. "Don't try to bribe my men anymore." Greatjon growled. "You won't get anywhere."

As the angry Northern Lord marched off a man nearby who was wearing Mallister colors murmured, "Besides, even if we all turned on them, I doubt you'd get away. Not with Ranma, Jon and their wolves here. That's an army right there."

Tywin raised his tied up hands to massage his sore throat, staring at the man. But he didn't talk again, turning back to entering the prisoners tent.

That tent showed something else that Tywin had noticed, the organization of the small force that had come after him was incredible. Every man there was assigned to a tent, one tent for every four men. Moreover a different man carried the tent and their camping gear on his horse every day, while another was in charge of putting their tents up every night. That organization also showed in the way they set up camp, though Tywin wasn't quite able to understand all of what he was seeing.

One day the rain was too heavy for them to continue on, and army camped out on top of a small rise, using the trees there as cover from the rain. As they went about setting up camp many of the men commented on how the leaves of the trees had begun to fall. Autumn was truly upon the Riverlands, making more than one man wonder what was going on in the north.

On the outskirts of the camp where they could best use their direwolves senses Ranma and Jon were sharing a campfire, both the fire and the two brothers covered by a small tarp. They were laughing about the first time the two

of them had been caught stealing food from the pantries when both of them looked up and turned to stare out into the rain. They looked at one another then Jon stood up and moved out from under the tarp cupping his hands around his mouth. "Ho there, be you friend or foe?"

There was a moment of silence then a voice shouted, "Be you Lord Stark?"

Ranma stood up as well moving as others in the camp began to notice something was going on. "I am. Who are you?"

"Do we be havin'yer word that none be harmin' us?"

"So long as you come in peace, friend." Ranma replied quickly looking at Jon who shrugged his shoulders. He leaned in slightly. "Did Ghost send you the same images as me? Some smallfolk carrying food?"

Jon nodded, and the both of them watched several figures come out of the scrub brush further down the small hill. Ranma moved forward, leaving Ice behind him while he moved to meet them. One of them was an elderly woman struggling under the load of what looked like a full basket of bread, covered by her cloak which should've rather been covering her. Ranma quickly took the basket from her arms, pulling off the cloaking quickly and throwing it over the woman. "We appreciate the food good mother, but we'd appreciate your not with getting sick on us even more." He quipped, winking at them all. "Come friends we have tents enough for you all to at least get warm and dry for the day."

The smallfolk looked at him in shock then in further shock when more men came out from the camp led by Jon. They quickly divested the smallfolk of their food and hurrying them under tarps here and there where fires were already burning. "Who speaks for you?" Ranma asked as he hurried the old lady up the hill, almost carrying her up but not quite.

The old lady looked to an equally elderly man, who looked as if he had been hewn out of rock at some point he was simply that solid, reminding Ranma strongly of Grimaldi from Harroway. The man nodded in turn, and joined Ranma and Jon underneath their tarp. Ranma stared at the man thoughtfully rubbing at his chin noting that he'd have to shave soon. "Exactly what did that food cost you and your followers, good man?"

"Rufus Smallcreek my Lord. Ah'm a farmer d'wn by house Keath and house Vance land. We been dealing wit' lots o' runners lately, but most of them be farmer folk anyway and more 'en willing to work for their meals. We done well s'ppose leastwise to da families that tried ta stay or weren't quick 'nough to run from the Lannisters." When he said the word 'Lannister' it came off with as much vitriol as a person could put into the words mother-fucking-bastard.

"I see." Ranma said with a nod before he gestured over to the prisoners. "As you can see, we've captured the old lion and some of his little cubs. They will stand trial for what they've done. I can't right all the wrongs that have occurred in this war, but I can make certain of that."

The man stared at him with all the weight of a man who had seen many promises from lords broken as politics or their own whims dictated. Yet when he stared into Ranma's blue eyes, all he saw was bleak determination and honesty staring back at him. Eventually he nodded. "If yer do that my Lord, then I'll truly un'erstand why da septons've begun to say we sh'ld aid ye as we may."

That made both young men sit up and take notice, though after a moment Ranma smiled. "That septon wouldn't be called Father Sparrow would it?"

"No my Lord," the man said looking quizzical replied, shaking his head. "I've heard tell of da one you speak of, but our village 'as a septon. He went off to some kind o' meetin' a week or so ago. When he come back he beg'n to tell us of da evils of the two Baratheon brothers, how one of 'em has given himself to a heathen religion, and the other's a man-lover. He said we sh'ld be aiding ye and yer queen as true champions of the Seven."

The man shrugged uncomfortably. "I cen't say that w're 'appy 'bout it, but given da choices a northern wolf who seems ta be keeping his army under control and doing something for da smallfolk rather than either ignoring us or livin' off our lands seems ta be the best bet."

"How bad is it really?" Jon asked softly. "I mean we've only seen portions of the lands where the Lannister army passed over. How bad is it elsewhere?"

The man shrugged. "Bad milord, Riverrun's overflowing wit' runnersand a few of da villages down by us, like Stony Sept, are too. Most of 'emarewillin' to work, but housings tough and foods scarce." He scowled a little as he stared

down at the bread that one of the men had come to give Jon and Ranma.

Ranma stared at him then down at the bread before breaking it in three pieces waving away the rest the man was going to give him before passing one piece to Jon and the other across to Rufus. "You'll stay with us for the night." He ordered. "Tomorrow we'll load you down with a few deer or something to take with you on recompense.

"And when you get back home, tell your fellow villagers and the septon to pass it on that the Riverlands will have what aid they need to prepare for winter. But there won't be any handouts, so long as people are willing to work together they will be rewarded for it. But we really don't have the resources available to simply feed everyone unless they're willing to work for it."

"So's business as usual my lord." Rufus said with a shrug before biting into his portion of the loaf. The next day Rufus and his fellow smallfolk were astonished to find several dead deer, their throats torn out but otherwise undamaged, piled neatly near the camp. As Ranma and his men set off, they gleefully went to work on butchering them, preparing them for travel.

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That was not the only surprise visit Ranma and his force met with as they marched to Raventree Hall. Two days after leaving behind the smallfolk delegation, Ranma and Jon was once more warned by their direwolves that there was another group nearby. Ranma halted his march, turning to stare out into the woodlands around them south and west, while Jon did the same. "Are we going to have trouble friends?"

Out in the woods, Beric Dondarrion jolted from where he was hiding with several of his fellows. They all looked at one another and he whispered "how did he know we were here?"

"RRRRRRR..." A growl from behind them made him and his men turn, and Beric gulped staring at the gigantic white-furred direwolf that had somehow snuck through the woods upon them. Another joined him quickly, looming even larger than the first.

One of his men however was one of the Stark men and he looked at the two of them in surprise. "That really is Ranma and Jon out there." He said. "Those are their direwolves, I recognize them." He laughed sharply shaking his head. "Of course I doubt there are that many direwolves this side of the Wall in any event." He held up his head well away from his mace, then moved forward. "Take us to your masters."

Moments later the full complement of the Brothers Without Borders were in front of Ranma and Jon while the army paused for a moment, some of the men breaking out lunch for themselves. Ranma stared at the northern men, especially their leader. "Jaryd Waterman?"

"My Lord." Jaryd said bowing his head, while the four northern men with him all bowed as well. One of them, a man named Orlus who had been wickered with a flail, had died in one of the skirmishes they had fought in the past few months. "I'm humbled to see you remember me."

Ranma moved forward, clasping the other man's arm firmly, stopping him mid-bow. "Of course I remember you! I'm happy to see you survived the Lannister betrayal. Jon told me the smallfolk passed on rumors that you and the others were still doing what you could against the Westerlanders, thank you for that." He turned to the others, narrowing his eyes as he tried to bring their names to mind. "Beric Dondarrion and Eric Dayne, or Eldric, right?"

"It's Edric, Lord Stark." The young boy answered firmly, returning Ranma's handshake despite feeling more than a little awe at the man. He had seen Ranma tear apart Gregor Clegane firsthand, and knew how strong he was, and some of the tales of his campaign here in the Riverlands had already spread among the smallfolk.

"You call it a betrayal Lord Stark, and it was indeed, a most foul trap that would have succeeded in claiming us all if not for Thoros of Myr's sacrifice." Beric said, shaking his head while he watched some of the northerners hand out strips of jerky and hard tack to his men. He described the battle against the Bloody Mummies covering Lorch's betrayal, then Thoros's power and his final stand, which allowed Beric and many of his men to escape. "It was the single most magnificent thing I had ever seen. Since then we have been doing what we can to aid the smallfolk and strike at the Westerlanders, in particular any of the forces that were involved in that battle."

Ranma and Jon had listened intently to the tale, exchanging glances occasionally when Beric described the flaming sword that Thoros had used. It made them both uneasy, since he apparently followed the same god that the Red Witch did, but they couldn't fault his heroism. After a moment, Ranma nodded. "That's quite a tale Beric. So, what will you do now? Will you join with us, or turn to hunting down deserters now that the Westerlands army has been



broken?"

Beric exchanged a glance with his squire and Davit Wendwater. It was obvious that the five remaining Northerners would opt to stay with their fellows, but both of them hoped to learn what was going on elsewhere before making a decision. He said so aloud than touched his squires shoulder lightly. "And I would also like to send a message to Starfall somehow. My betrothed and this ones aunt should hear we are alive as soon as we can manage to tell it."

"I'm afraid the odds of a messenger surviving the trip to Starfall from here is remote, and I've no idea if any castle in the Riverlands would have a raven trained to take messages to Starfall, but we can see." Ranma nodded, standing up and whistling sharply then raising an arm into the air. When the unit commanders were looking at him he made another motion, circling his hand in the air and pointing forward. "For now, let's get a move on."

That evening they stopped twelve leagues further toward Raventree Hall, and Beric and his men were almost falling out of the saddle in weariness. Eddric was a little better, being a young man of fourteen he recovered far more quickly. Ranma had been watching the young boy during the march, remembering his father's tales of Arthur Dayne, the Sword of Morning. While the rest of the army was making camp, he touched the boy on his shoulder, motioning toward a small clear area to one side. "Beric said you had seen action, and while I don't know him well, I've no doubt he has been training you as he should. Would you like some training from me as well?"

Eddric nodded eagerly, his eyes wide and Ranma nodded, grabbing up a fallen branch and holding it like a sword. "Come at me then." When Eddric looked at him askance, Ranma laughed. "Trust me Eddric, I'm at no disadvantage. There's a little trick I know, I might be able to teach it to you eventually."

Rather than putting him at his ease that made Eddric even more wary of attacking. He circled Ranma for a moment, his sword held in both hands slightly at an angle, ready to block or strike with equal speed. Ranma nodded at that, but still made a slight motion with the hand holding the branch. "Come on lad, we don't have all evening. Night comes quickly these days."

Spurred on Eddric stepped forward, swinging his longsword quickly, while Beric and a few of the others paused in their own work to ready their tents to watch. Ranma blocked the blow then blocked a kick that would have taken him in the knee with his own leg, smiling as Eddric moved in, trying to get in close and using his feet and hands as well as the sword. It wasn't the most 'noble' style but it was one that had been taught in battle, and it worked well enough for the youth.

But Ranma simply blocked or redirected every blow and punch, then began to shout out corrections. "Keep your weight centered at all times, don't overextend like that, if I wanted I could have gutted you just then. Protect your face and neck, not just your body, keep your sword up slightly more, good! We'll need to work on your footwork, you need to be faster at changing your position and angle of attack. Try to make each blow flow one into the other and aim for different parts of the body."

"Don't be so quick to lunge like that, no matter if you think you see an opening!" With that, Ranma dodged to one side, his branch flicking up and redirecting Eddric's sword into the ground then flashing to stop within a finger's width from his nose. "Like so. Control is what you need, the sword is an extension of the body, not just a weight, we'll need to work on that somewhat too, you were doing well, but your endurance needs a lot of work."

He stepped back, smiling and motioning the boy to attack again. Eddric did so, but it was obvious now that he was feeling the effect of the exercise. Ranma suddenly went on the attack, still calling out corrections, but a moment later Eddric found himself on his rear, his sword flashing up into the sunlight for a moment. Without even looking, Ranma reached out and caught it by the hilt, his arm not moving an inch when he caught it. "Not bad lad, not bad at all. We have a lot of work to do, but you're as good as could be expected at this point. Well done!"

Eddric looked up at him, flushing slightly at the praise and the exhaustion gripping him before Ranma reached down hauling him to his feet. "Now, I have some exercises I'd like you to do, then..."

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"I must say that I had not anticipated you so easily deciding to throw over Viserys as you did, Doran." Said Magister Illyrio, taking one of the dainties that the other man's servant had offered to them, munching contentedly. Viserys had decided to leave Illyrio behind as the fleet set out since in an actual war Illyrio would have nothing to contribute and he had been dealing with a fever at the time.

"I have ruled Dorne for a very long time." Doran replied, smiling thinly. "I have become an incredibly good judge of character if I say so myself, and certain aspect of Viserys' personality make me believe that he would not be the best

king for Westeros in the future. Besides, what you are offering to add to our cause is too good to ignore. Though I have to wonder at the ease with which you yourself are planning to turn on Viserys."

"I have had months to get to know Viserys, and you are absolutely correct, as King he would be a nightmare, Maegor the Cruel and his mad father all rolled into one. I had feared that from stories I'd heard of him before meeting him in person, but by the time I knew my fears to be justified, I had already backed him against Daenerys too often for her to trust me."

"Yes...Daenerys... What are your plans to deal with her?" Doran continued to smile, but his eyes were sharp as he looked at the other man. "She is making quite a name for herself."

The prince's spies had passed on some news from further north, in particular the fact that Rannar and Daenerys were allied and that the Starks had dealt the Lannisters a severe blow. The news that the Westerlands army had been utterly annihilated hadn't reached him yet, nor had the fact that the dragons had been used to aid that destruction. Nor, strangely enough, had the news that Rannar and Daenerys were married spread very far. Most of the rumors about the two of them concentrated on their deeds, and were very positive, which, when they got back to Illyrio, made him curse for lost opportunities. The marriage aspect would begin to spread from their time in Harroway, but that was weeks in the future.

Illyrio was also dismayed to learn that several of the Riverlands Houses that had been informing on events there to him to pass, ostensibly to pass on to Viserys, though that was impossible with him at sea, had stopped. That indicated that they had decided to throw their lot in with Daenerys rather than her brother, and of course Illyrio himself.

"I have decided to send a message to the Houses that are still passing on information to me to do something about her at the nearest opportunity. That is the best I can do at this far removed. But once Daenerys is dead, her dragons will go out of control, and the Stark/Tully army will face the brunt of their fury. I believe that is a case of two birds slain with one stone, yes?"

"Possibly if it succeeds." Doran said coldly. "And if it does not? If she, Viserys and this Aegon that you have suddenly pulled out from whole cloth meet in battle? What then?"

"I have had a message from Grif, as he calls himself. He says that the boy has proven himself a true dragon, and since I sent him one of the **four** eggs I found, there is only one way for him to have done that." Illyrio said smiling serenely. "If that is the case, then it will be two dragons against two, and judging by how huge the black one was before the fleet left, we'll have the advantage there. And the Iron Bank's aid allowed us to finally bring in a military force whose quality none here in Westeros can match. With them, and the troops you committed to fight under Viserys' banner, they will be able to win the throne for the renewed Blackfyre line, after which, Viserys can be... dealt with."

"Only if Aegon and Viserys can work together until then, or if Viserys remains alive until this 'aid' can arrive." Doran replied still coolly. "I'm hopeful for both, but if they cannot work together or Aegon faces his aunt alone, this may end up at in a greater disaster for Dorne than backing Viserys alone. And you, you may well face the Iron Throne's wrath as well, if they do not get the return you promised them on their investment."

"Why do you think I'm staying right here." Illyrio said laughing, though there was no humor in the noise. "The game is of thrones might be rewarding, but it is one best played at thrice removed less you pay for playing in blood."

OOOOOO

The fleet was about 40 strong. There were 25 transport ships, huge caravels that were built along the same lines as the massive grain transports that were used to feed Lys and Tyrosh. Each of these ships carried a little under five hundred men, along with horses and fodder for both. The others were war galleys, patrolling around their larger charges.

On the lead war galley stood a young man with shockingly blue hair. He wore full plate mail, and was working a whetstone over his sword as he stared out into the distance. To one side an older man with red hair fading to white stood, staring in the same direction, a thin, grim smile on his weathered face. "Westeros, at last!"

The younger man nodded, reaching down to rub the head of a dragon, whose scales were almost crimson in places. If someone had been in position to compare them, this dragon would have fallen somewhere below the size of Sunfyre, the smallest of Daenerys' two, and far smaller than Balerion. The dragon was currently tied down with heavy chains to the deck, but seemed peaceful enough, its stomach distended from a large meal.

Behind the dragon stood other men, none of them wearing the same armor but all wearing a tabard showing several golden skulls held up on a spear. All of them were also looking in the direction the young man was, some eagerly, some apprehensively, while the fleet continued on its way toward Blackwater Bay and Westeros.

Elsewhere on the same ocean, a lone longship sailed in somewhat the same direction, making its own, eerily silent way home.

OOOOOO

Viserys stared at the map of Dragonstone, nearly vibrating with fury. Nearby Arianne stood, looking at him worryingly while Nymeria and Elia lounged on cushions beside her, yet they too were watching Viserys closely. Though they would not voice it aloud both had come to the conclusion that the man was somewhat insane.

Since that initial disaster, he and his fleet had not made any headway in taking Dragonstone. Even with the threat of Balerion forcing the scorpions to remain aiming up toward the sky, the defenders were more than numerous enough to beat back any assault. *Worse the very land of the island is against us.* The other two assaults he had ordered had fared no better than the first. The army had lost another eight hundred men, and it would have been much worse if the lord commanders hadn't decided to pull out when the plans were obviously not working rather than continuing to throw good gold after bad.

The fleet had also lost another four ships. Luckily all four had been originally commandeered from Driftmark, but that was scant comfort. Viserys could feel time closing in on them counting down to when the pirate fleet and the Royal navy would be on them, while Dragonstone, his family's ancestral home, remained stubbornly just out of reach. Even the news that Lord Gargalen had been seen returning with his assault fleet could do nothing for his black mood.

"My King we've tried our best, but the natural defenses of Dragonstone work just as badly against attackers now as they ever did in your family's time." said Arianne soothingly. "We have to leave here quickly, it won't be long before the pirate fleet at least arrives. We can't afford to be pinned here by them at sea, where every advantage would be theirs."

"No dammit, I want Dragonstone! If I have to pile bodies against the side of its walls, I'll do it!" Viserys bellowed, sounding like a awful mix of a petulant child and a bloodthirsty sadist. Behind Arianne, the two Sands Snakes shared a surreptitious glance, both of them shivering a little.

Arianne however replied calmly, having long since been used become used to her husband's bloodthirstiness. "My Lord, we know that the assault on Duskendale worked, we have hurt the Baratheons and more importantly the Royal Navy in a way that it will take years for them to recover from,. While holding Driftmark and Dragonstone against them would be nice, it isn't necessary. Dragonstone alone is a symbol, an important one true, but **only** a symbol. We should retreat and assault them elsewhere, on Massey's Hook perhaps, or somewhere on Crab Claw Point. The Houses there were loyal to your family, and were among the last to submit to Robert during the war."

Of course those families were among the poorest of the Crownlands, and they hadn't supplied the Royal Army with many men even then, but it would give them a hold on the mainland, and some of those castles would make excellent defensive positions for them in the future. Driftmark alone could not supply the fleet or the army for very much longer despite House Velaryon's willingness to do so.

"And my Lord, we can return to take Dragonstone when Balerion is large enough and strong enough to carry you. A single Dragon Rider could take Dragonstone, where an entire army could not. What could be more symbolic than you, Viserys the Bold, returning to take House Targaryen's ancestral home single-handedly when your army had failed you?"

Her calm, soothing and somewhat ingratiating tone worked causing Viserys to smile slightly. Just then a knock on the door interrupted them. The captain of the galley and stuck his head inside. "Your highness, the attackers from Duskendale have arrived."

"We knew that already," said Viserys dismissively glaring at the man. "Why have you specifically disturbed me now?"

The man gulped in fear at Viserys' silky, yet dangerous tone. He could all too easily remember Viserys ordering Balerion to eat Ulwyck Uller with a similar tone of voice. That was not a sight any man was likely to forget anytime soon. "M-my Lord, they say they come with a prisoner who wishes to speak to you. The Usurper's Master of Coin, Littlefinger."

Viserys' eyes widened in shock, then he and Arianne exchanged a glance wondering what was going on in King's

Landing that one of the small council would have been in Duskenale. *Had Stannis already won and sent Petyr there for some reason, only for him to be captured? If so, we might be seeing the Royal fleet within a few days rather than another week, which meant Arianne's point about running out of time is even more pointed than normal.* "Bring them aboard." he ordered.

Petyr Baelish was soon led in, apparently no worse the wear for his time as a prisoner. He came in with Lord Gargalen, who bowed his head grandly to his king. "Your highness, the attack was a complete success! We fired dozens of ships as they sat empty at anchor in the port, and took two merchant vessels as well, seizing their goods for the crown. However afterwards we came upon a single vessel making its way slowly out of Blackwater Bay. We decided to close with it then found Petyr Baelish aboard. He had several men with him sworn to his service, and after making certain that none of the people inside it had the plague, we took them aboard as prisoners. He has quite a tale to tell my lord."

"I'm certain he does." Viserys said coldly. "But why should I listen to one who willingly served the Usurper?"

"I willingly served Robert Baratheon because he was the only game in town Your Majesty," Petyr said bowing his head. "My contacts in Essos are nonexistent, so I could not put myself in to your service even if I wished to. And at the time, I would not have. I am ambitious my Lord, and it is that ambition and a head for numbers that allowed me to become Master of Coin."

"Bluntly spoken." Viserys said with a nod, though his eyes remained hard on the older man's face. "So why have you then fled the side of the Lannisters?"

"Because they are done as a power." Petyr replied, shrugging his shoulders. "As Master of Coin, I have, shall we say, numerous contacts in practically every corner of Westeros. The Lannisters and the Starks have been fighting in the Riverlands for the past few months, and the Lannisters have been beaten, badly. I don't know any of the details, but the Westerlands army is broken, and I believe that Tywin himself has been captured, and with him out of the way the Lannisters lack a leader that can strike fear in their opponents."

Petyr had gotten more information about what had been going on in the Riverlands when he met up with his ship near Rosby. He had been appalled by it, and also fearful to hear of the dragons being used in such a manner. That had made up his mind to seek out Viserys, wishing to ally himself with a force that could call on a similar weapon. The way Stark had outmaneuvered the Lannisters however was surprising, even if Petyr didn't understand how it had been accomplished.

Seeing the shock on Viserys' face, along with a certain amount of glee at the Lannisters, the great betrayers, getting what they deserved, Petyr went on. "As you probably know the Baratheon brothers are busy fighting one another, and neither has proven to be much of a leader in the past. One lacks wartime experience and any kind of legitimate claim on the throne, the other would be a disaster as king for even more reasons. Even more so, I would prefer to align myself with a family that has a proven track record of being able to rule Westeros rather than one who seemingly has only had the ability to take them ruin it."

"That sounds pleasant." Viserys said slowly, still getting over his shock at his sister and the Starks apparently capturing the man who, just as much as Robert, he blamed for his family's fall from power. *After I kill her for betraying me I'll have to make certain at least that at least that much of her deeds is remembered fondly.*

Even so his joy at that news didn't stop Viserys from thinking. "But what can you actually give me? While that news is new to me, I already have access to an information network, or will once we move on to the mainland. I have no need of a few more swordsmen, and I certainly wouldn't be willing to trust you with any position near my own coin." Viserys smirked before going on in a scathing tone. "I know all about the debt that you helped create for the Iron Throne. In fact, I could make some points for myself with the Iron Bank by handing them to you, or perhaps just your head on a silver platter."

"Perhaps, but I would say I can aid you above and beyond my network of contacts, and I am worth far more than any aid the Iron Bank would be willing to give you in return for my head." Petyr had spent years playing politics at the highest level, no death threat was going to faze him. "I have supporters in the Vale, lords which can add their forces to your own, adding at least another 7000 swords. And if aid in the future does not suffice, right now I can give you Dragonstone." Petyr said, smiling thinly.

OOOOOO

That evening a pigeon alighted on a small murder whole in the outer walls of Dragonstone. There an armsmen and a servant looked at one another, pulling back from their embrace. They noticed the small message and small vial the

pigeon carried and gulped nervously. But after a moment the woman got out of bed, unmindful of her nakedness, and moved toward the bird.

OOOOOOO

Throughout human history far more castles have fallen through treachery than through brute force or even starvation via sieges. So it was with Dragonstone. The servants that were Petyr's agents Dragonstone poisoned the food of the garrison one morning. Much like the poison that had been used on the Starks to get them away from Bran so that the hired footpad sent after him could finish the job, it did not hit its victims right away.

This allowed the servant to poison the entire garrison almost, minus the commander of the garrison, the lady of the House, her daughter and their personal guard, a band of twenty men. Those men were the only ones not puking their guts out when the fleet raced into the port, disgorging the Army

They tried desperately to get their fellows up on the walls to fight the attackers, but none of the men poisoned could even stand without dealing with dizzy spells that quickly ended in vomiting, The twenty men acquitted themselves magnificently killing four times their number in the battle, yet by midday the Castle was in the hands of the Targaryens once more. Even better in some ways Viserys had also captured both Selyse, Stannis' wife, and Shireen, his daughter.

Viserys smiled faintly as he sat in the seat signifying Dragonstone, examining the Painted Table, running his hands over it fondly. He had fond memories of this place, and this room in particular. His eyes narrowed however as he looked at the two women who had just been ushered in.

It was obvious that the younger one had suffered from Greyscale at some point, her pockmarked features showed that clearly. Her features were plain underneath even that, but her eyes and expression looked pleasant enough. Compared to Arianne she was nothing but dirt plain, but that could be said for most women. Selyse on the other hand looked like she had been fed sour lemons her entire life and her face was like that of a hatchet, ugly and unfeeling.

She spat defiance at him even though she was being held by some of the Dorne armsmen. "The Azor Ahai will claim you, you bastard of a misbegotten dynasty! Westeros needs none of you any longer, the future is in the flames of the one true god, not that of dragons!"

"Really?" Viserys said smiling unpleasantly as he stood abruptly, moving past the woman gesturing the woman and her guards to follow, while Shireen and her guards remained. He trooped his way up to the top of the Stone Drum, smiling as he heard the booms that had marked his childhood while here. Eventually they came out onto the top of the keep and he gestured the woman's guards to release her. Since the woman's hands were bound in back of her she was no threat.

He dragged her forward until they stood on the edge of the roof, where he let go of her to point down at the men who were even now removing the dead bodies of the defenders. Most of them had surrendered without putting up a fight, but his army had days of anger and quite a lot of their own men to avenge so Viserys couldn't have stopped the slaughter even if he wanted to.

And he didn't want to, those men had raised their swords against the true King of Westeros, they deserved whatever they received. "As you can see, I don't think your 'true god' has done much to defend you yet. You stood up my army for a week or so, that's true, but what does that matter in the end?"

"It is your victory here that does not matter." Selyse growled back, still defiant even as she stood by the side of the parapet, glaring coldly at the men, who had been too weak to defend her and her daughter, her eyes gleaming with the madness of the fanatic. "Azor Ahai, the fist of R'hllor will come, and he will kill you all! He is the future, the only future that matters, when the one true god's touch is felt from one end of Westeros to the other and we all stand against the Great Other!"

Viserys laughed coldly. "So you would overthrow the Faith of the Seven for R'hllor? Well that is your business, I've never been a deep believer of that crap anyway. But the future, the future is not in your 'true god', or your husband. No, I believe the future is with my house, returned in triumph and with Balerion, the symbol of our power! Perhaps a closer inspection would convince you of that too!"

Without any warning he turned, grabbing her shoulder once more and flinging her off the balcony. Leaning over he shouted a Valyrian command at Balerion, who he had ridden from the ship to land below. "Catch and eat!"

Balerion looked up roaring and flapping into the air for a moment, catching the screaming woman as she fell down

towards him. Her screaming ended abruptly when Balerion's jaws clamped around her body, biting it in two. He gulped down her legs in one bite before ripping at her upper body, tearing it into smaller chunks while he circled around the towers of Dragonstone, dripping blood and viscera as he went.

There were groans of disgust and fear from the men nearby, and they all hurried about their business moving away from the flying dragon as best they while Viserys made his way back down into the Stone Drum. Soon he was back in the map room, where he found his wife, the Two Sand Snakes and Petyr, who had joined the trio of women during their inspection of the castle.

Viserys motioned the man closer, ignoring Shireen's horrified stare, or the strangely pale faces of the trio of Dornish women. Evidently they had heard or seen Selyse's demise, but that was all to the good in Viserys' mind. Better they should know their fate if they worked against him in the future.

When Petyr stood near Viserys chair he spoke. "With no love lost between her and Stannis, the Florent woman was no use to me." Viserys said, once more staring at the map of Westeros lovingly. His, all his by right, and soon by strength of arms. "The daughter, are you certain that Stannis is fond of her?"

"Somewhat, as much as such a man is fond of anyone." Petyr said, hiding his internal thoughts with the ease of a lifetime of training. *Have I simply traded one sadist for another?*

Viserys nodded. "Good, we'll transfer her to one of the ships immediately. I'll leave a strong force here to hold Dragonstone, as well as several dozen of our Navy ships, they'll try to launch a surprise assault on whatever force is sent to recapture Dragonstone. But the main transport ships, they and a small escort will leave in a few days. I believe however that you had suggestions on where else we could go?"

Viserys suddenly chuckled, like a little boy with a new toy he wanted to show off gesturing at the giant painted map all around him. "Where exactly would you advise that we go?"

OOOOOO

The day after Beric and his followers join the northerners Daven finally woke up from having been knocked senseless during the battle. "Ughh...What hit me?"

"That'd be my fist." said a gruff voice nearby.

Daven tried to raise one of his hands up to massage his face, only to hear faint clinking noises, and then felt both hands come up rather than one. Groggily opening his eyes Daven looked around then up at where Greatjon was riding a horse next to the prisoners on their own horses, though the prisoners were strapped to their saddles.

At the older man's grim smile Daven's memory of the battle came back to him and he shook his head with her a low moan, closing his eyes as pain flared in his head again. After a moment he looked up again, shaking his head very slightly so as not to dislodge anything permanent. "Next time use a hammer, it would be less painful!" He said tartly, but with a hint of his normal humor.

Greatjon guffawed, and several others nearby did as well with Rama and Jon coming up on the prisoners other side. "You've been out for a few days but having taken a giant's fist to the head that's understandable." Greatjon smirked unrepentantly, and Rama rolled his eyes before staring back at Daven. "Your father has been awake for some time, and gave us your name. I'll warn you the same way I did the others. You are alive right now at my sufferance, do not try to escape and he won't be killed until you can stand trial for your deeds."

"For 'my deeds'?" Daven asked sarcastically. "What exactly does that mean?"

"So long as you didn't take part in the rape and murder of any smallfolk here in the Riverlands you'll be allowed to live." Rama said bluntly, coldly staring into Daven's eyes. The slightly older man looked away after a moment and Rama continued. "I won't fault you or your father or the other Lannisters for your loyalty to Tywin, though I will say it has cost your family greatly. Whatever all else happens, the Lannister's time as Lord Paramount of the Westerlands is done."

Daven wasn't the only Lannister to wince at that, but it was his father who replied. "You say that as if you've won boy, you might have beaten us, yes, but that's not the same thing as beating our family! The Lannisters have deep pockets, we can raise an army three times the one you fought here quicker than you think, so long as Casterly Keep is ours we remain the strongest lords in the Westerlands, and no army has ever taken the Rock!"

Rama and Jon exchanged amused glance and Jon spoke up first. "Our army's done quite a few things that no one

else has ever done before, and the Wolfsworn tend to do such things at least once every week." "Yes your family might have deep pockets, fat lot of good it would do them. What kind of army could you raise with it? An army of smallfolk levies, or armies of mercenaries from Essos? Please, you'd have to raise a truly monstrous army to be any real threat against ours."

"The Westerlands will be able to eventually make up the numbers they've lost if all your remaining lords work together to do it, but that would be months in the future and if your brother doesn't capitulate, I'll be sending raiding forces into the Westerlands to burn every keep they can find." Ranma said looking over at Tywin. "Of which I have no doubt there are several, considering how we just smashed the greater majority of the Westerlands ready military strength."

Ranma went on before any of the Lannisters could reply his eyes narrowing dangerously and if in not at all humorous smirk on his face. "As for The Rock, I wouldn't be trying to take it Stafford, I would try to raze it to the ground. I have no doubt your spies told you what happened to the Twins, your keep would actually be easier to destroy in some ways."

All of the Lannisters shivered at that, falling silent for a moment before Daven spoke up again. "What will our fate be if we are acquitted of any wrongdoing outside of battle?"

"I'll probably keep a few of you as prisoners to Kevan Lannister's good conduct." Ranma said with a shrug. "His sons for example." He rolled his eyes at the youngest Lannister there, who was glaring at him hatefully. "They might not be the brightest, but I assume he cares for them anyway. As for you others, I'll either keep you as well or send you up to take the black or join Tyrion Brightwall and his knightly order."

"Tyrion **Brightwall**?" Daven said, and it was not his only voice raised in surprise.

"Oh yes," Ranma laughed coldly, staring at Tywin, whose face was actually showing a real emotion now, that of astonishment. "You know your son was in the North when your daughter tried to move against my father and began this war? Yet since we captured you, you haven't asked us one question about him. I'd heard that you and Tyrion didn't have the best of relationships, and that he didn't seem to care one whit about you or most of your family, but even so."

Under Tywin's fulminating stare Ranma laughed. "We offered Tyrion a choice, immediate imprisonment until this war was over, to take the Black, or to be named Lord Commander of a new knightly order we commissioned, whose job will be to defend the Wall. He'd been doing excellent work up there on renovating and rebuilding the siege engines on the Wall and even had developed some method of communication to pass signals down its length from one end to the other, so we owed him that choice."

Jon nodded agreement, though he hadn't been part of that decision. His own thoughts turned to what could be happening up north like Ranma's had done several times since they left the Neck, while Tywin simply glared back at Ranma.

"Tyrion decided to take up our offer, and with that offer take up a new name." Ranma restrained himself from commenting on the fact that it was that decision that might allow Tyrion to become the sole main-line Lannister alive after this war was over. He was not a cruel man, though that thought came closer to the surface than it would normally have.

Talking to the smallfolk about the depredations they had been forced to endure since Tywin had led his army into the Riverlands had hardened his opinion of the man. He wasn't a monster by any means, he didn't enjoy raping or looting or pillaging, he just didn't care if those things happened while he was dealing with other problems. He was cold and unfeeling, uncaring of anyone besides his own family, a deadly combination to anyone who crossed him as had been proven time and time again since he had taken over from his father.

"So the dwarf shows he really doesn't have any honor." said Stafford laughing coldly. "The Wall is too good for him."

"So you'd choose death instead of the Black?" Jon asked sarcastically. "We said he was head of the knightly order, he'll hold land in the Gift and the New Gift after the war to come. If he survives it."

"What are you talking about? The King Beyond the Wall isn't that deadly a threat since you northerners reinforced the Wall. What other war are you talking about?" Daven said looking at the northern men, while Tywin stared off into the distance his face cold and grim unwilling to be drawn further on the subject of his son or their lack of a relationship, which apparently had driven him from the family entirely.

Ranma and Jon looked at one another then shook their heads in unison before Ranma replied. "You wouldn't believe

us if we told you."

OOOOOO

While Ranma and Jon were making their way to Raventree Hall, the two Baratheon brothers and their armies were at last facing one another further south. The rains had been especially bad, slowing Stannis' army on its march somewhat, though this had simply allowed Melisandre to catch up to them, and now the two armies were facing one another across relatively open ground.

Renly had brought over two-thirds of his army together to face his brother, outnumbering Stannis' army by a large margin but no crushing one considering Stannis had brought several Stormlands lords under his sway, and Renly's need to retain forces around the city. The numbers were around 42,000 to 16,000 or so according to some of the scouts. This large a disparity in their numbers gave Renly and most of his allied lords a sense of superiority, though Randyll was quick to point out that Stannis was a cagy and dangerous foe regardless of the size of his army.

Renly had ordered a small pavilion set up well out of bow range from his own army towards the direction Stannis was coming from. Now he made his way forward along with Mace Tyrell, Randyll Tarly, Lord Fell and Lord Staedmon to the pavilion guarded by Loras and Ser Guyard Morrigen, the Lord Commander and the green of his Rainbow Guard.

Across from them Stannis made his own way forward under a flag of parlay. He was accompanied by Lord Errol, Lord Buckler, Justin Massey, Davos Seaworth, Melisandre and two of the Flame Guard who took up station across from their far more colorful fellows. The two Flame Guards openly sneered at the Rainbow Guard and their colored armor, while Loras and Guyard stared askance at the mark of the flaming heart on their shoulders, not recognizing it offhand.

Renly sat in his chair leaning back as if at ease, one leg on the table for a moment. He gestured his brother into a seat opposite him, then stared at the Lords with his brother. "Interesting brother, I recognize the colors of your commanders here, but not the men save Lord Buckler. I'd heard rumors how Lady Errol had died, in strangely unusual circumstances. How... convenient for you. And Lord Buckler. Tell me, did I ever do anything to anger you my Lord? Why have you risen in rebellion against your lawful Lord Paramount?"

Both Lords stiffened in anger though Stannis answered before either could. "These are men who need to be spoken as such by their lord, brother. If you were so wishful to act like a craven yet still retain some measure of dignity you should have retreated to the Stormlands instead of the Reach. You should have spoken to these Lords face to face rather than by raven as if they were so many minor nobles that you could simply call up upon command."

"You would know all about that wouldn't you brother, treating other people as lesser than you!" Renly replied sharply. "You've done that your entire life to everyone! Always thinking yourself so clever, so smart and so righteous, looking down your nose at everyone who isn't as stern or as cold as you. Tell me, did that extend to your wife as well? Did she find you as frigid in bed as you are in the rest of your dealings with other people?"

"Better to be too stern than too vainglorious. What have you accomplished in the last six months with this majestic army Renly? Nothing! Indeed what have you done your entire life Renly? What did you do as Master of Law? Nothing! And when it came to it, instead of supporting the Hand against the treason of the Lannisters you fled like a coward! Even now with a massive army behind you, you haven't accomplished anything! If you had marched faster you could have gotten here before the Lannisters were reinforced. If you had an ounce of courage, you could have taken the city by storm, and the plague infesting it would never have happened."

"And what have you accomplished in that same time? Despite your aspirations, you have only managed to convince a handful of Houses to follow you. Where does most of your manpower come from? The dregs of the fleet, foreign pirates and other foreign influences. And yes, I served as Master of Law, on a corrupt council where I could get nothing done, even after Eddard became Hand. What would you know of ruling, when you were given Dragonstone, a island as barren as your marriage?"

Stannis glared at him, while Mace and the Stormlands lords with him smirked a little. But Ser Seaworth spoke up before Stannis could again, standing forward and gesturing to both Baratheons with his hands, palms open in token of peace. "My lords, this is a peace parlay! I entreat you both to remember the blood you share and speak with such in mind."

"And who are you to speak to us so?" said Mace angrily from where he stood behind Renly's chair. "Some jumped up little man who was raised to be a knight because of a single act of courage?" Mace had always resented the Onion Knight, thinking that his act of running the blockade of his siege on Storm's End had allowed Stannis to survive until the Northern army arrived with news of what had happened in King's Landing.



"Of course you would know nothing of that!" Stannis growled at him in defense of his man. "Neither courage nor intelligence is something anyone has ever mentioned in conjunction with you Lord Tyrell. But Ser Seaworth is correct," he said pulling up a chair abruptly and sitting down across from his brother. "We are here to parlay. Given the fact that we both know Joffrey is illegitimate, as eldest I am Robert the First's heir, both by law and custom. Moreover I am the most experienced between us, I have commanded many a battle. I have also been Lord of Dragonstone and actually **acted** as such rather than leaving it to my castellan as you have Storm's End."

Stannis couldn't stop himself from getting that blow in, but it seemed to flow off Renly like water off a duck's back so he continued quickly. "I am willing to overlook the fact that you have risen against me, and will provide sworn amnesties for all that you and the lords allied with you have done since you did so if you agree to give up your false claim on the throne and stand aside so that I can deal with the plague in King's Landing."

"You have a plan to do that?" Lord Tarly asked quickly, before Renly could reply.

"I do. It is not pleasant, and it is harsh. But it will work and it will stop the plague from spreading. That is the most important thing." Stannis replied honestly.

Lord Randyll's eyes narrowed as he registered the fact that Stannis wasn't saying he would combat the plague, simply stop the spread of it. He didn't understand what he could have planned however, and stepped backwards once more, his eyes still narrowed thoughtfully.

His gaze flicked over to where Melisandre stood. She had been silent so far but she was staring at all of the lords arrayed with Renly in such a way that some of them were actually beginning to feel uncomfortable. For all that she was a woman something about those eyes told them all she was more than able and willing to kill them all if need be. It was very disconcerting, especially when added to the rumors about her powers.

For his part however Renly had concentrated on the rest of what Stannis had said. "Isn't that nice." he said smiling in a way that showed all of his teeth. "**You** would give out amnesties? That is droll brother when you have an army barely half the size of the forces I have here, let alone spread out elsewhere around the city!"

"The fact that you were only able to gain the support of so few lords should tell you something brother, or are you too thick to realize that? Robert was right to pass you over for Lord Paramount of the Stormlands, you would have ruined it with your self-righteous and stubborn ways! All the world knows that Robert declared me his heir as Lord Paramount, which means I am the heir to the throne as well."

"So you would throw over all precedent and law to declare yourself his heir?" Stannis asked coldly. "What will the world come to if second or third sons can contend for lordships? Pure anarchy would result, and it would devolve not to the one who has the best claim, but the most popularity, which does not equal being the best for the job! We want stability, not further chaos, and even if you were able to make your case because of Robert's favoring you so often, we would still descend into chaos when you don't produce an heir. I note you haven't even married the Tyrell girl, you were unable to even look at her with any favor?" As Randyll and Mace both growled angrily at that, Stannis went on. "Your daughter Tyrell will remain a maid her entire life if she is forced to wed Renly."

"Exactly, Robert favored me, all the realms know it, and he showed it by naming me Lord Paramount over you, which means I would be his heir by his choice, which overrides precedent." Renly replied coolly. "And I vowed to marry Margaery the moment I sat on the Iron Throne, not a moment before. It was a wrench, but I will keep my word in that. Unlike Robert, I prefer not to leave bastards all over. Besides, what have you produced in your marriage? Nothing but a single, rather ugly and sickly girl. How would you secure the line of succession with that?"

Renly went on after a moment, shaking his head. "Practically everyone who meets you knows that you are a good general, but a king needs more than skill on the battlefield. He needs an understanding of diplomacy, the ability to understand his fellow man's point of view, a certain amount of empathy in other words, something that you lack!" Renly smirked cocking his head. "If you had those qualities, perhaps you would've been able to rally the Starks to your cause, which you should have been able to do given the fact that Eddard would probably have backed you, but as it is, you stand alone."

"Not alone." Melisandre said suddenly, her gaze now locked on Renly as if they were scorpions lining up on a ship. "The Azor Ahai never stands alone."

"And now we come to the final, and perhaps creates mark against you, brother!" Renly said triumphantly, pointing at Melisandre. "Not only do you lack allies elsewhere, but you gave over your oaths as a follower of the Seven for this foreign whore? Was that the only way you were able to discover any warmth in your bedside brother, by bringing a flame worshiper into it?"

Stannis growled angrily, covering up his shock at his younger brother's accurate assault there. But Melisandre responded before he could. "Your brother is the Azor Ahai, the lord who will lead humanity against the Great Other gathering power in the north. **Everything** else is trivial in comparison! When winter comes and the Great Others forces march it will be the Azor Ahai who stands against them. Standing against him in turn means you are an enemy of all life."

The words were strange and disturbing, but Melisandre spoke them with such conviction and power that more than one listener actually shivered for a moment. It was as if they could feel the chill of winter already coming upon them for a moment.

For his part however Renly was immune. He shook his head, contempt written plain on his face. "I do not know how you pulled the wool over my brothers eyes Witch, but you will not do the same to me. This 'Great Other' is nothing to concern us here in the south. Magic has long been declining, this is merely a seasonal resurgence as it were. Winter will come, then it will go as it normally, does a year or two at best. Your words are nothing, simply a cover for your own ambitions."

The last winter had occurred during the Greyjoy Rebellion, fourteen years ago. Renly wasn't the only one there who could barely remember it, and that winter had been short, less than a year long, and the last winter before that hadn't even reached past the next for more than a few months in the Riverlands. The history of the Long Night had long been forgotten in the South. And his contempt for magic was equally understandable, since the Faith of the Seven had no place for it save as a force of evil.

With a final shake of his head, Renly turned back to Stannis. "I am Robert's chosen heir brother. Cease this folly, and I will forgive you and the lords who have followed you, giving you royal pardons, even the Witch. More, I will name you my Hand and place you in command of the army when we have to deal with the Ironborn and the Lannisters. That is the best offer you're going to get."

Stannis stood up abruptly. "This talk is going nowhere. As your older brother, I am giving you this one chance lay down your arms, surrender yourself and you and your followers will be given amnesty. But if you do not, you will die, and I will break your army."

"If you think you can brother then we will meet you on the battlefield." Renly growled, letting his self-control slip for a moment as he too stood up.

The two groups glared at one another, before Stannis turned without another word leaving the pavilion. Melisandre was last to go staring at Renly coldly. "That Azor Ahai has spoken, look to your soul Renly Baratheon." Renly sneered at her, and she turned, leaving with a flutter of her red dress heading out into the rain.

OOOOOO

Plague. The news had percolated into the collective mind of King's Landing barely a week ago. Bodies had begun to turn up not in ones and twos but in dozens, all of them with the same symptoms, a day or more of coughing followed by coughing up their lungs, blood on their mouths before their hearts and lungs simply gave up unable to keep the body going. And the smallfolk had panicked. Wildfire burned here and there in the city, huge conflagrations spreading everywhere and only burning out slowly when they ran out of fuel. Yet even that couldn't keep the rioters from spreading, and with them came the plague into new portions of the city. Soon enough even the wildfire of the alchemists ran out and with it the last measure of control the royal family had on the city.

Where there had been a few thousands here and there rioting, now the city was boiling, hundreds of thousands trying to get away trying to get out of the city or out off the port. Yet the ships of Saan's fleet had heard about the plague as well thanks to Varys and every ship out there was unwilling to let any other ship close to them. Dozens of ships were sunk and burned at the mouth of the Blackwater and not one of them escaped.

The men on the cities wall defended the towers that led up to the wall, but they quickly lost the trebuchets and every other portion of the city that they had previously controlled, losing hundreds of men to the rioters. Here and there along the wall a tower was lost, and the city's population quickly tried to escape over the wall many dozens falling to their deaths as their makeshift rope or ladders gave way under their weight. But the moment they landed the Stormlands/Reach army took them under bow fire, making certain to stay well away from the bodies. There was no escape from the city that way. Even the rubble around the seven gates had been pushed aside here and there, and it was all the men the guard towers could do to keep control of them.

King's Landing was now a hellhole beyond anything Lord Serret had ever imagined as thousands died every day. Rupert had known this might occur, and had pulled the High Septon in earlier, as well as over two thousand more

guardsmen for the Red Keep and some more foodstuffs as well. They were still being forced to slaughter the food animals faster than he would've liked, but he had rather grimly retained several hundred horses in the stables of the keep.

So far there hadn't been any cases of plague inside the keep thanks to the actions he and the Queen had taken before the plague had spread very far. But Rupert knew it was just a matter of time, and he was busy thinking of ways out of the city for the Royal family, a token guard force and himself

*The city is lost.* That thought was a bitter one, but no less true for all of that. *We did everything we could, both to defend the city and try to control the spread of the plague, but in the end we just didn't have enough men to pull it off! Now King's Landing is lost, not just to us, but to everyone. No one is going to be brave enough to step foot in this place until the plague has run its course. The largest city of Westeros, the home of its best artisans, its most magnificent works, the Red Keep and all of its history and knowledge. All of it, slowly turning into a mausoleum. But I might still be able to do my duty to my queen... oh and her brat too.*

Joffrey had not impressed Rupert from the first, and his reaction to Petyr's betrayal and flight had solidified Rupert's low opinion of him. Joffrey refused to see why Edmure's torture and murder was a horrifying stain on House Lannister's honor, and refused to consider the proof that pointed to Baelish as the Vile one. *If he could show some more of his mother's intelligence rather than looks he might amount to something but as it is...* Rupert sighed. That didn't even consider the fact that he didn't have any outward reaction to seeing Edmure's mutilated body. That showed a disturbing lack of feeling, even for an enemy.

Just then, one of his guards rushed in. "My Lord, the watcher on the Hand's Tower says they've spotted another army coming up behind the besiegers. It's coming from the Northwest."

Lord Serret frowned thoughtfully then nodded his head, thanked the man calmly and sent them off to prepare the defenders. He then raced down the staircase himself, looking for the queen and her brother. *I think this might just be the opportunity I was waiting for.*

About twenty minutes after Rupert had been warned about the second army the remaining small council met in Cersei's drawing room. "We have an opportunity here." Rupert said earnestly after informing them of Stannis' arrival. My queen, it's still your opinion that the two Baratheon brothers will not reach an agreement?"

"Yes, as I've said all along" Cersei said definitively. "Stannis has no give in him at all, he does not care about other people's positions, he'll listen to others opinions, but rarely. And he has always looked down on Renly simply because he's untried in war, and is a bit of a fop. And he resented the way he was cast aside by Robert, who favored Renly in practically every way possible. Renly in turn looks down on Stannis because he is a cold fish and bases his claim on the throne on Robert's favoritism. It is a vicious circle, that Robert set in motion from the moment he took the throne."

Rupert nodded, willing to take Cersei's word on this. He had never met either Baratheon brother, so had no personal knowledge to base their actions on. "In that case, we definitely have a opportunity here. Renly weakened the cordon around the city, emptying some and drawing down the number of men he has in some of their small forts."

He gestured to one of his aides, who flattened out a makeshift map of the defenses set up around the city, the small forts built here and there along with markers denoting which house was in charge of which fort. "I think we definitely have a chance." he said motioning to a few of the symbols, signifying the forts north of the city, one on the road to Rosby and the other halfway between that one and another holding position on the Kingsroad. "Three minor houses hold this fort together: Hunt, Inchfield and Redding. Command by committee never works, they won't be a formed force, especially if they can see the battle going on elsewhere, or at the very least can hear it.

"Even better for our purposes, House Florent holds the fort on the road to Rosby. I doubt they're very enthusiastic supporters of Renly's cause, given how Stannis married into their family. And I doubt any of the men they could tap for command of their field army has any real experience."

Unlike the two Baratheons, Rupert had met Lord Alester Florent, and had a very low opinion about the man's competence. "It might be his son, who from what I remember is untried in anything but the joust. Once the two stags lock horns, we can use various means to get our men out of the city and into the slums along the bay, then sortie out against House Florent here.

"Where would we go after that?" Cersei asked. "Varys told us weeks ago that Stannis had destroyed Stokeworth, and Rosby was destroyed even before that."

That might have caused trouble with the men those Houses sent to aid King's Landing, nearly their full military might.

But Rupert had acted ruthlessly, rotating them down into the city to aid the Gold Cloaks in trying to keep order before the news became general. They were stuck there, caught between the riots of the smallfolk about food and the outer wall's keeps. It had cost the defenders badly, but their sacrifice (in the truest sense of the word) had also robbed many of the riots of their strength before they could reach the outer walls. When the survivors rejoined their fellows, they were a beaten force, leaderless and easily added to the command of other lords.

"We could make first for Sow's Horn. It might not be the best castle but it will do for an initial destination, then we can take the Kingsroad up into the Riverlands and hope to find your father and his army there."

"You mean the same army that is retreating with its tail between its legs?" Joffrey said contemptuously. "If grandfather was as good a general as everyone said he was, he would've smashed the Starks already and come to our rescue here! Then we wouldn't have to run like craven cowards! I can't believe we're even talking about this! I am King, I will not retreat from my own capital!"

Rupert's jaw clenched and he was about to respond hotly when Cersei did it for him. "Enough of that." she said sharply looking at her son, who looked startled at her actually talking back to him like that. "Your grandfather is doing his best, and even the best of generals is beaten at times. Besides, he might have underestimated Ranma at first, but now that he has a true measure of Ranma's abilities, he will take them into account. And we are not so much running away from our physical opponents as we are fleeing the plague. The plague will not care if you are King my son, the plague will kill us all eventually."

Over the weeks since the plague had begun Cersei had become increasingly paranoid about becoming sick. She took baths every few hours, stayed away from practically everyone but her family, and ordered two servants tossed out of the keep after she had seen them coughing. And the lack of good food was finally having a detrimental effect on her health. Where before she had simply slimmed down, losing the weight she had put on in drink and rich foods over the years, now she looked gaunt and wan.

From where he was sitting next to Cersei as the Lord commander of the Kingsguard, Jaime looked at his sister worriedly. The two of them had several nights together before the siege began, but ever since Cersei had thrown herself into anything she could to keep the Red Keep going and watching over her son. And truth be told Jaime had lost the stomach for such activities as well. Now though, he was becoming more concerned about her health with every passing day.

Joffrey scowled, but knew he couldn't argue with his mother's logic. Like Cersei, he truly was frightened of the plague, which was why he had forcibly controlled his baser urges lately. Even so, four of the servants had disappeared in the days after he had finished with Edmure. But since Petyr had been blamed for the so-called depredations of the Vile One, and noting the outrage and loathing in his mother and the Hand, he had been forced to stop. Joffrey really didn't understand why anyone cared one way or another about his toys, they were all smallfolk after all and smallfolk were like weeds: they always cropped up again.

By this point Rupert had calmed down a little and nodded. "The Queen Regent is correct, and though we have all done our best to keep the Red Keep free from plague, it is only a matter of time. It would only take one rat who had bitten into a dead body to be missed by the cats, and suddenly we'll be dealing with the outbreak in here. Even setting aside the pandemic, our supply situation is getting grim. If we will decide to make a run for it, we need to do so now, before we're forced to start butchering our horses for food."

"Very well, I suppose that retreating to join grandfather in the field makes some sense given the outbreak. It's galling, but I can deal with it. "

For his part Varys simply smiled thinly. While he would be perfectly willing to go with the rest of the small council in this escape from the city wishing to get away from the outbreak as much as anyone would, he knew that their plan to find Tywin and his army would fail. He had gotten two disjointed reports about the dragons being sighted on the southern side of the Red Fork, and of Harroway falling before another message came in which said Tywin's army had been utterly demolished, though it didn't go into much detail.

*No, the Lannister cause is finished, I've done my part as well as I may here. The question then becomes, should I offer my services to Renly, to the Starks, or try to make my way to Dragonstone, where my lone remaining agent on Driftmark reports a dragon circling? Or make my way elsewhere to await the arrival of mine and Illyrio's true scorpion bolt? Regardless, leaving the city at this point is an excellent idea. I certainly don't want to remain anywhere near Stannis' reach.*

Of course no one else knew anything about Varys' inner thoughts, and Joffrey continued to speak. "Yet what is your full plan Lord Hand? I doubt we can get our entire defensive force out of the city without the smallfolk immediately

trying to break out in droves behind us. And even if we could, many of them might be contaminated by the plague?"

He looked over at Pyrcelle who nodded his head wearily. Of them all, he had been the one who had been most involved with attempting to combat the spread of the plague, and that, coupled with his age, had made the siege conditions hit him all the harder. "Yes. It's been difficult for me to get accurate numbers with the Red Keep now in total lockdown, but my servant's are still able to get occasional messenger pigeons to me. Their best estimate is at least half of the wall garrison is showing signs of the plague. I think we could take a chance on a third of them, the men of House Harte and Edgerton men for the most part, situated on the wall facing the Lion's Gate at present."

"Hmm... we might be able to do something there, if we can move them along the wall and switch them with the men now holding the northern area of the wall. Can we do that without risking them becoming sick?"

Pyrcelle frowned. "From what I was able to find out before being locked in the Red Keep, the disease spreads through one person coughing on another, direct physical contact, exchange of fluids and perhaps can linger in things like bedding and clothes. If we do that and then immediately send them over the wall after ordering them to not touch anything in the barracks there, and not to let any of the men touch them in turn, we might be able to. But I don't think we should chance it for the entire group. A smaller number of men might be able to get away with it."

"We will have to chance it with the Edgerton men, not the Harte men then." Rupert mused aloud. Before Joffrey could say anything about leaving one of his favorite lords behind, Rupert went on answering his questions. "Harte's seat is northwest of the city, and isn't a good enough defensive position to let us hold up there if the winner between the battling stags comes after us there. Edgerton on the other hand has a castle near the Riverlands border, and we might be able to stop there before moving on. Now, here is what I propose..."

OOOOOO

That evening Renly and many of his lords began to celebrate as if they had already won the battle. All of them were confident that their numerical superiority, coupled with the forts that backed their current position, plus the ones built across the Blackwater that protected their left flank, would see them through to victory. Mace and several of his friends were there, as well as every young Lord or heir, though Randyll was not, nor were a few other of the more experienced lords.

But those weren't the only lords missing. If anyone had bothered to look around they would have seen that Lord Dunn, Lord Norcross, Uffering and several others were missing. And if someone thought about it, they would have realized that the missing lords and knights were all those who had lands on the Mander or near it. But seeing as most of those lords were not among the young men that Renly had made friends with, or the most influential, no one did.

Many of the Rainbow Guard were present ostensibly on guard but not really, simply taking part in the festivities. Loras was there as their commander, though he alone amongst those present was not in a festive mood. He stood quietly in one corner of the massive tent getting quietly drunk. Loras was used to being the center of attention, or at least standing to one side of said center of attention. Since his injuries he had found himself on the outside looking in, and he did not like the experience.

*I have to confront him tonight*, he thought to himself sadly. *There's a battle going on tomorrow, we could both die and I will not go into that battle with this looming over my head!* Loras and Renly had not slept together since Loras is the initial confrontation of him. *He's always coming up with excuses to get away, but not this time!* He watched Renly from his corner of the tent, noticing suddenly how he and Emmon Cuy seemed to be friendlier than he had noticed in the past. *Could it be...?*

An interminable time later, Renly stood up from his chair, weaving in place for a moment as if falling down drunk before making his excuses to the partygoers. Mace and the others all ribbed him good-naturedly but didn't stop Renly as he left the tent. He was followed by Emmon ostensibly in his role as the Rainbow Guard on duty at present, while the other man who should have been on duty, Bryce Caron, was waved back to where he was speaking to his bastard brother, Rolland Storm.

Loras watched them go with narrowed eyes then waited several moments before following them out, unnoticed by any of the others, even his father who was looking quite tipsy himself by that point. He followed them towards Renly's tent, which was set up about fifty feet away from the command tent so that people could come and go from the command tent without waking Renly up. But rather than barge in, Loras decided to go towards the back of the tent and wait there for a time to see if he could find out if his new worries were justified. They were.

"You know we shouldn't be doing this." Murmured Emmon's voice, slightly deeper and less musical than Renly's. "If word gets out, house Tyrell and all of my fellow Reach lords will turn on us both. You're supposed to be marrying

Margaery after all.

"And I will do my duty with her when the time comes," said Renly, then there was a sound that might have been kissing for a moment and Loras began to see red. A moment the sound stopped and Renly's voice went on, slightly deeper than normal. "Until then, I can take joy in own personal preferences. Are you complaining?"

By that point Loras had heard enough. Swiftly making his way around the tent he got barged in growling angrily. "So this is what your **'love'** is worth?"

Emmon and Renly had been in the middle of the tent, their arms around one another though Emmon was still wearing his armor. His sword however was leaning against one of the tent's outer poles, which Emmon now suddenly regretted. The two of them sprang apart as Loras entered. Renly sputtered for a moment, caught red-handed. "Loras, I, wait, it's not what you..."

"It's precisely what I think!" Loras replied the volume of his voice rising with each word. He stalked forward one hand thrusting out hard to put Emmon on his rear for a moment when he tried to step between Loras and Renly. Then Loras was facing Renly from barely a foot away, staring into that handsome, once-loved face angrily. "Is this why you haven't made time for me, you were making time for someone else!? Did you use the same words you did with me when I was your squire to lure Emmon into your bed, or were you honest with him, saying you would cast him aside the moment he wasn't pretty enough for you any longer!?"

"Keep your voice down Seven damnit!" Renly said, motioning with his hands for Loras to calm down. "I know this looks bad, but both of us were drunk, you can't hold..."

"I can certainly hold it against you!" Loras interrupted him hotly, one hand on his sword hilt as he continue to glare at Renly.

To one side Emmon got to his feet slowly, backing away from the confrontation and making for his own sword just in case.

Loras noticed this and stepped backwards slightly to keep both of them in his line of sight, though he was still glaring angrily at Renly. "I have half a mind to go to my father right now and tell him precisely what your marriage agreement with our family is worth! Perhaps Stannis was right to suggest you wouldn't be able to perform with my sister, or would you simply turn her around, cover her head with a pillow and pretend she was a boy, you fucking bastard?!"

"No! Loras I was **drunk!** This was the first time, with the battle looming I was, I just needed to..." Renly stuttered, trying to think of words that would calm Loras down, but knowing that this really did look very bad.

However Renly was saved just then by something completely unexpected. With the sound of tearing silk the back flap of the tent was suddenly cut asunder, and a creature of shadow stepped in. Thinner and taller than a normal man, it still looked noticeably human-like, it even had facial features though none of the young men present could recognize them. In one hand it held a blade of deepest shadow, yet it was still a sword for all of that. It's eyes glowed slightly, and they seemed to lock on Renly.

All three of the young men broke off from their confrontation staring at the creature arrange astonishment. Loras drew his blade from its sheath, holding the sword at the ready while Emmon did same as Renly staggered back towards his own, set beside his cot. "What, what is it?"

"Those rumors of the Red Witch's powers might have been more accurate than we thought." Loras said tightly, stepping forward to meet the creature. "Seven Banish you!" He shouted, bringing his sword up and about in a quick, flashing arc.

The shadow thing blocked his blade, reaching out with a clawed hand that nearly caught Loras in the face, forcing him to dodge back. To one side Emmon raced forward, his sword flashing out. The blade impacted the shadow creature on his shoulder.

For a moment there seemed to be some resistance there. The limb fell to the creature's side, not responding from the shoulder down as a human's would struck in the same manner. But in response the creature's foot flashed out, catching Emmon in the chest with a kick that doubled him over, cracking his armor and the ribs underneath.

Emmon let go of his sword for a moment in agony and it fell to the ground, falling completely through the shadow monster. With that impediment gone its arm seemed to work once more. Still blocking Loras' continued assault with its own blade it pushed him back. The shadow creature then stopped directly next to the downed Emmon, and

punched down with its offhand. There was a sound of tearing metal, and Emmon Cuy died as a thing punched through his back plate and deep into his back, severing his spine before finding his heart and crushing it. "GAHHHHhhhh....."

By this time Renly had found his own sword and pulled it out, leaping forward to join Loras in battling the creature. "To arms, Seven damn it!"

Loras didn't even spare him a glance simply yelling out. "Be careful, this things much stronger than it looks, don't try to block it unless you absolutely have to, just redirect or dodge!"

Despite their recent estrangement the two of them had practiced together for years and worked well together. Yet their blades simply couldn't do any damage to the creature, every time one of them got through its defenses, their blades would impact its body, thrusting or slashing. Yet nothing seems to do any permanent damage. The moment their blades left his body it would regain full function.

The noise of combat however had spread, and more of the Rainbow Guard came running from the party still going on, even Randyll and the others who had retired for the night were riled by the ongoing clamor. Robar was the first to arrive, having just left the command tent himself as the noise began. He raced towards Renly's tent, pausing outside the tent for a moment to stare down at his sword in astonishment. The blade had been a gift from his father, one of several ancestral longswords that their family-owned. But since Bronze Yohn favored greatswords, he didn't really have much use for the others in their collection. But this sword and many of the others the family-owned had some of the same runes that were cut into Yohn's armor, which supposedly kept him from injury.

Robar had long been skeptical about that claim, partly because it reeked of magic. While his father followed the old gods, he followed the faith of the seven, which had no place for magic. Moreover, none of those runes on his father's armor had ever showed actual signs of magic, which Robar had long since decided meant they were simple the runes set into the hilt and blade of his sword had just begun to glow a pale yellow color. But Robar shook off his shot at that, continuing to race toward his king's tent.

As he burst into the tent he was confronted with a thing of magic that made his sword pale in comparison, halting Robar in his tracks. The shadow creature was slowly gaining ground against the two warriors inside. He hesitated a moment, watching Loras rather desperately dodge a clawed hand that would have caught him in the neck, twisting his body around to block the sword that was even then seeking Renly's side, where he had overextended for a moment.

The sight of his king almost being impaled shook Robar out of his stunned state, and he raced forward, his blade lashing out. "Have at you, creature!"

The creature turned, almost negligently throwing Loras off its blade to lock swords with Robar, but this gave Loras and Renly enough time to set themselves once again and attack. Their blades impaled the thing's side and armor and Loras howled in fury as they once again did nothing to the creature. "Father judge you, what does it take to kill you monster!"

The shadow beast of course didn't reply, simply flinging Robar back before turning its blade back to the other two. Renly ignored Loras' earlier advice for a moment, blocking the incoming blows since he couldn't dodge without losing his balance. Even so he was flung to the floor, his blade actually warped by the force of the blow. The creature lifted a foot to stop on himit's sword once more occupied with Loras then screamed in such a high pitch that it was more felt than heard. "SCREEEEEEEE!"

Robar had rolled from where he had hit after the creature had flung him back then, his sword held in both hands he lunged forward, at the creature's back. His blade stabbed into the creature point first then the runes which had heretofore simply been glowing dully, flared to life. A hard bright yellow color blossomed out, nearly blinding all three of the young man in the tent and even a few outside who had been racing towards it from the command tent. The shadow creature was destroyed by whatever magic was on the blade, turning into nothing but quickly dissipating smoke.

For a moment all was silent in the tent, then the other people who had heard the sound of battle burst in, staring around in consternation. Robar ignored themall however, simply staring down at his blade, where the runes had gone back to glowing a dull yellow, though somewhat brighter than they had been before he stabbed it into the shadow monster. "I think, that I owe my father an apology." He said softly.

"What happened here?" Mace growled angrily, pushing his way to the front. He gasped as he saw Emmon's dead body, then his son's exhausted frame leaning against the main tent pole while Renly simply pulled himself to his knees on the floor before wearily pushing himself to his feet. The two of them had been forced to push themselves

incredibly fast to keep up with the pace of the shadow being's movements even for the few moments it had taken Robar to arrive, and now their bodies demanding payment.

Renly thought quickly. "I was about to take off my armor, I had to take care of a call of nature first. By that time Loras had joined Emmon outside guarding me, we spent a few moments talking, I hate to say it, I tried to actually convince the two of them that I didn't need the both of them guarding me, but I'm glad I didn't! During our discussion that thing cut its way through the back of my tent and attacked us!" He sighed sadly. "Emmon died in the first few moments, nothing we could do seemed to hurt it."

"We were in dire straits ourselves until Robar arrived. Why did your blade work when ours didn't Robar?" Renly asked. He moved over to stare down at the sword that Robar was still holding out in front of him, staring at it in both awe and suspicion.

"The glowing symbols on it are supposedly runes of the First Men Your Majesty, though I'd never believed they had any actual power before this. You know my father's reputation about wearing bronze armor with these scribbles marked out on it but I'd never seen anything from them either. Magic really is coming back into the world..."

"For better or for worse." Renly growled out shaking his head angrily. "I thank you for your timely intervention my knight, and you Loras for your defense of me." He stared at his former lover, willing the man to keep silent about what had really occurred tonight.

The man somehow seemed to get the message, turning away from Renly but remaining silent. Loras had not forgotten his anger at Renly, but seeing that shadow beast had reminded him that there was more going on here than just his own issues. He still wasn't certain if he was willing to go to war for Renly now, not after what he had seen before the shadow creature arrived and the realization that Renly had never really loved him.

Breathing a mental sigh of relief Renly turned back to Mace, and the just arrived Randyll, who had Heartsbane, a Valyrian greatsword, in his ready grip. "This needs to be answered promptly! My lords, ready the army for combat, we attack tonight!"

Randyll made to speak out, but at Renly's angry glare he silenced himself, especially since all of the other Reach lords were also muttering angrily and nodding their heads ferociously. He instead merely nodded his head, and left the tent quickly.

OOOOOO

Melisandre came out of her semi-trance shaking her head. R'hllor's recently heightened favor had several amazing advantages, but one disadvantage was that Shadow Assassins were not nearly as hard to see as they had been before. They were also much more solid. Where before a Shadow Assassin could have floated into the false King's tent this new, more powerful version had to cut its way in, giving Renly and those inside warning.

She idly wondered why she got the impression of the beast fighting three people then two then three again, but her control over Shadow Assassins was tenuous, even compared to her control over Shadow Warriors. The Warriors she could direct and somewhat control their actions, giving them broad orders they would obey unless they went against the creature's very nature. With Shadow Assassins Melisandre could only give them their target, a few orders along the lines of how best to avoid being seen, and then after they left her physical presence could only ride their minds in a very vague manner rather than influence it.

She cursed however, knowing her assassin's failure meant that they would have to go with Stannis' second plan. In some ways she was happy to do so, but her own role in it was quite distasteful. *I loathe the fact that we have to act like this, curse the devil Seven and the strange dictates of honor they have impressed upon their dupes! Still, the Azor Ahai has a point, the spread of the one true god amongst our own men is slow, and we need to separate Stannis from this assassination attempt in his lords minds. He cannot seem to be connected to such, not when the target is his own brother anyway. If only it had succeeded without anyone seeing anything, curse it!*

With that in mind, Melisandre stood up, waving her acolytes back down before moving out of the tent and into the tent next door, which was Stannis's. He was awake as she had known he would be, ostensibly going over plans for tomorrow's action but in reality simply pacing inside waiting for news. He turned to her one eyebrow raised as she entered the tent.

Melisandre quickly crossed to him, bowing her head formally. "The attempt has failed my Lord. Somehow the Shadow Assassin was dissipated. I would assume it was because of a Valyrian blade."



Stannis frowned for a moment, thinking of which houses he knew had Valyrian blades. *Tarly has one I know, but which others? I suppose it doesn't matter right now.* He looked at Melisandre closely. "You know what that means don't you? Are you ready to do your part?"

"I am, though this will be unpleasant."

"So long as you act your roll out well, the outcome will be the same." Stannis replied coldly. He had never been in favor of simply assassinating Renly. If Renly had been assassinated with no witnesses that would have been one thing, and the upshot of such was worth the attempt, but if there were witnesses they could pin it on Melisandre. The rumors of Melisandre's abilities had spread too far for anything else at this point, and while the Stormlanders would possibly switch their allegiance to him, the Reach lords would not be willing to serve Stannis in that event. Assassination was against the knightly code after all, and that pile of excrement was believed in the Reach far more than in any other realm of Westeros save the North.

None of them would understand that it was simply politics taken to the next level, they would take it as a personal affront and might well attack Stannis' forces even if they didn't have a candidate for kingship with them. Or worse, they could retreat then sent overtures to the dragon girl and the Starks. The Reach had after all been loyal to the Targaryens to the end. The thought of the Starks, Riverlanders and Reach armies joining together was a daunting one.

No, to combat that potential disaster Stannis needed a victory. He needed to show his skill as a general in no uncertain terms, have Renly die in open combat and possibly wear way the Reach forces somewhat just in case. So he had been ready for the assassination to fail, and indeed had a little surprise prepared in the area directly in front of his army's lines. *The rain has been especially helpful there, and knowing my brother he will push for a night battle, where Melisandre's Shadow Warriors will do their jobs very well indeed.*

"I am prepared to do my part to deceive the followers of the devil Seven, Azor Ahai." Melisandre said, bowing her head once more.

Stannis nodded, then without further ado lashed out with one fist, his blow smacking into the side of Melisandre's face and sending her flying as he roared. "You stupid bitch! I never gave that order! I'll have no truck with such acts! The next time you do something like this, I'll kill you myself!"

With that he turned and strode out of the tent, passing the five Flame Guard who had been about to enter the tent their faces so showing shock and concern. "You five, watch her." He ordered in a loud voice, noting out of the corner of his eyes as his Lord commanders' came out of their tent at a rush. "She is to be kept separated from the rest of the Army, is that understood?"

"As the other lords and his commanders ran up to Stannis, he turned to Melisandre. "I'll have you flogged for this!" He hissed in an angry voice. "R'hllor might be the one true God, but such acts like that will never be allowed in Westeros!"

He turned to his commanders and waved a hand at the woman who was slowly getting to her feet, a bruise already forming on her cheek and jaw from his blow. "This fool of a woman has sent an assassin against my brother." he said without preamble. "She wished to keep the two armies from fighting, stating that we would need all the men we could get to combat the Great Other that she sees coming with the onset of winter.

"Fool woman thought I would be pleased with it!" He snarled the words then shook his head and went on. "The attempt failed, and we need to deal with the fallout. My brother will respond to this affront quickly, we need to be ready for combat now! We'll be sending her Warriors to do their part, but we need to be ready here as well."

Melisandre allowed herself to be pulled away, her head bowed submissively even as her eyes glanced at the lords, and she exalted inside at what she saw. None of them had even flinched at the mention of her warriors, who they had been told about the day before, though they were looking at her askance for the assassination attempt. That meant that both Stannis's words were being believed and that the reality of her magic was slowly wearing away their belief in the Seven. *Soon they too will convert, and with them many of their men!*

Only Davos was still looking at her distrustfully. But in his case, the fact that Stannis was obviously doing what he could to control her seemed to calm him down. He would need to be dealt with in time, but for now, the response from the other lords was good enough for now.

*Brilliant* Melisandre thought to herself as she was brought back to her own tent, her acolytes forced to leave her there for now. *The act itself was rather irritating, but the outcome is all I could hope for. Now when the Azor Ahai wins this battle we will be well on our way to forming an army capable of standing against the hordes of the Great Other.*

OOOOOOO

Renly's response to the attempted assassination was to organize a night assault, but not a normal night assault, a fully heavy cavalry charge in the middle of the night. With the full moon above them and a few torches Renly felt the knights would have enough light to see by, if barely. Within an hour fully 8,000 heavy cavalry road out, while the rest of the army was still preparing to move forward to engage Stannis's forces. The command had been given to Lord Phineas Cordwayner and his sons who accepted it eagerly.

However Stannis's army had already begun to move, not forward, but back during the Lord Phineas and his troops rode through the area where Stannis's army had supposedly been, all they found was their tents left behind. "Where the hell did they go?" He growled angrily, unwilling to give up the chance of glory that would occur if he was able to get in the first blow against Stannis.

One of his men rode up, bowing from the saddle. "Milord, our scouts report that Stannis's army has retreated back and to the south along the Blackwater, they have taken a position there. "Their torches are visible all around, they seem to have prepared positions there." Actually the army had retreated back there the moment night came, while the fake camp remained behind.

"Good! Reform the men for another charge, this time well march until we can see who they, are then charge. That will hopefully give the sun enough time to rise."

The men around Phineas nodded, grim faced. None of one of them had liked charging through the night. It had been highly unpleasant, even carrying torches as they were and with the moon above them. Luckily the sun was rising in the west, and soon enough they would have more light to see by despite the fact it would be an overcast day. Frankly Stannis' retreat worked in their favor really, allowing the Cordwayners to reform their men.

Lord Phineas reformed his force while behind them the rest of Renly's army began to coalesce, moving forward in divisions under its respective Lords. As the Sun finally rose high enough in the sky to give them light, Phineas and his men set off once more, still leading the Stormlands-Reach army along the Blackwater.

OOOOOOO

Lord Godrick Pommingham sighed sadly as he stared out at the Reach army, which was rousing itself to the south of the fort he had been given command of. He had been given command of this fort because his men were excellent shots with the catapult set near the small fort in a small, wooden-walled enclosure, and his family had supplied more archers than heavy cavalry. As such, Renly and the Tyrells had overlooked him when they were choosing commanders for the portion of the Stormlands/Reach army that would be used against Stannis.

He, the Norridge, Roxton and a few of the smaller Stormlands Houses, Wensington and Wylde had all been sidelined for this battle, defending the forts directly behind and to the right flank of the reformed portion of the army. Ostensibly they were there in case Stannis was able to send a column around Renly's force to attack them from the flank, but Godrick knew the truth. There was simply not enough glory to go around, and the King had been forced to play favorites.

Renly had originally split his reformed army into three different camps for hygiene reasons and for strategic ones. This way, if one portion of the army was attacked by Stannis, the other portions could come in and surround him from his flanks. One portion, Renly's, was directly in front of the forts held by Wensington and Roxton, with Wylde and Pommingham's own protecting its back and left flank.

The other two portions were smaller than that one, in comparison to Renly's 20,000 men, with a large portion of the army's cavalry represented in Renly's command and Lord Tyrell's, which was situated behind and to the north of Renly's, the two camps separated by Pommingham and Wylde's forts and about five leagues. The other force, under lord Staedmon, was to the south and west of Renly's. A reserve was also on the other side of the Blackwater, numbering only about five thousand.

*I wonder what happened to make Renly organize a night assault like that.* Godrick thought idly. He saw no reason why a heavy cavalry charge wouldn't work at night, so that didn't bother him so much as Renly's desire to send such an attack at all. *Still, it doesn't matter to us here. We're well out of it.*

"Wha-gahh!"

""Ware monster!To arms, to arghhh!"

Godrick turned from viewing Renly's cavalry marching out to stare in shock at several creatures seemingly made of shadow and smoke had apparently climbed up the wall of his fort, cutting into his men with ease. As he watched one of them cut a man in half, his bow raised so desperately in defense not even slowing the thing's dark blade.

For a moment the sight robbed Godrick of the ability to think, his feet rooted to where he stood. By the time he turned to run, four of the creatures were on his fort's roof, and dozens of his men were dead. One of them bounded after Godrick, catching him before he could get to the makeshift stairs leading down into the fort. It tore off his leg with one arm, causing Godrick to scream aloud.

The other three quickly moved around Godrick, heading down into his fort where, Godrick suddenly realized, they would slaughter his men unless they ran. He hoped they would, but that hope was in vain. Another Shadow warrior had entered the fort from its gate, and would hold it so long as the night lasted.

Godrick himself stared up at the distorted features of his killer, mumbling a prayer before the thing's blade speared him through the chest. "Seven defend the Faith...!"

OOOOOO

As dawn broke wet and warm Phineas took in the defenses that Stannis had thrown up at a glance. There weren't too many of them, but he seemed to want use large wooden barricades set deep into the earth to funnel the heavy cavalry charge into various segments. But Phineas could see where there were several areas that they hadn't been set yet, especially close by the Blackwater. Behind them, men stood, some with polearms, but mostly archers and swordsmen.

For ten minutes Phineas organized his men, giving his two sons command of some of them, and keeping the majority of the men under his own command as they raced forward, using their banners to direct the men. About 2000 men under his sons went for one of the other breaks in the barricades further north along Stannis' lines, while Phineas led about 6,000 heavy cavalry in a charge that was much deeper than it was long at the break along the Blackwater's edge.

Arrows began to fly from Stannis' army, and Phineas laughed as several of them hit his armor only to bounce off. "Hah, craven bastards, arrows do nothing against true knights!" Arrows truly weren't very good against heavy plate armor at range, and Phineas had always looked down on archers because of that.

Halfway across the distance between his starting point and the opposing army's lines Phineas couched his lance and urged his horse into a gallop. He shouted aloud "For the Reach!"

About a hundred yards before they would hit the break in the barricades and begin to flank Stannis's army equine screams began to render the morning air. Horses in the front rows went down screaming, their hooves pierced by caltrops that had been thrown out all around the and there men rode into their downed fellows trampling them under their feet, but even that wasn't the main problem to continuing the charge.

Phineas had not been able to tell that the ground all around the front of Stannis' lines was muddy and **very** wet. The Blackwater occasionally flooded its banks here, which Stannis had known and taken advantage of. The ground was not quite a quagmire, but it was certainly enough to slow down horses with full loads. The front few ranks had churned it nicely for the others, and now all of them were getting bogged down, their horses unable to move very in the mud slowing down dramatically. Indeed the entire charge was becoming bogged down, horses unable to move forward because of the mud or their exhausted fellows all around.

"Now!" shouted a voice from the enemy army's lines, and while arrows continued to fly into the bogged down heavy cavalry thousands of infantry raced out, their lighter armor allowing them to move much more easily in the muddy conditions. Half of them were armed with long makeshift spears, while the others were armed with maces and short swords, weapons that could be used to deadly effect if they could get in under their opponent's reach.

Bogged down as they were the heavy cavalry lost its most important advantage, momentum. No heavy cavalryman could defend himself from every direction, and that was what you had to do when you had several infantrymen trying to get around you, cut your horse's stomach out and then get you when you were hurled to the ground.

Phineas watched in horror as that very thing began to happen all around him, but he handled the sudden turn of fortune much better than Godrick. He recovered quickly, thrusting his lance down towards one man impaling him through the shoulder. At the same time another man's spear thrust up at Phineas. Phineas blocked with his shield desperately, letting go of the lance to pull out his sword. But by the time he did, another man was gutting his horse. The animal whinnied, bucking up to try and get away from the knife that was now sticking out of its stomach, and

Phineas was hurled from the saddle.

He landed heavily but the mud actually helped him for a moment, allowing him to absorb the shock of the landing. He tried to get to his feet, a hard task given the full plate armor he was wearing, only to receive a blow from a mace, smashing him comatose. The man who did it grinned, pulling the man in very expensive looking armor up out of the mud with some of his fellows before retreating with their captive. All around other knights and armsmen were dying, unless they too looked like they came from families that could pay a ransom.

Elsewhere Phineas' son's charges also bogged down, though they faced more archers than men on foot. And those archers were not aiming at the men on horses, they were aiming at the horses themselves. Stannis knew that killing all of the men currently bogged down in front of his army would take too long but unhorsing them might be just as good for now.

Watching this from a small rise behind his army Stannis nodded turning away to look at Lord Bolling. "You'll have two thousand of the levee forces and another five hundred archers. Keep up the attack on that cavalry force, I want as many captives as possible, but gut that force too." Those levee forces were impressed smallfolk from Duskenale and the lands the army had travelled through, poor troops for the most part but good enough for this purpose, and they had given him a few more thousand men to bolster his numbers.

Bolling nodded, but by that time Stannis was already gone, moving to his horse. He paused as he was about to lift himself into the saddle staring hard at Melisandre, who was in chains at present. "Your creations have already done their bit?"

Melisandre nodded. "We lost a few strangely and several others have died since daybreak began, but the nearest forts are emptied of men my Lord."

"Good." Stannis nodded. With that he pulled himself into the saddle and waved his hand in the air ordering the men all around him to advance. But they didn't advance into the quagmire that was initially their front lines. Stannis didn't want to simply wipe out a portion of Renly's army, he wanted to crush the entire thing before Renly, or more accurately Randyll, could realize all that was going on.

While news of that first cavalry charges disaster was slowly filtering back to Renly, Stannis was on the move, flanking in his position from the North. Before Renly and his men could realize it Stannis and his army were already in a new position slightly north of their previous position and attacking once again, moving directly under the range of the former Pommingham's fort.

Despite this, the army under Renly was able to see them coming and quickly turned to face them. Randyll had also ordered several units of Lord Staedmon's force to join the main army, reinforcing their numbers. The two armies clashed, cavalry and infantry smashing into one another while the archers on both sides went to work.

OOOOOO

Well back from the front lines Renly stared as the two armies clashed, shaking his head in shock. "Well that was a surprise." He said without much feeling, "but we still have the numbers advantage. Tell Lord Tyrell to swing north of them. No matter how they took out Pommingham's fort, they haven't moved men into it. If we can circle Stannis's army we can destroy it entirely. Send a signal to Lord Staedmon, I'll want his men able to push forward at a moment's notice, and send a message across the Blackwater to Lord Dunn as well, I'll want the reserves ready to go just in case."

Next to him Randyll frowned thoughtfully, not liking how deeply Stannis and his men were forging into their army, as well as moving towards the east towards the forts that they should've avoided. "I'd recommend that we continue to fall back towards the Blackwater my Lord. The Stormlands infantry is better than most of ours, let us bring up the rest of our own before we start to hold the ground against him." Half of the Stormlands infantry was serving under Staedmon, with only around four thousand men under lord Hasty assigned to Renly's force.

Renly nodded affably. "Do so." Then he pulled his sword and nodded at his Rainbow Guard and Randyll. "I believe however, it is now time for us to do our part." he pointed theatrically forward at where the infantry were clashing. "Charge!"

OOOOOO

A messenger was sent to Lord Mace and his portion of the Army was situated slightly behind and to the north of Renly's portion behind the forts. This second mobile force consisted predominantly of heavy and light cavalry with a

smattering of infantry and archers. House Tyrell, the Red-apple Fossoways, House Ashford and House Rowan supplied the men to this force. They numbered a little over fourteen thousand.

Mace stared at the messenger, then over at his son. Loras had been sent to him ostensibly as a liaison, which Mace understood. The real reason of course was that Renly didn't want Loras around just now, not until he had come up with a way to appease him. "Are you ready?"

Loras nodded, gripping his sword's grimly. For the life of him he had been unable to get his mind off of Renly's betrayal, his mind kept on going back to that moment where he barged into the tent to find him and Emmon in an embrace like a tooth to a sore. Right now he wanted very badly to hit someone, and Renly unfortunately was not available. "Yes, father."

The older man nodded and then waved his hand grandly. "Forward to victory!" His army began to advance, leaving behind their camp and moving quickly to attack Stannis in the flank. However those units that past close by the forts began to come under fire from them. From his position at the center of his army Mace saw this and stared incredulously. "What? Betrayal!"

The Shadow Warriors who had attacked the force commanded by House Wylde had moved on to reinforce those that were attacking the fort directly behind Renly's army, allowing some of Stannis' forces to move in and claim it. They now held it against the people who had built it, trying desperately to ignore the bodies all around them, many of which had been hacked to pieces as they died.

Mace halted the charge at this sudden assault, staring at the fort in consternation as he wondered if he should continue to attack along this line of advance. Then suddenly from the west another force, this one smaller than Stannis's main army began to attack his flank. Light cavalry in the colors of Massey and Bar Emmon began to hit Lord Ashford and his men, who had control of that flank. He hastily ordered their men forward to chase after the light cavalry instead of continuing the attack on Stannis's forces, breaking away from Tyrell's main force.

"Damn it!" Mace growled, then shuddered as he saw the catapult from the fort fire off, the large stone slamming into the front of his force.

"We should swing out wide in both directions!" Shouted Lord Fossoway. "Half should swing round to reinforce Renly from behind, the other should chase down that force that just attacked us, then split off to attack Stannis from behind!"

"Do it!" Mace ordered, glad that someone had come up with a plan. He turned to Loras. "Loras, you'll command the force moving to aide Ashford, I'll command the other with Lord Fossoway and move to reinforce Renly!"

Loras nodded and turned his horse away while Mace began to bellow orders to his horn-man.

OOOOOO

In King's Landing Rupert had watched the beginning of the fight as well as he could with the spyglass, which wasn't very well given the distances involved, but thanks to the Hand's Tower he had still been able to see enough to know when the battle was truly joined. But even before that, Rupert had gone ahead with his plan for the escape from the capital. Several dozen of his most trusted men under the command of Jaime had begun to lead the horses horded here in the Red Keep through the catacombs several dozen at a time. They were led in turn by Varys with Jaime by his side at all times, ostensibly to defend him just in case, but everyone knew the real reason. This had gone on throughout the night, and now every horse in the Red Keep had been brought out. Then Varys and Jaime had returned, leaving Balon Swann in charge of the men with the horses.

Then, when he was certain Stannis and Renly were fully concentrated on one another, Rupert first ordered every Lannister and Baratheon flag in the Keep up onto the walls of the Keep. With that done, Rupert gathered the two royals and the small council. "if we are going to do this, the time is now your Grace, your Highness."

Cersei, Joffrey and Pycelle all nodded, though the old Grand Maester looked hesitant for some reason. As the others left, Rupert laid a hand on the old man's shoulder. The two of them had become friends over the past few weeks, and Rupert had come to value Pycelle's knowledge and insight. "Pycelle?"

"You know, I'd known for decades I would die here. The plague or through wounds taken in battle or assassination would not have been my choices, but even old age would have claimed me eventually, and I would still be here. For all its smell, for all the machinations of the small council and the horrors I've seen here under the Mad King and after, this has been my home for longer than the queen has been alive. Part of me wants to simply stay here, and meet the

end however it comes."

"None of that my friend, the Lannisters still need your service, and I still need your advice." Rupert said, looking at the older man worriedly. Dealing with the plague had affected him greatly, but this was the first time Serret had heard the man sound so fatalistic.

Pycelle took one last look around the queen's council room, then nodded resolutely and turned toward the door. He didn't look back again, even while they were led into the catacombs. With Varys once more leading them the royal household and the force Serret had gathered in the Red Keep prior to the outbreak moved down into the catacombs.

After what seemed like hours the eunuch finally led them out of the catacombs the same way that Petyr had escaped weeks ago. Rupert stepped outside, blinking in even the overcast light of the day after the last few hours. He took a moment to stare out over the landscape towards distant forts and lines facing this direction. Jaime stopped beside him doing the same thing. "I would've liked to do this at night," the Kingslayer said shaking his head. "There's got to be enough men over there to make a fight of it, right, even with your diversion?"

"If we were trying to create a hole rather than simply punch our own way through possibly." the older man replied caustically. But Alester Florent is not exactly the best commander, nor the most intelligent or even courageous man. So long as he's not been reinforced, we'll be able to break through."

The force of around 3,700 men began to make their way down the cliff face and soon enough they were down in among the slums, where the horses had been hidden. While the men mounted quickly, Rupert looked at Ser Swann, nodding his head gravely. "You are in charge of the Kingsguard for the moment, Jaime, you're with me."

Ser Blount looked angry at his seniority being passed over like that, but subsided as Jaime looked his way. With Blount suitably chastised, Jaime joined Rupert as they moved through the slums set on the small stretch of land between the Blackwater and the city's outer wall. They halted where the wall turned, staring out into the distance past the few remaining hovels left standing. Then they began to hear shouts and yells in the distance, and both men smiled grimly.

When he came up with his desperate gamble the Lord Hand had decided to add as much chaos to their escape as he could. He couldn't assume that the lords of the nearest forts were as cowardly or slow as he felt Alester was, so they had to be occupied in such a way to stop them from coming to the Florent's aid. And if the men on the wall had seen the royal force leaving, they might have panicked and tried to abandon the city as best they could. So Rupert had decided to use their desire to leave the city in a controlled way. He had relayed an order to Lord Harte and the other surviving lords who had gathered in King's Landing to prepare their men to go over the wall and attempt to escape in force.

Of course this also meant that the smallfolk might notice the sudden absence of the wall's defenders and try to escape the outbreak themselves. But even that could be borne since they probably wouldn't try to come the same way that Rupert's force was taking, moving through the slums where the wildfire had burned out most of the houses.

Now several thousand men began to rappel down the outer wall of the capital. They formed up into a force around four thousand strong in slums there before marching out along the Kingsroad as fast as they could.

OOOOOO

Loras' force had run off the skirmishers who had pulled Ashford's men off their initial line of attack, only to run into some survivors of the Shadow Warrior's assault on the forts behind Renly's army. They were immediately ushered into Loras' presence, and he and his commanders stared first at the scared, broken men then at the fort. "Are you saying that creature much like the monster I fought last night are in those forts?"

"Y-yes my lord, they, they slaughtered us! L-lord Wensington had a Valyrian knife, it worked on them but nothing else we did hurt them at all! It, it was horrible!"

Thinking quickly Loras said aloud "But none of them have been seen in daylight yet, so we need to assume that they can't exist in the light. So they won't be able to come out to attack us if we pass them. We should be able to get past them to reinforce Renly." He had to bite his tongue slightly to keep from cursing the man as he deserved.

"What's going on over there?" Ser Luthor Norridge, a knight from a very minor house loyal to House Tyrell said from next to Loras, pointing toward the city.

Loras looked in that direction, then frowned suddenly. "That looks like someone is trying to escape the city!" He

scowled angrily. "Who's in command on that side of the city?"

"House Cafferren and House Meadows control the forts and the line from the Kingsroad to the west. To the east of the Kingsroad and towards the road to Rosby... the Florents and a few of the smaller houses I think." Said Talbert Yelshire, the lord of another minor house beholden to the Tyrells.

Every man around Loras groaned aloud at that. Alekyne had not done anything to impress any of the other young knights with his courage or intelligence, setting aside the fact his family's loyalty to Renly was seen as somewhat compromised. *If the capital's garrison is trying to break out along the Kingsroad, they might be trying to break out elsewhere as well, and Alester and his cluster of imbeciles are definitely the weak point in our cordon.*

"We need to get over there then." Loras said, turning his horse almost entirely around. "We can't let any of the Lannister get away, especially if they might be carrying the plague!"

"What about His Majesty my lord, we might be needed here?" Lord Ashford asked hesitantly.

"If Renly can't beat his brother with a more than two to one advantage in numbers, then our five thousand certainly isn't going to make any difference!" Loras retorted hotly, allowing his anger at Renly out for a moment. "Whereas we might be the difference between life and death for thousands if those men trying to break out are sick! Turn the army around and let's get over there!"

OOOOOO

The clash between the two main forces had bogged down, becoming a case of shield wall against shield wall. The Stormlanders much better trained infantry fared well against the very poorly trained and outfitted troops of the Reach. The cavalry was no longer able to come to grips with them with enough momentum to turn the tide. In several places the Reach cavalry now couldn't even get to the front lines through the ranks of their own infantry. Hundreds tried to flank out west, only to get strung along by Stannis' reserves until they became bogged down in the same quagmire that had caught the nighttime charge.

While Renly and forged his way forward, hacking at Stormlands men below him it became clear that the training that Stannis had given his men in the intervening weeks was paying off now. While the men from the Royal Navy didn't work very well as units, they wielded their spears expertly, keeping what cavalry could get to the front lines from crunching into the better armored and armed Stormlands infantry, which were making short work of the Reach levy forces. Panic was setting in, and even Renly was beginning to feel it now, seeing the strange men with the mark of a fire on their shoulders at the front of a charge.

The charge crunched into a point near the front of the battle where the Royal Navy forces had fallen back. They smashed into the rush of men trying to fold up Stannis' line to either side, killing or riding down most of them, then cutting deep into Renly's own line which had bulged out there to try and take advantage of their fellow's sudden weakness.

Renly grimaced, pulling his sword out of one man and looking around "Where are Mace and Staedmon?!"

"Bogged down your Highness!" Shouted Ser Morigen his normally green enameled armor splashed with red. "Somehow your brother was able to get forces inside some of the forts last night, and Lord Tyrell decided to split the army. Loras is still coming up behind Stannis, but Lord Tyrell fell back and around to join Lord Staedmon." Word of the second force under Lord Bar Emmon had not reached the main army. "Lord Tarly sent word though that Staedmon is on the move! They are trying to circle south so they can join the battle sooner!"

"Damn it!" Renly muttered, bringing up his blade to hack the shaft of a spear that was thrusting for his face. The shaft shattered and Renly kicked out, catching another man who was trying to get underneath his horse to hamstring it before bringing his sword over, braining the fellow with his pommel. "Then we need to hold until Alesander and Mace gets here!"

OOOOOO

Elsewhere Lord Dunn was looking through a very expensive Myrish glass he had recently won in a game of cards from one of his fellow lords. Then he turned and looked at Lord Norcross and the other nobles that made up the reserve forces of the Reach stationed to the south over the Blackwater. "Are we agreed my lords?"

Lord Norcross nodded grimly. "If Renly won't let us go reclaim our lands Stannis will, his messages said so." He had lands to the south of House Oldflowers, perched directly on the Mander. So did their fellows, Lords Rhyssling, Offering,

Orme and Graves. None of them had their full compliment with them on this side of the Blackwater, but they were all agreed to follow Dunn in this bit of revolution. Lord Lybber, a house that was on the cusp of knightly and noble class, who was situated almost on the Mander nodded as well. "In that case, I think we need to send a sign don't we?" At his fellows nods he smiled grimly and moved to where several catapults were set up on the southern shore of the Blackwater, the largest ones the army had made. Originally they had faced toward the capital, but now they were slowly turned around.

OOOOOO

Mace's portion of the army had met up with Lord Staedmon's by that point, and the two of them had, as Robar reported, decided to swing slightly south of the main battle. This way they would be able to move around the main snarl of combat where Stannis' forces had smashed into the center of Renly's. This way they'd be able to actually come to grips with the attackers much faster.

They were moving quickly, the heavy cavalry and the light racing ahead of the Stormlands infantry. This force had none of the barely trained levy forces from the Reach, containing the remaining Stormlands infantry allied to Renly. The two groups, cavalry and infantry, were slowly separating when they came under attack from an unexpected direction.

The first Mace knew of it was when a large boulder fell out of the sky smashing into his formation, puling several men and then rolling, crushing several more. "Ware above, from behind!" Came the belated call, and practically every man in the army turned to stare in that direction for a moment.

It took another boulder appearing out of the sky dropping toward them to make the men scatter, pushing and shoving at one another to get out of the way. Even so, the 13,000 or so strong force had not spread out over much when the next boulder landed, crushing a few cavalry men this time, and severely injuring a few others even while they desperately tried to get out of the way.

Then it became worse. The first two boulders were the sort used to try and batter down the city's walls. The next several catapult loads were loaded with several dozen smaller rocks of various sizes roped together, the ropes coming apart under the strain of the flight, creating the medieval equivalent of buckshot. Useless against fortifications, this type of catapult ammunition was far more deadly against formed troops.

Hundreds of men died in those next few moments as Mace and Lord Staedmon tried to figure out where the catapult fire was coming from while also trying to get their men to spread out yet remain under control. This was a daunting task under the sudden assault from enemies well out of their own range.

This was made all the harder when someone shouted aloud, "My lords, the fire's coming from our own forts on the other side of the Blackwater!"

Staedmon had found Mace amidst the tumult and the two of them scowled angrily as they realized what that meant. Either Stannis had somehow sent men across the river and overcome the reserve force or they had just been betrayed. "Who's in charge over there?" Mace growled angrily, looking at one of his aides.

"Lord Norcross and Lord Dunn. I think they were much angrier about Renly not cutting them loose to march home then we believed." Staedmon replied, scowling angrily. He couldn't blame them for that anger, but to turn on the rest of the army like this?

"Despicable traitors!" Mace growled, waving his sword in the air. "Let's turn the army around, and get after them!"

Staedmon didn't look at him, staring down towards the Blackwater frowning heavily. He wasn't the most experienced commander, but he had a good education in tactics, and knew that if the traitor Houses held the bridges, they would be able to beat off any assault. "They can easily hold the bridges we made against us, or simply burn them. No, the main battle is out of their catapult's range, let's pick up the pace and we can leave this behind." He grimaced as more stones fell out of the sky, killing and scattering the army's formation further.

"**No!**" Mace growled, angered beyond belief at the treachery from houses that owed him their loyalty. "You do what you want with your force, I'm going to go back there, and make damn certain that those traitors get what's coming to them!"

Staedmon glared after him as he and his accompanying knights began to blow their bugles, gathering their men to them. "What should we do my lord?" Asked one of his own men, a knight from House Tudbury.



"Get the banners and the buglers north of here out of the range of the spread shots from the catapults over there. Don't use the bugles to rally the men, with that buffoon and his fellow idiots blaring so much we'll just confuse the issue. Hopefully the men will see us moving and rally to us anyway. Once that fool has gathered his men and moved off... we'll see how the main battle is doing before deciding what to do."

"My lord?" The knight asked, his voice showing his surprise.

Staedmon shrugged, not wishing to voice the thought that maybe this battle had already been lost. Renly still had more men than Stannis but it seemed that in every other way Stannis was proving the superior. And Staedmon's House hadn't suffered many losses yet, so maybe it was time to look to his own first.

While Alesander Staedmon was thinking long term, Mace was thinking here and now. Even Mace however wasn't so much of an idiot to charge the bridges controlled by Norcross and the other traitors. Instead he retreated to the west and south, moving toward the city and the bridge the army had built near the port in the Blackwater. The forts around there were controlled by his family and House Ambrose, a firm ally of House Tyrell, he'd be able to cross the bridges there and take the traitors from the side. That this removed him from the main battle against Stannis really didn't register in Mace's mind, he was so angry at the traitors.

OOOOOOO

At the front of the battle Renly had made the same mistake numerous young commanders have made throughout history: he had become too involved in the front lines to control the flow of battle. Randyll however had not gotten involved personally yet. Standing back from the main conflict he was able to slowly reorganize the main army's forces and pull them back to the south and east, skirting around the forts that had been emptied of men last night through whatever sorcerous means the Red Witch had called up. He ordered every archer in the army up to guard his flank in defense against whatever was inside them, while pulling together the main army.

But the army well knew they should have received reinforcements by now. The fact they had not, and the drubbing they had taken so far, was impacting the troop's morale. The morale of the Reach's levy forces was never very high at the best of times, now they had been mauled, thrown into a battle they couldn't win. Here and there they broke despite the best Randyll could do to put some steel in their spine. Those men now began to fight to get away from the battle, further hampering the remainder's ability to keep their lines intact.

Despite that, Randyll still had command of the center of the Stormlands-Reach Army, and they were pulling south and east under control. Now the Stormlands infantry on both sides matched up in the center of the battle, bolstered by the infantry of the few Reach houses who had spent any money on their infantry and were present, a small number indeed. House Buckler met House Fell, House Grandison met House Errol along with others and House Baratheon fought on both sides in the center of the ferocious melee. But the men under Stannis held their lines better, and then reinforcements arrived on Stannis' right flank.

These were men of House Massey and Bar Emmon. They had been involved in the skirmish against Loras and Lord Ashford but had not, as Loras thought, been broken by their riposte, retreating in good order. Now they joined the main battle, joining the Royal Navy men that had been holding that flank. Slowly they began to turn the Reach cavalry and levy forces holding there, and then their light cavalry and the small number of heavy cavalry Stannis had under his command began to hammer the enemy's line, threatening to break it, and with it the army's morale.

Noticing this Randyll cursed then gestured around to the men of his own house. "Time for us to hit them lads!" As his men roared and they began to charge forward, Randyll was still thinking hard. *Turn that around, and their panic may spread.* The battle could still be won, but the lack of reinforcements was beginning to loom large, and he wondered where the hell Mace and Alesander had gotten to. *Fucking idiot must not have gotten someone to read his fucking map for him!*

OOOOOOO

Rupert and Jaime had continued to wait, hoping that a general outbreak would quickly follow. Yet the smallfolk had learned their lesson from the times they had taken control of the walls here and there in the days before this. They knew even if they got out of the city, the surrounding army would not let them go, and there was little to no cover and nothing to eat between the outer wall and the surrounding army. There were still a few who tried to put to sea by the Blackwater, and more who tried to get over the wall into Fishmonger's street and from there over the river, but they fared no better than they had the other times they had tried this.

That didn't mean however that the various Crownlands forces trying to break out weren't doing their job however. Jaime and Rupert took turns looking through the Hand's Myrish glass at the forts set up on and to the west of the

Kingsroad. Finally both men smiled as the forces there sortied out against Lord Harte and the others. "Now, let's return to the others and get on!"

It would take them a bare few minutes by horse to reach the Florent lines. Returning to the others Serret barked out orders, no longer giving even lip service to Joffrey being the king, simply ordering him around like he did the others. Joffrey took this poorly, but a stern glance from the queen and Pycelle's hand clamping down on his shoulder kept him from interrupting Rupert's flow as he finished giving out orders. "Jaime, you'll be in charge of the first ranks, break through and then circle back until the King and Queen Regent are clear, after that, make certain they get away whatever else is going on!"

Jaime nodded, glancing at his sister who nodded as well, her eyes showing both her concern for them all and her trust in him. Joffrey made to move forward, but at a gesture from his mother Ser Swann moved his horse to block the King's path. "You should not be fighting what amounts to a skirmish my son." Cersei said simply shaking her head. "Kings lead grand charges into massive battles, they don't fight in every skirmish where arrows and position mean more than skill and numbers."

"I suppose that makes sense." Joffrey conceded with a scowl. Though inside he was eager to hurt someone again, it had been too long since he had sated any of his... desires.

Jaime stretched in his armor, grinning evilly. It had been far too long since he'd had a proper fight, the last time was against Eddard in the battle of Two Truths and he was eager to get it stuck in. "Let's go." he said simply, and led the way trotting out of the slums and out into the open area between the slums and the besieging army's line.

Almost immediately another shout went up, but only a few desultory arrows were shot in their direction before Jaime and the men with him were within charging range. "Hear me **roar!**" Shouted Jaime at the top of his lungs, pointing forward with his blade before spurring his horse into the charge.

A moment later his sword flashed out, catching one man high in the shoulder as he passed by before coming back in a underhand swing to catch another man's axe, pushing it away before coming back and slicing him open along the neck. The man hadn't even put on his helmet yet.

Jaime's men hammered into the defender's lines, coming up and over the ditches and slamming into the men manning them with all the force of a cavalry charge at its best. It was ironic that the Reach for all its vaunted desire and love of cavalry had not been able to use their cavalry to good effect in this entire war yet, whereas the Westerlanders in this one charge had been able to.

A small unit of heavy cavalry tried to join the battle coming out of the Florent fort, but couldn't get up enough momentum to make much difference, instead becoming snarled up in the melee. Wheeling his horse around Jaime hacked to the left and right, clearing the area around him quickly then making for the one banner man he could see.

The man saw him coming, and urged his force forward with more courage than sense. The two exchanged four blows before Jaime reposted too fast for the other man to block, smashing his blade tip into and through his opponent's plate armor. The man fell, and the heavy cavalry all around them began to pull back toward the fort.

"Keep going!" Yelled Rupert, pulling his own horse around and coming back hacking at a man wearing Florent colors with his axe. "Bring the torches forward, then someone run off or take their horses!"

A moment later several unmounted men came forward with torches, hurling them up onto the Ford before pulling themselves into horses held by their fellows. There were too many men up there and the wood was too wet for the fire to catch hold, but it took even more attention away while Ser Swann led Cersei and her party forward at a gallop, racing through the hole Jaime and Rupert had made in the defender's line.

The next few moments were harrowing, and more than a dozen men went down with arrows in their horses or their own back, but at last the Westerlanders galloped out of arrow range, racing on down the road to Rosby, meeting up with lord Edgerton and his few surviving men, all of whom had simply run through the battle occurring along the Kingsroad, allowing Harte and the rest of their men to die to cover their escape, though they didn't know it. Soon enough they would cut off overland and head towards the Sow's Horn, but Lord Serret wanted to put more distance between them and any pursuers.

OOOOOO

At the same time the Lannisters and their allies were breaking out of the cordon, Mace had gotten across the Blackwater and had moved up its southern edge to attack the traitors on that side. He had gathered another several

thousand men, and had massively overwhelmingly numbers as he attacked as well as surprise. Lord Dunn and his fellows hadn't sent out any scouts on their own flanks, assuming that any attack would come right over the bridges in front of their forts. A few of their watchers had noticed Mace's force pulling back, but they hadn't followed them, intent on hammering Staedmon's men before they could get out of catapult range.

Even so, the battle almost teetered on the brink for a moment. Mace thought himself a fine warrior and general, when in reality he was rather poor at both. He led the fist charge against the traitor's lines, smashing into their barely formed defenses and through, only to become bogged down almost immediately as more men came up, circling his horse. It was only the timely intervention of some of his household's men that kept Mace from death then.

Even so, Lord Dunn and his fellows were able to retreat into the fort and the better defenses set up around it, holding out with their archers and bogging down Mace and his portion of the army. Until Lord Staedmon led his men across the now undefended bridges, falling on the beleaguered defenders from behind and more importantly bringing enough infantry to storm their lines and the fort. Men began to surrender then, throwing down their weapons and getting on their knees where they stood, but the men in the actual fort kept fighting.

As this was going on, Staedmon found Mace in the back of his formation. Mace's shoulder plate was badly dented, and his helmet was missing. Blood caked one side of his face, and he appeared a little dazed, but his guards, all men chosen by Willas and Loras back in Highgarden, had command of the battle and were doing well.

Staedmon had decided to aid Mace in crushing the rebels instead of reinforcing Renly's frontline. Randyll had sent a runner to him, ordering him to fall back over the bridges. Randyll felt that the first day of the battle was lost, momentum was totally on Stannis' side. But if the Reach/Stormlands army could fall back in good enough order, they could come back after rebuilding their morale and pin Stannis against the still manned forts. Staedmon had agreed with the idea, it made sense and allowed him to not commit his forces just yet.

"Lord Tyrell!" Alesander shouted to be heard over the ongoing tumult of battle. "We need to guard the bridge! Get your archers over there, I'll leave some of my infantry and... my lord, are you listening!?" Mace had been staring at him, his eyes uncomprehending.

"Mace took a blow to the head Lord Staedmon, he hasn't been able to concentrate for a few minutes." Lord Fossoway said from where he had pushed up his faceplate huffing heavily at the exertion of the battle thus far.

"Damn it, fine, then you tell someone to get the archers over there, if Renly and his force are forced to retreat, Stannis will be right behind him!" Staedmon barked, turning away. "Leave someone to watch the idiot, I'll send House Caron's forces to aid you finishing off the men around the fort, but after that move your men over to the bridge!"

OOOOOO

Loras was wiping his sword off on the tabard of a Lannister supporter from one of the Crownlands houses, he didn't recognize it offhand. His heavily enameled armor had been badly dented, and one of his shoulders felt a little stiff as he moved it under his armor. But like Loras himself, once you removed the enamel covering it, you found the steel waiting underneath. He had personally killed at least ten men today, and more than one had been a passably decent swordsman, but none had been up to his level.

Cleaning his blade was just something for his hands to do while he stared incredulously at the knight he had sent to speak to Alekyne. "Are you telling me that buffoon saw Cersei and her bastard, along with the Kingslayer escape past his lines and didn't pursue them?!"

"Alekyne Florent lost several dozen mounted men my lord, and the remaining horses were run off during the battle or stolen. He couldn't pursue them."

"Damn convenient for the coward." Lord Ashford scoffed. "He could have chased after them on foot, but I doubt the yellowbelly wants any part of the Kingslayer."

"I on the other hand do." Loras replied, staring northward. "Let's get after them. If we don't catch them up before the sun starts to set, we'll rest then, and send word back to the rest of the army. But I want us on the Lannisters heels right now!"

"My lord, what about the battle against Stannis? We have over five thousand men here my lord, surely we should just send a small force to trail the Lannisters and then turn to aid His Majesty against his brother?" Ashford asked hesitantly.

He had noticed throughout the day that something seemed to have happened between Renly and Loras. Many of the Reach lords had noticed that their friendship had waned. They had come up with myriad reasons for the sudden change, ranging from the idea that Renly felt guilty about his friends disfigurement to some reasons based on some of them believing the Lannister propaganda about Renly's preferences. Whatever it was, it seemed to have come to a head last night, and it was effecting Loras' thinking.

Loras frowned, looking back over his shoulder toward where the main battle was occurring, just beyond his line of vision. then back to the north. If they attacked from here they would be able to strike at Stannis' rear, but Cersei and her family would get away cleanly. For a moment, just a moment the future of all Westeros tilted in the balance.

Then the moment passed and Loras shook his head. "No, we have a chance to finish off the Lannisters right now. My father and the others will be able to handle Stannis, but we can't finish him off to simply let Cersei and her bastard get meet up with Tywin in the Riverlands. If they do that, they can fall back into the Westerlands, and this war might continue for years even if we're able to ally with the Starks. Strategically, the Lannisters are a much larger threat than Stannis."

Personally Loras felt that just wasn't going to happen until Renly admitted his cowardice in fleeing from King's Landing. That just wasn't going to happen, it would be political suicide, but that wouldn't matter to the Starks, whose patriarch had nearly died in a battle that they might well have won if Renly had stayed to aid them.

"Besides," Loras went on. "Given what I saw last night, the 'marriage' between Renly and Margaery might never have been consummated." That was hinting at something a little too close to home, but frankly Loras no longer cared about keeping Renly's secrets.

Lord Ashford frowned, wondering what by the Seven that could mean, but still nodded to Loras' other points. Tywin had strode Westeros like a giant for so long, the fear of him was something to conjure with, even now when he had evidently suffered a major military defeat. Letting him and the royals join up was no doubt a very bad idea. "I suppose that makes sense my lord."

Loras nodded, then turned to his bugler and began to pass on orders to his men, forming them up for a march. Not twenty minutes later, they were gone, leaving the forts they had aided behind them as they moved north along the Kingsroad.

OOOOOO

The main battle had seesawed wildly, with both sides able to break their opponents shield walls here and there to claim momentary advantage, but neither able to really deliver a crippling blow, but Stannis' troops had gradually pushed Renly's men back and further back, blunted only by the fact they didn't have enough cavalry to envelop Renly, but the archers on both sides had dueled for hours, with hundreds on both sides dying. The army was close to breaking, but the news that the traitors on the southern side of the Blackwater had been crushed and that the Tyrell/Staedmon force was waiting for them there kept most of the men from losing that last bit of morale that kept them going. But it was becoming close, every unit commander could feel it.

The final straw came suddenly as it always did. Randyll was once again at the front of the battle, rallying the western edge of the army's line, where Stannis had committed his last few units of cavalry along with two-thirds of his reserve to try and shatter that flank permanently. Randyll and his men had just beaten off the assault when an arrow came out of nowhere and caught him directly in the eye-slit of his helmet. It caught Randyll in the eye and continued on, piercing his brain and killing him instantly.

Heartsbane fell out of his lifeless hands to the ground below as Randyll Tarly slowly collapsed sideways out of his saddle. The Valyrian blade was quickly picked up by one of his bannermen, who quickly shouted orders to his fellows while another man began to wave the Tarly banner in the air. "Our Lord is slain. Our duty is to our house, not Renly, let's get out of here!"

The Tarly armymen were very well trained and had previously been well led. Moreover they were a unified force. Under the command of Terrence Hunt they backed away from what forces Stannis still had on the eastern flank, making towards the city before cutting back south, making for the same bridge Mace had previously used to flank the traitors.

With Randyll dead, the full weight of command fell on Renly's unprepared shoulders. But not only did Renly not realize he had to, still embroiled with the battle at the front lines, he'd already proven that he wasn't it up to the task by the night assault debacle. Here and there lords from both the Reach and the Stormlands slowly began to pull their own men back, or simply surrender where they were. Worse, when news of Randyll's fall began to spread panic set

in, the remaining levy force broke entirely, throwing down their arms and running away here and there or simply surrendering, getting in the way of their fellows who were still up for the battle.

At that point Renly finally realized what had happened, the shout of 'Lord Tarly is slain, all is lost!' moving through the army. Pulling back slightly from the front lines, Renly looked around him wildly, noticing men everywhere he looked throwing their weapons down or simply turning and fleeing the battle. Waving his sword in the air Renly gathered his remaining Rainbow Guard shouting aloud. "We need to rally the men!"

Robar spoke up from where he stood on his own feet by the side of Renly's horse. He had been unhorsed early on in the battle but had acquitted himself well, his rune marked longsword red to the hilt with blood. "My Lord this battle is lost! We should retreat across the rush like we had been planning! "

"Retreat where?" said Ser Mullendore, shaking his head looking this way and that, his eyes wide behind his full helmet. Real battle had not been anything like the stories or the tournaments he had been used to. He wasn't alone in thinking that, many of the 'summer knights', the men who had not seen battle before this from the Reach or the Stormlands, had broken or were in the process of breaking now, and Mullendore was on that ragged edge.

"Nowhere," said Bryce Caron, grimly flicking down his visor again, exchanging a last shoulder thump with his bastard brother Rolland before readying himself. "Here they come!"

Around them the last line of Stormlands infantry between the Rainbow Guard and Stannis' advancing troops had finally broken, killed where they stood or fleeing for their lives. Through the panicking armsmen came a few men of the Flame Guard, advancing purposefully at the head of several dozen infantrymen, ignoring the fleeing enemies to race towards the Rainbow Guard quickly. At their head Stannis was moving forward purposefully, Lightbringer burning in one hand, sizzling and crackling from the blood of its latest victim. "Surrender, Renly!" Stannis bellowed.

Renly scowled. For once in his life he felt the hot rage that his family was known for, burning away his sense of self-preservation at the worst possible moment. Pulling down his visor he waved his blade in the air once more. "**Ours is the fury!**" And with that he spurred to meet his brother.

No one would ever know whether or not Stannis would really have killed his brother in person because Renly's charge was interrupted by a few of the Fire Guard who had dismounted during the battle, bringing up spears that they had grabbed from their own infantrymen. One spear caught Renly's horse in the throat, punching through its armor and killing it instantly, throwing Renly out of the saddle. He rose, his sword whistling to cut deep into one man's side and then his sword shield bashing out catching another man in the knee sending him to the ground screaming in agony.

While his remaining Rainbow Guard tried to get to him a mace found Renly's head slamming into it with punishing force. Renly lost his helmet, knocked off his head from that blow but still was able to bring his sword up into the man's guts. Then a spear found his back. Renly Baratheon staggered, arching his back in agony as he screamed. Even spitted like he was however Renly was able to reach around behind him and yank the spear out the while the man on the other side was hacked down by Robar. Nearby Bryce and Rolland stood back to back hacking at any of the Fire Guard who came near them, unable to reach Renly. Ser Mullendore had run, flogging his horse into a lather to escape the Fire Guard.

Renly turned, bringing up his sword to block another blow that would have caught him in the shoulder, his shield flashing out to catch the man in the crotch, shattering his balls. Then Renly's strength failed him as the agony from the wound in his back hit him, and he went to one knee. Someone with a short sword stabbed him through the shoulder and Renly tried to raise his blade to attack the man only to have it knocked out of his hands. An axe then found his side.

Renly Baratheon, would-be King of Westeros fell on that blood-soaked plane. Not to a champion from his brothers forces, not to a Lord or even a knight. He fell to several dozen common born armsmen, not one of whom even realized in the heat of battle who he was, Renly having lost his crown long since.

Stannis stared around at the men who had slain his brother. Two of the men who had been protecting Renly had surrendered immediately seeing his death, shouting "A ransom, A ransom!" which was better than any other shout they could have tried to the armsmen around them. The last of the Rainbow Guard Robar Royce died instead of surrendering, spitted on Lightbringer.

Looking at the body of his younger brother grief filled Stannis, not grief for the death of the man that Renly had become but of the younger boy who he had once known, who had looked up to his older brother during the siege of Storm's End, who had followed him and Robert around and played at being a knight. *The reality of war is rather*

*different than what your imagination created, isn't it brother? Still*, he thought to himself, his thoughts rather morbid and slow at the moment, *at least I won't have to execute him myself*. Then more important matters once more interceded, and Stannis raised Lightbringer up, the flames of it catching the eyes of thousands all around as he shouted, "Renly the pretender is dead, lay down your arms or die as traitors!"

OOOOOO

The battle soon petered out after that, with the Reach and Stormlands men on this side of the Blackwater no longer having reason to fight or the will to do so, really. The Stormlands men in particular were eager to switch sides now. Stannis had proven his strength on the battlefield, and was now the only Baratheon remaining unless they wanted to follow the blonde bastard. Those units of the Reach that were still under control however fell back quickly moving south join Lord Tyrell and Lord Staedmon on the other side of the bridge. Together with the men already there they numbered about sixteen thousand men, but their morale was shot to hell, and Mace and Lord Staedmon were not a united front by any means. Even after Mace regained his senses, he was unwilling to simply submit to Stannis as Lord Staedmon was. This caused a rift in their forces, with Staedmon and his men, along with the men of the Stormlands lords under his command, moving down the Blackwater to camp between the forts controlled by Mace and his ally. Mace did however immediately send a messenger over to open peace talks.

The levy forces of the Reach had been massacred. Unable to get away, unable to surrender, and as poorly armed and led as they were they had never had a chance. Several lords had died, along with much of their forces, and dozens of lords had been captured from both the Reach and the Stormlands. Even so, Stannis knew he had taken casualties too, and many of the forts and siege lines around King's Landing were still manned. Magnanimous in his victory however, he allowed the Reach Lords across the Blackwater to send messages to their fellows while he saw to his brother's burial.

Later, while Lord Buckler and Lord Bolling took over reorganizing the army and preparing their camp, plus of course setting ransoms for the knights and lords captured, Stannis reluctantly met with Mace. The two of them met well out of bow range from both their armies but in full sight of them, accompanied by no one else.

Mace was still stiff from his injuries, but he stared defiantly at Stannis, blustering as always. "The Reach will never surrender to you!"

"Why would I seek war with the Reach now when Renly is dead?" Stannis replied simply. "All I want is for much of the Reach forces to head home, to retake their lands and to destroy the Ironborn invasion. I'll keep some of their forces here, but not many."

"They'll do that anyway." Mace replied rather bitterly. With Renly dead, many of the Reach lords had lost their will to fight for the Iron throne when their homes were in danger. Dunn and his allies were gone, executed after the battle or killed during it, but their desires were shared by many of the remaining Reach lords and all their remaining men, a decent chunk of the Reach's remaining strength. If Mace didn't send at least some of them back to aid Garlan in his campaign, he might face mass desertions or even another uprising like Dunn and Norcross.

"True, but the lords I've captured and in particular the Lords who are still in command of the forces around King's Landing would not. They may still follow you." Stannis smiled grimly. "Unlike my men, I would rather have the loyalty of those lords rather than the money returning them to their families would bring. That doesn't even consider the men under your son that were spotted heading north for some reason. To that end, I think we need to talk."

"Why?" Mace asked suspiciously. "You're not known for your ability to use diplomacy Stannis. And that's not even considering the Shadow monsters you've made use of in this battle or the one you sent after your brother last night."

"Several reasons." Stannis replied not taking umbrage at the other man's tone or words. "One, winter is coming, that Stark motto is true now. All the signs point to it being a long one, and the Reach is well known as the bread basket of all Westeros. I will need the Reach and it's agriculture working as best it can, which means I can't afford to let it fall into chaos with your death or the death of your forces here. Willas may be able to take over for you easily enough, but I understand he is deep in an invasion of the Westerlands right now. And Garlan is a soldier, not an organizer or land manager."

Of course Stannis wasn't certain if he could even deal with either of those though the chances would go down after their father's death obviously. And he knew that with the return of the dragons the other roses might be inclined to go with that ally rather than him. "Second, trying to subjugate the Reach would take time, and men I can ill afford to lose. Those men on the other side of the Blackwater aren't exactly on my side, they were just no longer willing to remain here and be on Renly's side. Moreover some of the Lords manning the fort around the city have refused to give in. I could take them each in turn of course, but doing so would cost my men lives, and their own, plus time. I need those

lives."

"And fourth." Stannis said, leaning forward. "It has recently been confirmed that my wife is barren, my daughter will most likely suffer from the same affliction. As such, I need a wife, a queen. I don't suppose you know where I can find one. Do you?"

OOOOOO

Ranma and his party reached Raventree Hall four days after their meeting with the Brothers without Borders. As soon as they were within sight of the castle horns began to bellow a joyful tune, and there was much shouting and jubilation coming from the walls. "I think word of our success has gone before us!" Greatjon laughed reaching over to slap Ranma and Jon on the shoulder in turn.

"News of victory tends to do that!" Jon laughed, and the party continued on its way, speeding up now as men on horseback rode out to meet them, most of them in Blackwood colors. At their head was Tytos himself. "Lord Stark," he said bowing his head from the saddle, trying not to show any awe at the massive direwolf the Stark youth was riding as easily as a horse. He had gotten used to Nymeria somewhat in the past few days, but even so... "I am Tytos Blackwood, your wife has told me much about your campaign thus far in the Riverlands, as well as the real reasons behind this war. My Hall is yours."

Ranma nodded, reaching across to exchange hand clasps with the man. "Tytos, your loyalty to house Tully does both you and your house credit. I'm sorry we couldn't get down here sooner, and I hope that your lands haven't been too badly despoiled."

"Not overmuch no. Bracken wanted to take our lands over and so they were careful not to do any permanent harm such as poisoning wells or salting the farmlands." Tytos suddenly stopped speaking, taking in the sight of the prisoners with wide eyes. "We'd heard rumors that you had captured the old lion, but I honestly didn't believe it. Killed possibly, but actually captured?"

"In the end, that old lion is more of a politician than a general." Ranma smirked, before turning more grim. "I fully expect that Stannis is going to give us a much harder battle."

"And you're sure that it will come to battle between you two?" Tytos said as he pulled his horse around, swinging into the column to ride between Ranma and Greatjon exchanging nods with the northern Lord who had met during the Greyjoy Rebellion.

"Seeing as he has already sent magical creatures to attack me and mine I would hesitate to say that peace is possible between us." Ranma said now smirking quite a bit more. "Besides, I've heard too much about his new religion to want to have any part of it. That doesn't even mention the fact that my wife is a threat to his position."

By that time they had reached the gate into Raventree Hall, and Ranma rode through the gate to resounding cheers and shouts from all around, shouts of 'King of the North', 'Stark!', and general hurrahs. But Ranma had no attention for any of these, his eyes were locked on his friends and Daenerys, all of whom were standing together in front of the gate into the keep. Quickly Ranma swung off Fenris, letting him bound over to his sister along with Ghost, and moved forward.

Daenerys was just bowing and saying "I take it your mission was a success my husband," but before she could get more than "I take it" out of her mouth, Ranma had picked her up by the waist, twirling her around in midair before leaning up into a kiss that took her breath away. All around the shouts redoubled, joined by whistles and cheers as even the Wolfsworn laughed and shook their heads at Ranma's disdain for propriety. Daenerys however didn't notice anything, simply leaning into the kiss her arms going around Ranma's shoulders.

Eventually however reality reasserted itself and Ranma pulled away letting Daenerys down to the ground reluctantly. He murmured into her silver hair in ancient Valyrian "Avyjorraelan, Daenerys Targaryen."

"Avyjorraelan, Ranma Stark." Daenerys replied in the same language nestling into his shoulder and neck for a moment before turning away, moving back to stand beside Myrcella who had watched the exchange with joy in her eyes.

Arya came forward, grinning up at her brother. "Did you catch them? Daenerys told us you were chasing down the old lion."

Ranma laughed, reaching out to ruffle her hair affectionately, knowing she wasn't one for hugging most of the time.

"Caught Tywin and more besides." Ranma gestured with his other hand to the prisoners who were now being led inside. "Another one of his brother's nephews, another nephew of some kind and an uncle." He looked back to Daenerys who was scowling angrily at the site of the Lannisters. "Enough to both see that justice is done and retain enough hostages to make certain the Lannisters will no longer wish to fight us."

"Good." Daenerys replied simply, not taking her eyes off where Tywin was being led down to the keep's dungeons, which were set in a small separate building leading down to a basement beside the central keep of Raventree Hall. "Very good indeed..."

He looked at Myrcella who was staring at the prisoners with a cold face. Thinking he knew what she was thinking he moved over to her next, pulling her into a gentle hug and whispering in her ear. "Don't worry Merry, I can't pass judgment on them for their actions here in the Riverlands, but you won't have to be present for that. I'm sorry, but that's all I can do. Justice needs to be served."

Merry sighed, putting her arms around his waist in a brief but heartfelt hug before letting them fall back to hang by her side, though Ranma hadn't pulled back from the hug just yet. "I know, Daenerys explained matters well enough before this, and really I've never gotten to know most of my family. We spent most of our time in King's Landing, and only occasionally went to the Westerlands. I might know one or two of their names from seeing them at tournaments or the few times we went to Casterly Rock, or when they came to pass messages on to my mother, but that's all."

"Besides..." She went on much more grimly. "Remember I've been dealing with the injured and wounded of not just the army but the smallfolk when I have the time. I've heard all the tales of the horrors the Westerlands army committed here, and seen more than a few examples of it too."

"I know, Ranma said, turning his attention back to Arya and the young girl who was trying to hide behind her while staring up at him through wide eyes. "And who's this?"

"This is Bess Bracken." Arya said somewhat hesitant way. "I was hoping, to, um to keep her with us as a sort of servant for myself? But not quite?"

"A page sort of thing." Ranma said bending down now to stare into the girls eyes. "And is this something you want too, milady?"

"Yes, your Majesty." the girl said and Ranma laughed.

"Ack, you don't have to call me by my title if I'm not sitting in judgment or giving out orders lass." he said kindly, reaching over to rub her hair just as he did Arya's. "So long as Arya is willing to look out for you, I suppose that's fine. Though obviously given your age you won't be allowed to roam the army's camps when we stop, and you have to stick with Arya for most of the time in any event."

"That's fine." Bess said quickly, staring at Ranma with something approaching hero worship. She was astonished that Ranma didn't seem to care about her last name in all, and indeed Ranma didn't. His policy had been set back with the Twins. The children of traitors would not be physically harmed in his retaliation against their house unless they were part of the treason.

Arya however had turned to stare at the young boy and the other strangers that had arrived with the army. The youth wore a longsword on his back and moved like a trained warrior, with that bit of added lightness to his feet that Arya recognized as one of the first signs of Ranma's training. A small, heretofore unknown part of her mind also noted he was rather cute. She ignored that however, simply wondering who he and the others were, and why Ranma had saw fit to train him.

Ranma stood up, looking around at the Wolfsworn and in particular Dacey. "I think we all have some tales to share, let me see to the men and then I would love to hear how you and the others took Stone Hedge, and everything else. Though I note that there don't seem to be nearly as many men around as there should be, and Lord Mallister isn't here either."

"That would be my doing." Daenerys replied, taking one of his arms in hers. "I didn't want us to overburden House Blackwood land, I thought that would be a ill turn to deal to an ally. So when we arrived I split the army up into smaller commands once more. I sent the most rested of our troops, mostly the ones that had relieved Raventree Hall, down with Lord Mallister to camp outside Harrentown, then the most weary back to Harroway under Timot Hammerhand. Is that really his last name by the way?"

"No, Timot got that name from a kind of joke from his youth." Ranma said talking about an older Stark man who had



served his family as long as Ranma had been alive and quite a bit longer besides. "He was known as a boxer in his youth, one of the few northern men willing to go toe to toe with Greatjon. He never won obviously, but it still made a name for him."

Despite that however he knew Timot to be an intelligent and thoughtful man, and a very good organizer. Timot had served as Jon and Patrek as their second in command when they had been handling the army's logistics. Not the sort Ranma would put in charge of a battle by any means, but on a march from one place to another and the refit of the army, certainly.

"I told him that once Lord Karstark arrived back from the Salt Pans he should turn over command to him unless something else came up. We captured a lot of supplies from Stone Hedge, enough to feed the Army for weeks, but I thought we should only keep half of those and turn the other half over to helping with the refugees that have already begun to trickle back to their lands. I left a small contingent at Stone Hedge to hold it under a knight that Sir Wendel recommended, he'll be in charge of feeding the refugees as they move back to their lands around there." Daenerys went on.

By that point Ranma, Daenerys and the people following them had entered the keep and were now being escorted through the keep by a servant to a small sitting room on the fourth floor. Instead of taking up the position of the Lord, a single chair in front of a small low-slung table, Ranma took a small sofa, pulling Daenerys down next to him and throwing an arm around her shoulders smiling contentedly, grinning at Merry who automatically moved to sit on a small footstool to his other side. She giggled a little, then winked at Daenerys who smirked back. Ranma closed his eyes contentedly, while the others filed in, then opened his eyes and looked over at Dacey. "I think we all need to get caught up on what we've all been doing, Dacey you start."

That process took several hours, by which time food had arrived. It was an extremely convivial affair, with everyone laughing as Arya interjected her bit about the eldest Bracken daughter trying to flirt with Roger. The battles fought to retain control of Stone Hedge were much more interesting though especially Lord Bracken's capture which was a surprise to Ranma and those who had chased Tywin down.

Another surprise was his great uncle Brynden's tale. "So both Lord Broom and Lord Vypren are dead? That's a shock. I had thought that Tywin would try to keep his remaining Lords alive." Ranma and his men had made a note of the lords his in-battle assassination idea had killed in the battle by the Ruby Ford of course.

"It certainly surprised me to at the time." Brynden said smirking a little. His clothing was the most travel stained and worn of them all, and even now the better part of a week after his part of the campaign had ended he still looked weary. "It was simply a literal example of the fog of war. You see..."

### **Flashback:**

Brynden wiped his face free of rain for a brief moment staring around him. Behind him the six men of the small scout force he had been personally leading were also looking around. After a moment Brynden shrugged his shoulders and whispered "If any of you see any landmarks you recognize tell me, because I am completely lost in this rain."

This wasn't just rain thought. This was a torrential downpour, the rain and fog was so heavy you could barely see five feet in front of you. The same rains that had fallen on Ranma's army lightly a few days after they left the Ruby Ford had simply sat in the area Brynden was chasing the Westerlands through and dumped everything it had on them.

"Look on the bright side milord." Said one of his men with false joviality. "If we Riverlanders are having trouble moving through this, the bloody Westerlanders must be bogged down something fierce."

"True." Brynden replied. "Which is why I want to find some Seven-damned landmarks! If we're where I think we are, we can possibly get ahead of them and prepare another ambush."

A moment later however that thought was driven out of Brynden's head when several men on horseback rode through the small muddy riverbank that Brynden had occupied of their second before. Luckily the sounds of their hooves had alerted him and his men, and they had hidden themselves quickly.

One of the men nearby put an arrow to his string quickly, and even through the rain was able to get off a single shot which took one of the horsemen in the thigh. The other six cavalymen tried to turn, but the rain was hampering their vision just as much as the Riverlander. Several of Brynden's men were able to fade back into the scrubland, and Brynden threw himself down into a small muddy ditch.

One of the horses actually paused directly over him and he heard voices about. "Lord Vypren, we can't chase after

them in this rain, we be chasing our own tails!"

"I know." Said a voice directly above Brynden, the voice dark and angry. "But I want to hurt the Northerners at least a little as recompense for the destruction of my seat and the capture of my family. Thanks to that old toothless lion I haven't been able to even join in the battles yet! If I had..." the voice turned rather boastful. "We might have won that battle at the Ruby Ford."

Another voice muttered as if to itself, though the voice carried through the rain slightly. "And pigs could fly."

Brynden was inclined to agree with this second voice, but he also wasn't about to let a gift like this pass by. Slowly he reached above him and began to saw through the bottom buckle holding the saddle onto the horse directly above him. He was very careful about it, yet even so one of the horses hooves nearly caught him, but he finished and then laid back down in the ditch, lying prone and letting the rain wipe off some of the mud on him while the Westerlanders continued their discussion above him.

"I don't know why Tywin is even trying to push this through this rain, it's obvious that even the Northerners won't be able to follow us closely in this, in fact I bet they've already stopped for the day. Trying to continue in this is foolish in the extreme, it's only chance and luck that will let any of our scouts find the main army again."

"True enough, but Tywin is still afraid of the wolves catching up with him with those pike in the open."

"He's not the only one." Another voice muttered, sounding scared. "I've faced pike before, but nothing like that. Those men acted like one person, there wasn't a way you could get between them, no way to get at them and those pikes kept on pushing and..."

There was a moment of silence above Brynden, and then Vypren shook his head. "Enough, we're not getting anything done sitting here wool-gathering. Let's move on."

The men all kneed their horses into motion and Vypren did the same a second later. Only when he did, it his saddle began to slip back off his horse almost immediately. "What the..." Before he could shout for help his horse kept on going into the rain, spilling Vypren out of the saddle.

Brynden began to pull himself out of the dish to move towards Vypren where he sprawled on the ground, trying to push himself to his feet hampered by the full plate armor he wore. In comparison Brynden only had light chain mail on. Even so, Vypren had already been pulling out his sword the moment he felt his saddle began to shift, and he was up on one knee lashing out blindly with his blade before Brynden could pull himself out of the muddy ditch.

The mud clung to him as he moved forward, engaging the downed man sword to sword. "Alarm!" Vypren began to shout then paused as he stared hard at the man facing them. "Brynden Tully!" he exclaimed, then pushed hard against Brynden's blade, before coming up with a sweep that he had hoped to catch Brynden in the shoulder with.

But Brynden moved aside at the last moment, letting Vypren's blade whistle past before stabbing forward with his own blade only for Vypren to turn slightly to allow it to skitter across his armor rather than penetrate. Vypren's fist caught Brynden in the chin, throwing him back slightly. "I wanted to hurt the Northerners, I think losing one of their best generals will settle accounts nicely!"

Not speaking, Brynden locked blades with the Vypren, then forced both blade to one side before smashing his shoulder into the other man's chest, taking him off his feet and down to the ground. But one of Vypren's hands left his sword hilt, grabbing Brynden's arm and pulling him down as well. The two of them rolled around in the muck and mire, the blades lost when they hit the ground punching and kicking as they could.

Vypren lost his helmet, but eventually gained the upper hand thanks to his slightly greater strength and weight, pinning Brynden underneath them. But Brynden reached out with one hand grabbing up a rock and slamming it into the Vypren's face. Blood flew and Vypren began to scream, as his eye was caught by that blow, popped like a grape. Both of his hands moving from where they had been holding Brynden down to touch his ravaged face as he tried to push himself to his feet to get away from his opponent.

But Brynden whipped out his belt buckle's knife then thrust upwards, catching Vypren directly underneath his chest plate pushing it deep into the man's guts. He moved to his knees, pushing the dying man's body off him while he reached out with his other hand, putting it over Vypren's mouth so his screams could not be heard through the rain.

However the sound of their battle had been heard, and Brynden could already hear the jingle of harness as the other Westerlanders came back to see what was going on. Throwing the dead body into the same ditch that he had been

hiding in before, Brynden moved off silently through the woods, chuckling quietly at yet another traitor getting his just desserts.

### End Flashback

"Lord Broom's death was much less..." Brynden paused then shrugged "Muddy." As his listeners laughed, Brynden went on. "There was nothing glorious it, it was planned simply chance. Chance played a part in Lord Broom's death as well. We had found a small ridge line where we could prepare our archers and rake their army as they marched along. We waited for the central portion of the army to pass before he opened fire. Broom was simply one of the casualties.

Silas nodded, looking at Brynden with respect. "Brynden planned a masterful chase my Lords, I doubt Tywin had even an inkling of what was happening or that the entire northern army **wasn't** behind him. We cost them hundreds, possibly thousands of men. He shook his head. "The only problem is, they also began to have a major desertion problem. We'll have to put together a bandit hunting expedition to winkle them all out."

"Not just there, Ranma and Daenerys said together, " then looked at one another as everyone else laughed. Daenerys shrugged and went on. "I would bet they were also having an issue with deserters before that, and with looters that never returned." He looked over at Ser Blantree. "Ser Blantree, would you be willing to lead such an expedition?"

"So long as I can receive local guides my lady, I have no issue with that. I would prefer to start around here and work our way out, in particular towards Acorn Hall and then down to Wayfarer's Rest before making my way back up. That area is the most ravaged by the Westerlanders, and I think, despite what Silas says, will have a larger percentage of looters and other dishonorable folk acting in it."

"That will do for now, how about you tell us how this siege went Lord Blackwood? Ranma asked. "As well as events before that and the battle at the Kneeling man's Ford."

Tytos nodded assent and told them everything he knew about the initial few months of the campaign against the Westerlanders. He told them how he had tried to convince the Vance brothers to continue their skirmishing campaign against the Lannisters rather than a standup fight, how he had retreated and how the siege had not been so onerous thanks to his having time enough to prepare forward. "But," he concluded. "It would have become much worse if your relief force hadn't arrived. The besiegers were just starting to tunnel, and even though my castle sits mostly on granite they could've found a weak point. Tunnel fighting like that is a horrendously bloody affair."

Ranma nodded. "I know I said it before, but it bears repeating," he said as he looked at Tytos and his two oldest sons who had joined him for this conference, bowing his head. "Thank you. Your loyalty to my grandfather will not be forgotten."

"We did as honor dictated." Tytos replied waving his hand airily, though his eyes glimmered appreciatively at Ranma's thanks.

"I understand you have a godswood here?" Ranma asked.

"Yes, but our weirwood tree is dead." Tytos scowled angrily. "It was the poisoning of our tree that set my house against House Bracken."

"Nonetheless even without a weirwood tree being in a godswood would be a touch of home after so long away." Ranma said shaking his head. "And I'll send word to Winterfell to see if we can find a sapling to send to you."

Tytos nodded gratefully, never having considered that idea before. The weirwood tree had been dead for so long that replacing it had never occurred to him or any of his ancestors.

Ranma moved on to other matters. "I agree wholeheartedly with the splitting of the Army, though I've no idea how likely it is the Lannisters in Harrenhal will try to make trouble. Keeping them penned up there is simply good sense. Other than that, I want to give the army at least a week to recuperate. We've been pushing them hard for months now. Every aspect of the army save the bandit hunting group."

He looked over at Ser Blantree his eyes grim. "Ser Blantree, as my grandfather's representative I formally give you leave to try and execute bandits as you find them. These men will be desperate, they will be hard and dangerous men, not like those who surrendered to us. They willingly decided to run and try their luck living off the land and their fellow man's work. As such, they deserve no mercy and will get none unless you deem it so. Do you agree to perform

this duty?"

Ser Blantree stood then bowed formally. "I shall perform my duty to the best of my abilities my lord."

Ranma nodded, running one hand through his hair down to his ponytail and pulling on it thoughtfully. "Have we got any messages from Domic and Alayaya?" The two of them had stayed behind in Harroway, thinking that it was the best place to gather rumors and news from the rest of Westeros.

"No." Daenerys replied, leaning away slightly from him to lean against the other arm of the sofa allowing her to better look him in the eyes. We received word that Lord Karstark had sent word up from Saltpan however." She detailed what happened in that beleaguered town, causing most of the Riverlanders around her to scowl though Lord Ryger seemed more irritated that his guess had been so far off than anything else.

"Domic also sent a message that he is waiting for some news to reach him from further south, but he didn't tell explain what." Daenerys's was rather irritated by that frankly. She trusted Domic not to keep things from her, he just tended to want to make certain of his sources and information before sharing them. That was a good thing she supposed, but it did slow down the flow of information to her and Ranma.

"Damn. I'd like to know more information and possibly even get back a reply from the Vale before we start planning our next move. We'll need to start gathering the captured Lords and their men for trials. I'll send out messages to that effect tomorrow. Until the trials begin, no one is to speak to any of the Lannisters. Tywin is well known to have a silver tongue and very deep gold lined pocket. I trust most of our men, but there's no need to let temptation rear its ugly head. Other than that my Lords, I think that we can afford to have a few days break." With that he stood up, looking over at Daenerys who nodded in turn. She too stood up, bowing slightly and exited the room.

Several hours later Daenerys sighed, stretching luxuriantly in the small tub while her body tingled in post-coital bliss. The two had begun their lovemaking after Daenerys had helped Ranma shave, then bathe, though she somewhat regretted the soggy, torn mess that had been her chemise.

Ranma nuzzled into her rest, resting his body lightly over hers. His back was once more crisscross of slashes from her at nails, but they had already begun to heal. "Have I mentioned how much I love this?" she said sighing tiredly.

"Not the only one Dae." Ranma said kissing her porcelain colored breast before moving up lately to nuzzle into her neck. When he spoke next however his voice was serious. "You realize that we were lucky in this campaign right? Tywin underestimated me personally, and he didn't know anything about you or your dragons."

"I know." Daenerys replied nodding her head. " And even if I wasn't aware of it before, Brynden brought that up a few days ago. I'm honestly surprised we haven't heard any news about my brother arriving somewhere in Westeros, either with the Dornish aid or not, and our campaign against the Westerlanders isn't done quite yet, is it?"

"No, it will only be done when we take the Golden Tooth at the very least. We might have to send a small invasion force into the Westerlands, at least until we deal with Joffrey the bastard and his mother, but I hope not to." Ranma grimaced, not looking forward to that. He had respected Cersei, possibly even liked her or at least liked her more than he liked the King. But there was no doubting the fact that she had committed treason defending her son from being outed as a bastard along with the initial act, whoever his father had been. He would deal with her as he needed to regardless of his sister's request in that regard.

"The Wolfsworn and I can deal with the Golden Tooth, one way or the other. Once we have that, the Westerlands won't be able to invade the Riverlands, our back and west will be secure which will be necessary when we march into the Crownlands. I want to fight the next campaign in the Crownlands, the Riverlands have suffered too much already. It will be all they can do to compare for winter."

"I agree wholeheartedly." She had seen far too many burned-out farms and even one village between Stone Hedge and Raventree Hall to doubt that. "And we might be able to at least bring some of the Westerlands under our auspices in the future. Merry and I came up with some ideas there, I think you'll find them interesting." Daenerys said with a fond smile. She changed the subject slightly then. "Do you think the Faith is serious about getting the smallfolk to aid us as they can?"

"I think that Septon Sparrow saw we were truly doing our best not to prey upon the smallfolk, and we haven't gone out of our way to piss off the Seven's Faith. In the short term, that makes us the best candidates he and the rest of the Faith can back. In the long term that might change, but for right now and into winter that's more than enough for me. What help they might be beyond supplies and passing on information though, that I don't know."

"True." Daenerys murmured, slowly becoming uncomfortable as the water in the tub, which had been delivered by several maids earlier, began to cool around their bodies. She pushed Ranma off her gently, taking his hand when he offered to help her up and out of the tub. She flushed in delight at the look of desire on her husband's face as she stepped out of the tub, but her mind remained on more important things. "In the future I think we should place a septon, possibly even the High Septon himself or his representative, on our small council. Or whatever we decide to call our council in the future. Though not for preference the current one High septon, I've heard too many tails about how corrupt he is."

Ranma nodded, then trailed one finger down Daenerys' back while he towed her off. One hand circled her waist, moving up to gently tickle her nipples for a moment while he looking at her with one eyebrow raised. Even though Daenerys could feel her body responding to his gentle touch she shook her head regretfully, moving out of his warm embrace to a bathrobe one of the servants had left. She was a little too sore for more fun right now. Dacey had taken to training her since they had met up at Stone Hedge, and some of the exercises she had her doing made her thighs and legs burn. Now that she was coming out of her post-coital high the pain had returned redoubled. It was all Daenerys could do to keep from wincing.

Instead of being upset or concerned Ranma simply shrugged, patting her rear gently while he moved to his clothing. As he searched for his breeches he called back over his shoulder "I want to check out the godswood here, then talk to Merry."

Daenerys paused in searching around for heard nightshirt, staring over at Ranma enjoying the sight of him being bent over and his magnificent back towards her. Watching the muscles in it move and flex even as he did something so simple as pulling on a shirt was a very sensual sight. "About what?"

"I want to make certain that she really is okay with what's going to happen to at least Tywin, and maybe some of the other Lannister prisoners. I know she said she wasn't close with any of them, but not close with any of them and understanding that some of her family will be executed in the near future is two different things."

Daenerys nodded, smiling fondly at his concern for the other girl, even while she made another mental note to talk to Alayaya about Merry, her and Ranma. She had not forgotten that moment where she had to stop herself from kissing the younger girl in Stone Hedge, nor had that been the last such moment. "She and I have talked about that, and I think her responses will surprise you."

She reached out, taking Ranma's hand. "She cares Ranma, she **cares** deeply about people not just the people she meets, but the smallfolk she helps and then never sees again, even those she will never see. It's part and parcel of her personality as a healer. And as Merry said earlier, she's seen what the Lannisters have allowed to occur here in the Westerlands up close and personal."

Ranma looked over at Daenerys. What do you think about that Bess girl? I have to say I'm not happy about the idea of another young girl being with the army, especially one who can't defend herself like Arya and Meera. Alayaya was one thing, and she was always accompanied by one of the wolfsworn or Domic, but Bess is much too young, and not trained in any way."

"I think Arya enjoys having another tomboy around, her own age, and she loves to encourage that. I also think Cley has quite a bit of a crush on the girl, though whether to encourage or discourage that is something I haven't decided on just yet." Daenerys replied dryly. Ranma and the others who had them had left their pages and squires with the rest of the army before they began to chase Tywin from the Kneeling Man Ford. They had been a major aid a time or two with her dragons, and Cley had taken to be her personal messenger and aide easily enough. "Are you going to execute her father?"

"That depends on how house Bracken's men acted. If they are simply traitors, then the Lord Bracken will be sent to the Silent Brothers, and their remaining men indentured for five years. But the daughters, I'm still confused on what to do with them."

"Lady Bracken was fully in agreement with her husband's actions." Daenerys replied firmly, laying down on the bed for a few moments. "She should either be sent to the Silent Sisters or exiled to Essos. The older daughters Barbara and Barbara are useless piece of fluff, and they should be sent to the Silent Sisters as well, I wouldn't even keep her as a servant someplace, they are too concerned for their own status to trust not to make trouble. The middle sister Catelyn however might have the beginnings of a decent healer, she and Merry have been talking almost every night since they first met, and she apparently helped nurse Hathan back into health."

She shrugged when Ranma raised an eyebrow in silent query. "There might be something there but Hathan is a very difficult man to read." Ranma chuckled at that, and Daenerys went on seriously. "As for Bess, I think she's a lovely

girl, who could become, well, whatever she wishes in the future. There is a somewhat bright mind in that head of hers, and she has a magnificent way with animals."

Ranma tried to remember whether or not the Bracken's came from First Men lines, he knew the Blackwoods did, but couldn't remember about the Brackens. The Blackwoods still kept to the Old Gods, but the Bracken had followed the Faith of the Seven for their entire history, so far as Ranma remembered. He shrugged. The Bess issue was really a small one in the great scheme of things, and not one he was going to spend much time on. "All right." He leaned over the bed now fully dressed, kissing his wife ardently on the lips for a moment before pulling back reluctantly. "I'll be back in a few hours."

"I might be recovered enough by that time to have some more fun." Daenerys replied with a laugh shaking her head. "But if I'm asleep please don't wake me."

Ranma laughed again, kissed her lightly on the forehead and exited the room. He quickly made his way out of the keep and into the small godswood growing to one side of the main keep. It was really very small, nowhere near as large as Winterfell's but just as wild and the smell of it once Ranma was within the trees was like a breath of home, even disguised as it was under the smell of recent rain.

Walking quietly through the trees he found Fenris and the other wolves padding along nearby, and was astonished to find the two dragons also there, curled up in the small clearing that had remained inviolate around the dead weirwood tree. Ranma could tell that it was dead, the normally white bark of the tree was brown and black in places, the face on it had distended into an ugly caricature of a death mask, and its leaves were long since gone. He had no idea how long this tree had been dead, and knew that the odds of the old gods being able to hear him this far south and moreover not in the presence of a living weirwood tree was small.

Still, Ranma sat down on the ground in front of the tree, bowing his head as he began to send his thoughts out to the old gods who had first brought him here. He thanked them once again for the chance to find a family, to find love and a purpose beyond anything his old life had ever held. He sent them thanks for all of this, and hopes for his family back North and for the future.

The tree was dead, as Ranma had seen there was no doubt about that, but this place had still been... not sanctified, that word had no meaning in the old god religion. But it had held the power of the old gods at one point, and that power was such that even with its local font no longer there some power still lingered. It wasn't a vision, the power simply wasn't strong enough for that, just a scent on the wind, a suggestion of an expanse of fresh water. The smell of it hit Ranma through his senses as if he was linked to Fenris, then the vision of an island, and the sense this was a place he had to go in the near future.

Ranma came out of his trance after a few moments. He stood up, looking out into the distance to the southeast from the castle. He felt a slight nudge as if someone was telling him that yes, that was the direction the place he had to be was in and then he came out of it.

Standing up Ranma nodded. "I understand, though it might be a while before I can find wherever you wanted to go." He looked around at the wood and then back at the stricken weirwood tree, shaking his head. "Definitely need to find a sapling to send down here, the Blackwoods deserve no less."

With that Ranma left, heading back to the keep. He found Merry precisely where he knew she would be, working on a few of the wounded from the force that he had let to hunt down Tywin. Several of them had taken wounds though none serious, that final battle against Tywin's forces had been rather anti-climactic. He had to bury several men after the battle against the forces from up from Stone Hedge, but he had only lost two men in that final battle. Merry moved quickly around the room, redoing tourniquets and bandages here and there, making sure that their wounds were healing properly and above all that no one was infected.

Ranma greeted her by his customary one armed hug, pulling the younger girl into his body for a moment between beds. "Hey Merry, can I talk to for second?"

Merry blushed in his arm then looked up at him and nodded. "I'm almost done, only one more person to check okay?"

Nodding equably Ranma moved on over to a nearby wall leaning against it as he watched Merry work. Master Martyn might not have been the nicest person, and a misogynist, but he had been a decent enough teacher, and Merry's skill in healing showed that.

Soon enough she was finished, and the last man trooped out of the makeshift nursery. She joined Ranma by the door, smiling at Ranma and asking "So what do you want to talk about Ranma?"

Ranma smiled back then frowned slowly. "I know you said so earlier Merry, but I wanted to make sure that that you really were okay with what is going to probably happen to Tywin and the others. He is your grandfather after all."

Merry shrugged. "I've only met the man about three or possibly five times in my life. He might have sent nameday gifts occasionally, and a fair few stern rebukes on what books I should be reading just like he did for Joffrey and Tommen, but that's not what I would call being a grandfather." She blushed a little looking away. "If anything, I think your father acted more like a grandfather to me and to Tommy than Lord Lannister ever has."

She looked up at Ranma thoughtfully. "I don't think you ever really realized how you and your families warm, family atmosphere shocked Tommen and I. We'd never had to deal with that kind of thing before, we thought it was normal for us to be treated as if we were set on a pedestal, like our older brother. We had gotten used to having a father that treated us as if we were strangers, and a mother who cared for us in a suffocating sort of way. You, your father and Fenris just by being yourselves, you made it an impression on us."

She shrugged. "I realize that as a Lannister I probably should care, but I really don't. My sense of right and wrong and of family above everything else has been affected by you and what I've seen in your company since we left King's Landing. I know justice must be done, and while I'm not happy that it has to cost my mother's side of the family a few members, as I said earlier, I've seen what they've allowed to occur far too closely to have any doubt about the justice of it."

She looked into Ranma's eyes her own green eyes fierce and for a moment despite her Lannister features Myrcella was all Baratheon. "If I had to, I might well do it myself, not just for what they've let happen here in the Riverlands, but because of my mother and Joffrey's actions in King's Landing. I haven't forgotten that monster killed Tommy, or that my mother started this war to keep him on the throne. I still love her, she's still my mother, but if you have to in the future deal out justice to her as well..."

Merry paused shaking her head. "I won't like it, I won't watch it, but I won't stop you." *I won't stop loving you* she thought to herself, as Ranma's arms went around her once again in a tight hug.

"You're a very strong young lady you know that Merry?" Ranma asked smiling gently, trying to ignore the part of his mind that was whispering comments about Merry indeed being a young lady rather than a girl anymore as he felt her body against his. "And I'm proud to know you."

Merry blushed hotly, then moved away slightly pushing at Ranma's chest for a moment as Ranma, rather reluctantly despite himself, let her loose. "Anything else you wanted to ask?"

Ranma nodded ruffling her hair affectionately. "Nope, it's a little too late for any other questions. Go find your quarters, Merry, I know I'm eager to sleep in a real bed again."

"Yes but does that mean you're actually going to be sleeping in it or..." Merry trialed off, then laughed as Ranma blushed slightly. Seeing his fingers twitching towards her sides Merry backed away and left the room quickly, still giggling.

Ranma stayed there for a moment looking after her then smiled faintly, then headed back to bed.

Over the next few days Ranma and his men rested, while Ranma personally got to know the Blackwoods. He found each and every one of them down-to-earth, honest and intelligent for the most part, though Lucas, one of the sons wasn't that bright, he was also their best blade. Ranma found that out because he was busy training up Patrek, Cley and young Edric as well as he could, and training with Ser Barristan. The old knight was too old to benefit from most of Ranma's training, but training against Ranma and the other Wolfsworn was still excellent for him.

House Blackwood also had around three thousand men that they were willing to add to Ranma's forces, and Ranma turned them over to Jon for further training. Jon and Roger began endurance training on them all so that they would be able to keep up with the rest of the army on the march and began to train them in unit tactics picking out unit commanders with the help of Lucas Blackwood while Tytos himself spent time with Ranma, Daenerys and putting his lands back into order.

The day after Ranma's arrival Ser Blanetree led the most rested and recuperated men out to start hunting down bandit groups, while the rest of the army stayed behind. Between bouts of training the men did those things army men always had to do, fixing torn equipment, finding lost equipment, putting edges to their weapons, all those sorts of things.

Of course, there were also a few funny moments during those relaxing days. One of which Ranma would always

remember, the first time Arya formally met Eddic.

Arya had spent most of her days with Bess and helping Jon train Blackwood's troops, but she was able to find some time to see to her own training one day in the early morning. She was surprised, and rather irritated to find that young boy, Eric or Alric or something that had arrived with the Brother's Without Borders, already there going through some strength and speed exercises she recognized. "Hmhf, I thought Ranma's training was something he reserved for those who had already proven themselves, I guess that's not true."

Eddic turned and saw the girl who had spoken so despairingly was the young Stark girl, the one the Northerners called the She-Wolf. They hadn't been formally introduced, Ranma and Beric overlooking that as Beric tried to compose a message to his betrothed, Allyria (though he still had no way to send it) and Ranma got to know the Blackwoods. Setting aside the fact she was sister to Ranma Stark, whose people had raised him as King of the North, she was still the daughter of a Lord Paramount, however she acted, thus Eddic should have replied politely.

But the derogatory tone the girl had spoken in made his hackles rise, so instead he responded in like coin. "I impressed Lord Stark by the training my lord Beric has given me over the past few years. Several months of which, I would add, which I spent living off the land and fighting as one of the Brothers against the Westerlands forces. Very rarely was I safe, and I certainly didn't have an entire army around me like you must have, miss."

Arya growled, her teeth bared in a pure challenge response. "I've fought in the front of over a dozen battles and not once was I kept back and protected like some damn southern flower!"

"I suppose that makes sense." Eddic replied, which would have defused things if he didn't go on, smirking. "After all, you look more like a weed than a flower." That wasn't quite true any longer. Arya would never have a very womanly figure, but she still had begun to develop some curves that showed her gender, much to her dismay.

Arya growled again, crouching as if to leap forward, but paused, smirking slightly. Calming down, she straightened up, a challenge gleaming in her eyes. "I don't suppose you'd like to see how well your training with the Brothers stands up against a northern wolf would you? Or are you too scared to cross swords with this weed?"

"I would like nothing better miss." Eddic replied, smirking as the miss seemed to irritate the girl.

Not responding verbally, Arya moved over to the nearby rack where training blades were kept, placing Fang there and taking up the training blade she had received with it before moving back to stand across from Eddic. "Any rules to this massac-I mean bout?"

"Rules? Combat has rules? Since when?" Eddic replied sarcastically, then ducked his head as Arya's blade immediately sought his face.

"Good." Arya grinned wolfishly then pressed in hard. Eddic backpedaled at first, but he retained his balance, moving around so that Arya was nearer to the side of the training circle.

Then he kicked out, landing a blow on Arya's thigh that knocked her off balance enough for her training blade to get caught against one of the training grounds posts. His own blade struck forward aiming for Arya's chest, but Arya leaped into the air rising above the blade.

"WHa-ack!" His startled explanation was interrupted by Arya's boot smacking into his face sending him flying, but luckily not breaking his nose. He would have a shiner for days though.

Still Eddic rolled with the kick, and when Arya pressed in her blade flashing in a series of blows he was able to redirect them, if barely each time. Arya laughed, having fun with this and not really trying her hardest, since kicking this boy's butt like this was too fun to end quickly.

That ended when Eddic suddenly kicked up a bit of mud from the ground into Arya's eyes. She gasped, pulling back and reaching up to her face to wipe the mud away and Eddic struck, knocking Arya's blade out of her hand. Before he could capitalize on this however he found his arm gripped in a vice.

"YipE!" With a whoop of displaced air Eddic found himself on his back once again. But he still didn't give up, kicking out and bringing Arya down on top of him. The two of them rolled around on the ground, Arya's blade forgotten behind them. Eddic had the upper hand at first being larger and heavier than Arya, but Arya was **much** stronger. Eventually they ended with Arya sitting on Eddic's chest, her hands pinning his easily above his head.

But Arya's hands were so small she needed to use both of her hands to keep his arms there. Even so when Eddic bucked under her trying to throw her off Arya kept her position easily, grinning down at the slightly older boy.



Eventually Edric realized he was caught and stopped fighting, and Arya released her hold on his wrists.

One hand pushed down on his chest while the other rose to wipe the remains of the mud from her face along with pushing back a few errant hairs. Her hair had grown longer the past few weeks, though Arya was thinking of cutting it back down. "What's your name again, mud-boy?"

"Edric, Edric Dayne, She-Wolf. And yours?" Edric asked, staring up at her in a strange mix of wounded pride and good humor. He might not have won, but that had been a lot of fun. That, and Arya's stormy gray eyes were rather compelling.

"Arya, Arya Stark." Arya laughed, pushing herself to her feet. "We should do this again some time, but right now, I think I want a bath." With that she strode over, picking up her training blade as Edric remained where he was, watching her interestedly.

Nearby Beric and Ranma lurked, having watched the 'friendly' bout from beginning to end. Beric turned to Ranma and asked, somewhat bemused, "Why do I get the impression that that was your sister's version of flirting?"

"Yeah, it might've been, probably. Let's just say that Arya's... unique, and leave it at that." Ranma murmured, laughing hysterically on the inside.

OOOOOO

Upon arriving at Raventree Hall with his brother Jon had spent a few days simply resting, then talking to the rest of the Wolfsworn in particular Arya, hearing their adventures. The second day however when he was getting up to head out to hunt with Ghost he was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Come in?"

Daenerys entered, dressed as she normally was in leggings and a good solid shirt. "Jon, would you mind accompanying me? I would ask Ranma, but he's going over maps with the cartographers, and I don't want to disturb him for a personal matter like this."

"A personal matter?" Jon asked, getting to his feet quickly. "What kind of personal matter?"

"I wish to ask Tywin a question, one that has haunted much of my life." She smiled thinly.

Moments later the two of them walked down into the dungeons, accompanied by Ser Barristan, who was once more connected to Daenerys's hip as her bodyguard. Raventree Hall did not have enough suites for both its guests and its prisoners, so even the Lannisters had been placed in the normal cells in the dungeons, though Tywin was separated by the others by several empty cells, and there were several guards routinely patrolling the corridor. All of them had been personally chosen by Ranma and Tytos but Tywin continued to try to bribe someone to free him. It hadn't worked yet.

Tywin stood up as he heard a female voice down the corridor, wondering if this might be his granddaughter come to see him. That the girl had not as yet was strange, as was the glare she had sent him when he arrived. However as the voices closed Tywin realized that it was not his granddaughter, but the Targaryen girl. He watched her as she stood on the other side of his cells door, staring at him. "Tywin Lannister, you used to be one of my childhood bogeymen, yet in reality you're not nearly as terrifying as I thought. Of course the Starks were as well, and I have learned long since that reality very rarely matches nightmare."

"You would be the Stormborn girl," Tywin replied coolly, staring hard at her. He absently noticed that Ser Barristan was standing behind her, a fact that shocked and dismayed him somewhat but which was not important at the moment. "You seem to have made a masterful return to the game, especially with those dragons of yours though I am wondering where your older brother is? He would be the true heir of your family after all. Did he send you ahead? Or were you the price he had to pay for gaining Stark aid in reclaiming his throne?"

"My brother and I have very different views about honor and what we are willing to do, something you would learn to your cost if you ever came within arms-reach of him. But I have not come here to banter words with you, I'm here to ask you a very simple question. I have grown up hearing stories about how my nieces and nephews were murdered, how my aunt was raped while their bodies were still cooling in the same room. But there was one question no one could really answer. Did you plan it? Did you plan my nieces and nephews murders, and Elia Martell's?"

Tywin stared at her for a moment then nodded sharply. "Of course," he said simply. "So long as they lived they were a threat, Robert had that part correct at least. I was not willing to let those threats in place. "

He watched as the girl's eyes narrowed, her hands clenching as Ser Barristan also showed visible signs of anger. Jon

Stark however, standing to one side of Barristan simply looked at him, his eyes took every bit of Daenerys' willpower not summon Sunfyre to come there right that moment and burn Tywin to ashes. But she didn't, she wouldn't give the man the satisfaction of driving her to murder.

Tywin went on unhurriedly. "However the method of their death and their mother's dishonor was the acts of the Mountain that Rode. I would not have ordered that, simply holding a pillow over the children's heads would've sufficed. I am not a monster, simply practical."

"Would you say the same to the widows and orphans your army has caused, or the thousands of dead and raped?" Daenerys replied coolly, despite the anger still coursing through her. "You might not be a monster in the mold of Gregor Clegane, but that does not make you any less of a monster." She stepped forward lightly, staring hard at the man. "And monsters, 'Lord' Lannister, have to be put down. But it will be done in the name of justice and honor, not vengeance though I will of course take some pleasure in watching your end. Look forward to it. I know I will."

Before Tywin could reply she turned striding off leaving Tywin to stare after her in impotent anger.

OOOOOO

A day before Ranma was ready to lead the portion of the army here down to Harrenhal to deal with that pocket of Lannister resistance he was called from the exercise area to the great Hall of the keep. He found Tytos and the others already present, as well as a man who looked as if he had ridden himself hard to get here. He looked even worse than Brynden had when Ranma first arrived. He was a youngish man, obviously a page of some sort, and was accompanied by five other armsmen who were now standing near the doorway at attention.

Ranma moved forward to join his wife, taking her hand lately one of the cell as he looked at the messenger. "Yes?"

"Lord Stark?"

"I am."

"Your grandfather Lord Tully asks for your to speak to you personally at Riverrun, as well as all the lords who can gather there and who have proved their loyalty."

Ranma's eyes widened then narrowed, coming up with several good and several bad reasons why Hoster would be making that request. He looked around, knowing that all of the lords present were also doing that, and then nodded firmly. "In that case, I suggest we best get going." That was sooner said than done however, but with Ranma having organized the army already for the march the move was actually done much faster than Tytos had expected. Even his own men were ready and able to go within an hour.

Almost as soon as they were out from Raventree Hall Daenerys leaned close to Ranma whispering. "Is it just me, or are you getting a very bad feeling about this?"

"Not just you," Ranma said grimly. "Trust me it's not just you."

OOOOOO

Asha laughed quietly, staring at the ruins of the Crag, though calling it a castle at this point was really misleading. It was a ruin basically that had been designed initially to defend this portion of the coast of the Westerlands. She had ordered it taken by a few of the most restless captains, while *Black Wind* stayed off shore, watching the action. It would settle them down, while the rest of the fleet continued patrolling the area around Fair Isle.

She turned when one of her spotters shouted, "Sail ho, coming in from south, southwest."

Asha frowned then, racing up the rigging to perch on the topmast herself to stare out into the distance. "Get us under way!" she bellowed to her crew below. "I want us to meet that ship quickly."

A few hours later she did, and found it was one of the Blacktyde ships, with one of the captains that young Baelor Blacktyde had recommended as a scout. As soon as they were within shouting distance the man cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted "Sails seen rounding Feastfires, heading north!"

"All right!" Asha bellowed. "I'll get the idiots off the shore, and then we'll be heading back to Faircastle."

Inwardly however Asha's mind was already racing. A fleet to fleet action could go either way, she hoped that her little surprise would work, but if that didn't, if the Lannisters instead decided to go around Fair Isle westward rather than

put in at Faircastle for food and provisions, then it would become a stern chase first of all, and then an open ocean battle. If those war galleys were as heavily armed as others such she had seen, that battle could turn into a bloodbath on both sides.

*Please let them act true to form, she thought to herself, please.*

OOOOOO

It took several days for Mace and Stannis to reorganize their disparate forces, during which thousands of people tried to escape from King's Landing only to run into the re-strengthened cordon around the city. In return for arranging a marriage to his daughter with Stannis, Mace and the Reach lords joined the Stormlands lords in bowing to the last surviving Baratheon. The only ones who did not were House Tarly's men, who had not stopped in their march south to take Heartsbane home. Stannis had already composed a message of condolence to Randyll's widow, and an official notice that her son would have to appear in front of him on his fourteenth name-day to be recognized as lord of the house.

During that time Stannis sent Davos Seaworth to Sea to liaise with the Lysenni pirate. With Davos commanding the Royal Navy, a portion of the fleet blockading King's Landing quickly made their way east to relieve Dragonstone.

The two leaders also found out that the Lannisters had fled, breaking out of the city. "They weren't even involved the battle!" Mace bellowed, shaking his head as he turned from the man he had sent to speak to Alekyne Florent and discover what had happened. "We put them in charge over because..." He trailed off looking at Stannis.

Stannis smiled grimly. "You and my brother put them in charge over there to keep them away from the battle, which might have been a good move. I am uncertain if they would have joined me in that battle, but they might have. However, they failed to hold that line when Lord Serret led a force of mounted men out somehow from the slums of King's Landing. I have no idea how they got horses out of the city, but they did. At least we know now why your son Loras was moving north, he's obviously going after them."

Unfortunately Loras had both mounted men and infantry, and both man and horse had been in a skirmish and a full scale battle against the Crownlands forces Serret had sent out from the wall as a diversion. Worse they had not taken along much supplies, slowing them down further with their need to forage. Loras had no intention of returning until he had the Lannisters in chains, but his chance to actually catch them before they reached Sow's Horn was slim.

Mace smiled, proud of his son's quick thinking, though he wondered why Loras hadn't joined the main battle. If he had attacked Stannis' army from behind, they might have been able to turn the tide despite everything. Stannis was thinking much the same thing, knowing how close his own army was to exhaustion when Renly's army finally broke. "Nonetheless, Alekyne needs to pay for his incompetence. I will be executing him on the morrow. The other Florent men will be rolled into House Baratheon, and from now on they will form the front of any battle, to mitigate their failure."

Even Mace could understand the unsaid reason for doing that, so he said it aloud. "And further weaken the Florents as a House so when you set aside your current wife they won't be able to cause trouble." Stannis nodded grimly, and Mace broached a subject he and many of his lords had been wondering about. "But I have to wonder what you intend to do about the epidemic in King's Landing. Even with the healers you have added to our own we don't have nearly enough to handle the sick of the city."

"The city is doomed." Stannis replied, shaking his head slowly. "Practically the entire city has been infected by this point, and those that aren't showing signs of the disease are still carrying it. No, the plague cannot be cured, but it can be... excised."

Mace stared at him in dawning horror, then actually thought about it for a moment, before nodding convulsively, looking away. He thought to protest, but what could he say? He had no real solution to the epidemic either, all they could do was keep it contained or... With a shudder Mace left that topic and the discussion continued.

Eventually Stannis decided to send Rolland Storm and Bryce Caron down with the forces from more than half the remaining Reach houses to aid in reclaiming their lands from the Ironborn, numbering about nine thousand, since most of those houses had taken losses already. Both men had impressed him as warriors, if not leaders, but he had heard good things about them in that area as well. The troops assigned to this force left one house at a time, allowing Stannis' men to move into their camps and forts around the city.

Stannis was left with an army of around 27,000. It wasn't the giant hammer that Renly's army had been, but it was still quite a large army, and its quality was actually slightly better. None of the levy forces from the Reach had survived

the battle in any shape to continue fighting, and the weaker houses of the Stormlands had been wiped out, which removed some of the less trained infantry and allowed Stannis to apportion their lands out to his followers while Staedmon and those like him added their infantry strength to his. And despite the mauling they had taken, the Reach portion of his army still gave him a large heavy cavalry force.

He was however hurting for archers and scouts. The scout force of both armies had taken a beating on the outskirts of the battle. The archers too had mauled one another throughout the day, leaving a bare two thousand trained archers in the entire army. Stannis retained all of them regardless of House affiliation, but it was still a meager number, and a possible weakness.

With his army and the new addition organized to his satisfaction. Stannis ordered the Reach and Stormlands army forwards towards the city until they were just out of bow range. With less than a thousand defenders holed up here or there in towers around the wall, there was no one to attack them. There were thousands of smallfolk scattered around the wall, but they had learned not to try to escape the city. All of them were hopeful that this new lord meant that the outbreak would soon be brought under control somehow. That hope was in vain.

Some of the Fire Guard moved forward with a dozen mules toward each of the seven gates to pile up large piles of bracken and wood in front of them. Then seven of Melisandre's acolytes came forward. Like the women who had given birth to the Shadow Warriors, they were fully under the sway of R'hllor, ready and willing to sacrifice themselves. They walked up onto the piles of bracken, sitting there as they stared up into the sky, beginning to chant a prayer to R'hllor while the Fire Guard tied them down, 'lest weakness suddenly come upon them'.

Melisandre stood in front of the Gods Gate, her gaze contemptuous as she stared at the images graven thereon. She waited until one of her acolytes then nodded at her, then with a single gesture the pile several meters in front of her ignited. She then gestured to both sides, and the piles of wood underneath the sacrifices in front of each of the seven gates leading into King's Landing burst into pillars of fire.

The flames roared into the sky, brighter and stronger than they should've been just coming from mere wood and human flesh. In the center of those flames the women screamed, not in fear but ecstasy as they gave themselves to R'hllor's sacred flame. Melisandre nodded soberly at their sacrifice, then her eyes closed as her hands rose more. The gem on her choker began to glow cherry red as her will reached out grasping the power of the willing sacrifices of the women to manipulate the flames. The flames grew and grew and grew, then suddenly she gestured forward, and those flames blew through each of the gates melting the portcullis and igniting the wood so fast it almost turned to ash immediately, blasting the rock and rubble set against the inner gates out of the way like the world's largest battering ram.

The flames then spread, heading towards the center of King's Landing as well as around its circumference. The smallfolk in the city, who were barely eking out their lives now, trying desperately to get away from the plague or stay away from the walls fights everywhere, looked up as the sound of fire reached them wherever they were in the city. The flames moved quickly, burning everything in front of them, burning almost hotter than wildfire. Metal, wood, even certain types of stone, it didn't matter, if it was in the way of the flames it burned. People barely lasted long enough to scream, which some might have called a blessing. The flames even buried deep into the Alchemist Guild and elsewhere in the city. There it was stymied by the sand, and dirt. But the heat of the flames spread through those mediums, eventually reaching large caches of wildfire that, unbeknownst to any but perhaps Varys, had remained buried under the city.

These caches had been made in a plot by Mad King Aerys. He had decided that if he lost the war against Robert, he wanted to take King's Landing with him. Learning of this plot was the reason Jaime had broken his vows and taken the king's life, along with his Hand Rossart, Grand Master of the Alchemists Guild. Jaime had then gone on to kill many of the other Wisdoms, accidentally killing anyone who knew where all the wildfire caches were.

Some were later discovered, especially before and after the siege began, but not all of them. Some had been exploded in the out of control fires that had raged here and there in the city before this thanks to attempts to control the riots or the spread of the plague, but others had been buried too deep for those fire's heat to ignite them. Not so now. Every remaining cache ignited as Melisandre's flames raced through the city.

Melisandre screamed suddenly, falling back as loud booming sounds echoed from the city. "W-Wildfire!" she gasped shaking her head. "There were catches of wildfire hidden under the city, randomly I think..."Melisandre pushed herself away from Stannis who had caught her reflexively. "The, the wildfire will change the nature of my flames my lord. It will do its work my Lord, faster than we even expected..."

Underneath the pain of her spell of control being broken like that Melisandre was **furious**. She had hoped to gather in the power from the thousands of lives her flames snuffed out in the city, much like she did formal sacrifices. She

wouldn't have been able to grab as much power as from a real sacrifice, but the total number of lives would have meant she would have taken in enough energy to power any spell she could think of. Instead she was left with only a small pittance from the original willing sacrifices, the rest having broken free from her grasp under the shock of the wildfire changing the nature of her fire. Melisandre almost reached out in an attempt to regain that connection, but stopped herself quickly. No one could control wildfire once it had ignited.

Stannis knew nothing about her thoughts however. He simply stared at the ongoing death of King's Landing, his eyes bleak. "I hated that city you know." he said almost conversationally. "I **loathed** it with every fiber of my being. Every person in that court was there for their personal aggrandizement, every person there thought he or she was more important than everyone else. There was **so much** backstabbing, so much plotting, so much **disgusting** greed, graft and dark ambitions. And the smallfolk, from the merchants to the squatters in Fleas Bottom had that much in common, making war with words in one area and knives in the dark in the other. Everyone above preyed on everyone below. Yet even so, I wouldn't have wished this on it. I wouldn't wish this fate on anyone. Chance and fortune are truly fickle bitches."

After a moment he took a deep breath then resolutely turned his gaze away from King's Landing, grateful that the screams from the dying couldn't reach the army where it was encircling the city. Even the sight alone was enough to cause shouts and even screams of dismay and shock from the men however. "How long do you think?"

"I do not know my Lord." Melisandre replied quietly, her gaze staring at the flames which were now tinged with green. "The wildfire was not in my calculations. I will say that I am glad that the pirates moved their blockade further away however, and we should be ready to move just in case." Stannis nodded, and the two of them continued to stare at the pyre that was burning King's Landing, the greatest or at least largest city of Westeros to the ground.

#### End chapter

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This was seriously not the chapter I thought I'd be putting out. The battle between Stannis and Renly became much larger, and there were so many other little loose needs to talk about, that I just couldn't write them up and polish the sections dealing with Ranma's faction. I have a lot of that part written, so I might, as said above, be able to get the next chapter of this story out along with my surprise and the next chapter of ATP by the end of October. We'll see. I will say at least a third of the chapter will show what has been going on up North. Oh, and maybe Margaery's reaction to the news that her father has just agreed to marry her off to Stannis. Hint, her response would appear as a lot of asterisks.

Hope you all enjoyed, and hope that at least some of what happened surprised you.

As always please review. They are the pizza to the writer's soul.

## \*Chapter 16\*: Chapter 16

I don't own Ranma 1/2 or A Song of Ice and Fire, mores the pity. I would have a lot of fun in either universe.

I would like to thank Antony444 for once again going over this for me and being my sounding board on all things Westeros. Again though, we might still have odd missing space issues, so if anyone sees any, PM me please.

### Wild Wolf 16 Justice Given, Warnings Heard

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While the events around King's Landing were coming to an end, down in the Stormlands Oberynd had continued his campaign of terror. The lands of Trant, Peasebury and Wensington had felt the Viper's touch, and were burning or otherwise despoiled behind him. That had brought him onto the lands of one of the more powerful Stormlands Houses, House Grandison, which he again began to despoil, but here it was somewhat more costly. And the young fool standing in front of him in his tent, cocksure and arrogant despite the remains of the storm dripping from his cloak and armor, was part and parcel of the reason.

"Perhaps my instructions were unclear." Oberynd said his voice a low thoughtful tone. But there was a hint of hiss in it that would've sent any man who knew him to flinching, or perhaps running. The young fool in front of him did not flinch, but his smile disappeared as well. "I believe I ordered your force to fall back if you ran into the slightest bit of resistance heading towards Grandview, is this in point of fact not the case?"

"You did, but I thought to see if I could go around it." Ser Gerold Dayne, the head of House Dayne of High Hermitage, answered. He was a young man with an aquiline nose, high cheekbones and a strong jaw, visible thanks to his tendency to keep his face clean-shaven. His thick silver hair, divided by a streak of midnight black, showed that he had some Valyrian blood in his ancestry, as did his dark purple eyes. "After all, our orders are to harry and harass the Stormlands is much as possible, how can we do that if we are afraid of getting too close to their castles?"

"By despoiling every bit of arable land they have, sowing it with salt, and poisoning the wells as we have been doing since exiting the Boneway you stupid young fool." Oberynd replied his tone now even more like that of a viper's, biting and poisonous. "Not by leading good Dornishmen into costly ambush after costly ambush! I get enough of that from the idiots who lead the mercenary groups! I don't want to see good Dornish soldiers **wasted** by their own commanders!"

"You're speaking as if it wasn't a total victory!" The man some called Darkstar said incredulously. "We killed all of the ambushers!" He had too, even those who had surrendered. That this wasted a valuable local resource and broke every law of war in Westeros didn't seem to occur to him.

"But only after their archer's had slain more than half your own men because you **foolishly** led them into the woods after them!" The area in question was not flat, it was hilly and overgrown with rocks and trees haphazardly thrown around the landscape, which made the use of horses impossible. That had negated the one true Dornish advantage when it came to war: horse archers. Dorne was famed for them and their use in quick, slashing hit and run attacks, and they were truly deadly in the desert.

However horse-bows didn't have the range of even Stormlands bows. Worse the locals knew the lay of the land intimately, and were able to fade in and out hitting Gerold's forces again and again before he was able to pin them in place and wipe them out. There had only been 100 men involved in that series of ambushes, but they had slaughtered at least 400 of Oberynd's precious Dornish forces.

Oberynd had been going out of his way since this campaign began to husband the forces actually from Dorne, using the mercenaries whenever it looked as if he would be taking losses. The mercenaries of course were fine with this, since if they did the lion's share of the fighting, they got the lion's share of the booty.

And so far the booty had actually been surprisingly good. Oberynd could do without the camp followers, which were really just women taken from smallfolk families here and there along their route of march. But the mercenaries' bags were bulging with wine, food and even some trinkets here and there. Most of those were taken in the sack of the holdfast of House Trant, and several small merchant groups that the army had intercepted here and there. But taking on Grandview, which was a small town and castle in one, was not something Oberynd was going to do.

"Men can be easily replaced." Darkstar said calmly, a faint sneer on his oh-so-pretty face. "Especially if you give me the order to go back to the main branch of House Dayne and order them to send you their men like they should

have!"

House Dayne of Starfall, one of the more powerful Dornish houses, had not joined the muster. In fact Lady Allyria Dayne had protested the muster most vociferously via raven several times, and had refused to even provender the army.

If not for the fact that the reasons for this was well known, that her cousin and heir the lord who she was acting as regent for was lost somewhere in the Riverlands or dead along with her fiancé who she doted on, Oberyn would have called her out for treason. But not only would that have forced him to possibly besiege Starfall, which would not have been easy if it was possible at all, but none of his Dornish forces would've agreed to it.

House Dayne of High Hermitage, a Knightly House offshoot of the Main branch, had fielded all of its forces under its lead knight, the idiot in front of him. That amounted to around 800 men: 200 relatively decent infantry, 100 lancers, and 400 horse archers with the remainder made up of levy infantry. There was something going on between Gerold and the main branch, but Oberyn didn't know what it was and didn't particularly care.

"No." he said coldly. "If you were one of my mercenary captains, I would be executing you right now for incompetence. The only reason I am not is because you are young yet, and might, just **might** be able to learn from your mistakes. And you will need to learn from your mistakes. Remember you are not from the main House of Dayne, you are from High Hermitage, a House which is unimportant in the grand scheme of things, as are you. Make another error of judgment, or interpret my orders so loosely again, and I will not hesitate to kill you."

He watched in amusement as the youngster scowled angrily. He was almost hoping the boy would draw on him. Oberyn had a small crossbow ready hidden underneath the small folding table he used as a bench, and his spear was lying to one side of him. *Please give me an excuse! 'Darkstar' thinks himself so dangerous and for an untried sword I suppose he is, but in comparison to those like me, he's nothing!*

However the young fool seemed to have some sense, or perhaps he felt the hidden crossbow because he removed his hand from his sword and gritted his teeth angrily for a moment getting him up self under control. "Very well, I apologize, I made a mistake in judgment. It will not happen again." Gerold stood there for a moment, then bowed abruptly and left the tent.

"Young fool." Oberyn said scoffing and removing his hand from the small crossbow. With that bit of discipline taken care of Oberyn turned his attention back to the map. *I have more important things to think about young sadistic idiots.*

House Grandison was fighting him in exactly the style it should, using small bands of hit-and-run skirmishers who would fade out as quickly as they came, killing a few men here and there. The losses were negligible, but they were having an effect on the morale of his men. Actually, Darkstar's victory in wiping out the large group he'd run into had bolstered that morale, though not nearly enough in Oberyn's mind to make up for the losses.

Yet even that wasn't a major issue, since Oberyn doubted that House Grandison's forces would continue to harass his army once he left their lands. No, he had a much tougher enemy, autumn in the Stormlands. It seemed as if every other day the army was hammered by a new storm, and they were growing stronger and longer. It was raining, it was becoming colder with every passing week, and his men were simply not prepared for it. Thanks to the pace they were moving, disease hadn't quite yet set in among the army, but it would quickly. "Whose idea was it to invade the Stormlands in the autumn anyway?"

"I think that was Uncle Doran's and Visery's my Lord, and I seem to recall that you thought it a grand scheme too." A voice said from behind Oberyn.

He scowled a little but he couldn't put any real menace into the expression. "Quiet daughter, that was rhetorical."

Obara moved out from a patch of darkness at the back of the tent, looking at him quizzically. "What are we going to do? We can't keep up the campaign in the Stormlands for very much longer without falling to disease and other issues. And once we do, the mercenaries won't be willing to stick around, they'll break."

"Of course they will, they have a strong sense of personal self-preservation." Oberyn quipped, but shook his head. "I wanted to stick near to the coast or near to the rivers at any rate so we could make for the coast, but with the storm season upon us, that's not going to happen. Instead we'll go the opposite direction."

He moved his finger over the map marking out the new route. They were a little past Grandview now, though still on Grandison land. "The lands get easier if we keep going for another day in a northerly direction, then split off east. We'll have to pass through this patch of the Kingswood which will be hard going, but after that, we'll be onto the other

side which will be in the Reach. After that, we'll march on Grassy Vale. That family is a weak one, and send most of its forces to bolster Renly. After a hard march an easy sack should bring up the troop's morale. After that, we'll follow the Blue Bryn, sacking what castles we can as we make our way deeper into the Reach."

Obara shook her head, wincing. She had not enjoyed the march, oh the fighting was fun when there were actual fights, but most of it had been burning, pillaging and raping their way across the Stormlands. The mercenaries and the Dorne troops were fine with that, she wasn't for many reasons, not least of which was her gender. Knowing what armies did on the march to the smallfolk whose land they marched through was one thing, witnessing it was quite another.

Yet she replied gamely. Obara was a Sand Snake. Poison ran in her veins not blood and she would not allow herself to be swayed by soft feelings when they were striking at those who willingly served they who had wronged their family. "That, that sounds like a good idea but I'm concerned that the Reach has so much more manpower than our Army does."

"True, but recall how much of that army has already been mustered and sent to King's Landing or down to deal with the Ironborn reavers." Up until they left House Wyl's land behind them Oberyne had been getting relatively quick reports from his brother's spy ring. Since then, messengers had been few and far between, until he finally stopped trying to send men back along their route, knowing that they were being ambushed somewhere along the line. That meant that by this point he was a little over three weeks out of date from any news, but he didn't think that would really matter.

"And better, I seem to recall my brother saying that he had a contact at Longtable, a lady willing to pass on information for anyone willing to pay her price. Once we're passed Grassy Vale I'll send a messenger ahead under disguise to talk to her, to get the lay of the land. That should allow us to make further plans to stay ahead of any response force that the Reach can still muster."

"In that case," Obara said sighing faintly. "We should get the army up and moving again."

OOOOOO

Asha gazed through her glass from the crow's nest of *Black Wind*, frowning heavily. At the moment her ship was making good time skirting along shoreline of the Straits, closer than any deep bottomed galley would be willing to go. Strung out behind her or even closer to the shoreline to her east the majority of her fleet waited, drifting slightly for a moment, their sails furled.

From here she could barely make out the sails of the Lannister fleet as they made their way slowly but with a certain ponderous majesty through the Straits. They weren't spread out unfortunately, each ship was sailing much closer to one another than any Ironborn fleet would've been willing to do. Of course when Ironborn ships sailed together, they were careful to keep distances from one another, lest old feuds suddenly flare up when someone spotted an ancient enemy on another ship, though of course if the captains themselves were feuding, the very idea of sailing together would have never ever occurred to them.

*I wish I could say they're sailing that close because they're scared of sailing alone, but I doubt it.* She didn't think the Greenlanders would be able to match her crew's skills as ship handlers, or even in a fight across the gunwales, but they really didn't have to be. *With the number of scorpions those things carry, they could sink my entire fleet before we close if I do this wrong.*

Her fleet consisted of forty-two longships, most of them fully manned with 150 crew members. She had been reinforced by a fourteen more ships from House Harlaw, but had lost seven ships that she had originally commanded including several that she had lead since coming down from the north. They had been left behind because she had mistakenly thought they had learned the need for strategy and tactics. They hadn't, and when a Blacktyde ship came by sharing the news of the Lannister's fleet being spotted, they all chased out after the first war galley that entered the Straits. According to the one longship that returned, that war galley had retreated, and they'd been jumped by the rest of the Lannister fleet in the open waters out past Fair Isle.

A few other ships had even come from the Iron Islands. House Farwynd of Lonely Light and House Volmark had apparently held some ships back from the Rise of the Kraken. Their captains said this was because they had deep reservations about Balon's grandiose scheme. That was well and good, though she was surprised that her father hadn't seen through their attempt.

Still she was happy to have them, even if she wouldn't have enough time to instill any kind of discipline into them or the second force out of Harlaw. Worse she didn't have time to make certain that they'd follow her orders in battle,



which could be disastrous.

Thankfully she didn't have any concerns there about the Blacktyde or the first group out of Harlaw. Hopefully their examples would be enough to hold back the newcomers rather than vice versa.

"Keep us out of sight down of the horizon." she ordered shouting down to her crew. "I want us to be able follow them, but I don't want them to be able to see us! They're almost at Faircastle, now we'll see if my first little trap works."

Her crew responded quickly, trimming the sail even further and slowing the ship, signaling the other ships quickly while she continued to watch the enemy fleet. She watched as it came abreast of where they should've started to turn slightly westward to make for the bay of Fair Isle, holding her breath for a moment.

If they could catch that fleet in the narrower confines of the cove, they would be able to close far easier, and bring the fleet to battle on their terms. *No matter how many scorpions they have, if I can get to grips with their fleet when they are hemmed in the bay, if I can board their ships, I'll back my man against any amount of greenlanders.*

Yet it wasn't to be. Instead of turning westward, the Lannister fleet kept on going, only a few ships peeling off to head toward the bay. Those were quickly out of sight, while the rest of the ships kept on going further north and east, simply heading straight through the Straits towards the Iron Islands.

"Damn it." She muttered. Those few ships would be able to retake the harbor easily, since she had only left a single longship there. The *Sea Foam* had been damaged in the fighting for the harbor, and hadn't been able to put to sail before the deadline came for her fleet to remove itself from the harbor to bait this little trap. Luckily most of their spoils had already been transported back to the Iron Islands, and both the Castle and the small holdfast within the port had been burned. The castle still stood somewhat, but the holdfast had collapsed in on itself.

*Still, that means that the greenlanders will have a somewhat closer supply point to call on.* For a moment Asha pondered the idea of pulling back to the Iron Islands, letting the Greenlanders get to them and then raiding their supply lines until they were forced to retreat. But after a moment she shook her head. *No, they've got too many war galleys, I'd have to keep most of my strength raiding their convoys to get through, and thanks to my father most of the islands don't have enough men to defend themselves and keep the thralls beaten down.*

There were of course thousands of thralls, making up more than fifty percent of the population of the Islands. Most of those were from families of those taken in raids for generations, but many were not, since the Ironborn tended to work their thralls to death in the mines or at other tasks if need be. So many Houses had to keep at least some of their men at home to keep the thralls under control, especially on Great Wyk and Pyke itself.

*If they get to shore, they'll be able to force a beachhead quickly enough just like in my father's first rebellion, and whatever their lack of wealth our islands are still able to supply us with food. No, I'll have to meet them at sea. But that doesn't mean I have to be stupid about it.*

The Ironborn fleet stayed out of sight towards the inside of the Straits for several days following the Greenlander ships just out of sight while they made their slow way through the Straits. Asha had wondered initially why they were going so slow, but then one of her other captains had spotted several merchant ships sailing with them, indicating that they were bringing along their own supplies. Asha was curious about that, but decided it didn't really matter to her plans.

After a few days of this many of her captains began to get restless, saying they should strike now but Asha refused, wanting to wait for the right time. Despite Asha's string of victories she was forced to call a conference however, where she reiterated her position. When she gave them their reasoning, most of the captains grudgingly accepted, save for a few troublemakers here and there, but with House Harlaw still backing her as a whole, they subsided.

Asha knew she would only get one real chance at this. If it went badly, her control over her fleet would disappear like salt in the wind, and the Lannisters were keeping too good a tight formation for any kind of hit-and-run attacks to work. No, it was best to wait until the weather and the ocean itself could be their ally.

Several days after that meeting, the Ironborn had their chance: a massive storm, almost but not quite a monsoon, a deluge of water, lightning, thunder and above all, wind. It struck at just the wrong time for the Lannister fleet, where the Straits became treacherous all along their course forward, with several hidden shoals and reefs.

One ship was hit amidships by one such reef, and another lost its rudder. Worse, visibility because of the storm was almost nonexistent, cutting down the ability to see for a few leagues around to practically one or two at best. And so their formation had begun to break up.

And then Asha and her fleet came out of the storm from behind them. The first the Lannister's knew of it was arrows beginning to fall on the back-most ship in their formation. While it's nearby fellows tried to make tight turns in the pitching roaring waters to bring their scorpions to bear that ship was rammed by three longships, and the crews of those longships boarded with a roar.

Those war galleys had responded quicker than Asha had expected, but still not fast enough, and even so, they proved how green they were when it came to seas such as this. All four of them floundered badly in the pitching sea when they tried to move against the waves, and one almost was pushed over entirely.

One of them got off a single shot with its scorpions, most of which were facing ahead of the ship and to the sides covering a 145° angle in front of the ship but only one scorpion was directly facing aft of it. That scorpion took out one of the attacking longship's rigging, slicing through the sale with a thump, but it and the others were helpless to stop the longships from closing with them.

Asha and the rest of her fleet raced on. But behind them, the captain of a war galley had enough courage to actually set fire to his own rigging to hopefully warn his fellows.

The rest of the fleet had already begun to turn by the time Asha and the rest of her longships came into range. Most of them hadn't been able to turn entirely, but enough took her ships under fire to cost Asha six or seven more longships, sinking them or destroying enough of their rigging and oars to slow their advance. And any ship that went down in waters like this was doomed, along with every man aboard.

But the rest of the Ironborn fleet closed. Arrows flew from both sides and men began to die, falling to the rain drenched decks below while lightning zoomed across the heavily overcast sky and thundered bellowed. Fire arrows were practically useless in this downpour, which took out one of the most dangerous weapons of any fleet at sea, leaving the battle to be determined by steel, numbers and courage.

Five more Lannister war galleys were boarded in the next few moments, then Asha's *Black Wind* scraped alongside a sixth, and she had no more time or inclination to spend looking at the overall battle. "Up and at them!"

With Qarl leading the way her crew charged across the gunwales onto the larger ship, hacking and slashing at the crew who were barely in place to defend themselves. Asha charged with them, attacking one Lannister man with so much fury that she knocked him sideways overboard to die in the wild to tumult that had become the ocean. In the next second she was engaged heavily with several men, one of whom snarled at her. "Fucking barbarians, they even send their women to sea?"

Asha laughed wildly, crossing blades with the man and then kicking out hard catching him in the chest, sending him gasping to his knees, where her forearm caught him in the face. The other two men came in as one, trying to box her in, but she flung her hatchet at one, forcing him to dodge backwards, allowing her to engage the other sword to sword. Here he showed his inexperience, simply hacking away rather than with any form. She was easily able to knock his sword off guard, then grabbed her knife from her belt and thrust it into the man's unarmored chest.

"Lester!" shouted the man who Asha had thrown her hatchet towards then he was on her, hacking and slashing at her with rage but no skill. "You killed him, you killed my brother!"

Asha dodged to one side running the man through. Kicking his dead body off her sword before raising her blade and going after another man, hacking into his back as he tried to duel with one of her crewmen. Then she had enough time to reach down to grab up her hatchet before cursing luridly, seeing another war galley through the storm visible on *Black Wind's* other side.

Rather than taking her ship under fire with its scorpions however, the ship pulled in alongside hurling across grapnels and crashing into her ship, side to side. Then it's crew, which were much better armored and armed than the crew of the initial war galley she had attacked, charged across. Their warcries were so loud Asha could even hear them over the storm and the clangor of battle. "Burning bright!"

With a snarl Asha bellowed "'ware back! They're tryin' to take the *Black Wind* boys!"

That was enough for many of her crewmen to break off his engagement with the first war galley's crew, turning to this new group. But before they could re-board their ship, the newcomers had already slain practically every man that had been left on the deck of *Black Wind*, and several of them were even now breaking down the hatches to head further into the ship.

"By the Drowned God, you'll not take my ship!" Asha howled in anger, leading the charge back onto her longship

alongside Qarl.

These newcomers however were much better trained as well as better armored, wearing chain mail as few greenlanders would at sea, and they worked in teams of four, each man looking out for one another in the midst of the melee. Even as she and Qarl struck down one such group others were wreaking a bloody toll on her crew.

Then four more longships crashed into them, sending many men to the slick deck beneath them with the impetus of the blow. Seconds later more Ironborn raced across the intervening space, shouting "For the Drowned God! That which is dead can never truly die!"

A part of Asha's mind heard that cry and knew these were the reinforcements that had come from Pyke, but she didn't care. All she cared about was that now the men from the second war galley were being pressed hard. Their armor was still allowing them to take the Ironborn on much more evenly, but the numbers were beginning to tell in the Ironborn's favor.

Not that Asha had any time to waste on that. She found herself engaged along with Qarl against a swordsman who was easily the best she had yet seen. He engaged her first mate's sword to short axes, smashing both of his axe's to the side, steering one down to the deck as his hand flashed up to smash into Qarl's chin, sending his head rocketing back under the blow.

Asha jumped forward engaging the man before he could capitalize. But she found herself handled almost with negligent ease, and was forced to duck under a blow that would've caved in her head, then roll to avoid a follow-on ripost that came so fast she had no chance of taking advantage of the man having seemingly been off-balance.

Desperately she brought up her hatchet to block a third below. She watched in shock when the man changed his sword's trajectory just slightly mid-blow, so that instead of impacting the hatchet's blade it cut into the wood of the hatchet's shaft right above her fingers. The man's sword cut straight through,, sending the hatchet's head flying through the rain.

It was only Qarl's intervention that kept her from dying in the man's next attack, and she fell back, grabbing up some of the fallen rigging. Heavy with rain and knotted at one end it made a decent enough weapon. She charged back, swinging both it and her sword at the man while all around her the battle continued.

The man ducked, allowing her attack with the rope to go over his head as he reached up as swiftly as a snake strike to grab her outstretched arm pulling Asha towards him, back first. His voice sounded surprisingly loud given the tumult of battle and the howling fury of the storm. "A rope, really?" Then Asha felt his boot hitting her backside and she was flung forward, almost impacting Qarl in the stomach but he leaped to one side, keeping his footing on the heaving, wet deck with the ease of years at sea.

Qarl began to attack the man again. Having lost one of his axes somewhere now he was wielding one with both hands, but the man matched him blow for blow, forcing him back until his back was against one of the masts.

Nearby Asha gutted a man who had attempted to take advantage of her downed status, thrusting her sword up between his legs and deeper into his body before pulling it out listening to the man's curdling scream. "GYAAHHHHhhhhh.....!" She stabbed another man in the back before he could finish off a downed Ironborn, racing to aid Qarl.

But the battle had shifted, and she could no longer get to them. She never saw Qarl go down, his knee ruined by a blow, or saw him take another man's spear to the back.

Indeed it was all Asha could do for a few moments to defend herself, but she slew two of her five attackers, and suddenly other Ironborn were there, bursting through the rest of the melee. She leaned against the bulwark at the back of *Black Wind* getting her breath back before pushing herself up and thrusting her way back into the battle.

Ahead of her she could see the man that she had recently been dueling with hacking Ironborn down, his movements fluid and fast, showing a skill she had never seen before. But she refused to be cowed. Instead she reached down, grabbing up a dead man's fallen hatchet and raced to meet him. The man smiled at seeing her come through the melee and the rain, turning his body slightly to give her a smaller target before bringing his sword around in a blow that she was forced to block with her new hatchet, almost losing it at the first pass.

"Your crew fight well for Ironborn." The man said conversationally, causing Asha to scowl. "And you picked the proper time to attack us I have to say."

"Shut up and fight greenlander!" Asha growled, her pride piqued at the fact that he could talk in so blasé a manner while engaging her. As if she didn't matter!

The man sighed, and his blows redoubled forcing Asha back, smashing her off-balance enough for him to spend a brief second to hack another Ironborn down as the man tried to come to her aid. "May I know at least the name of the young woman I'm about to kill? Oh, forgive me, my name is Ser Addam Marbrand. I've been told it's polite to give my name first."

Desperately, Asha lunged, but she was off-balance and couldn't get up enough speed to surprise her opponent. Instead he simply stood aside allowing her blow to pass, and she threw herself sideways in an even more frantic contortion to one side gritting her teeth as his sword cut through her chain mail along her side. But thanks to her last second evasion it wasn't a killing blow, but she could still feel her side start to bleed copiously.

Asha pushed herself to her feet, watching as another Ironborn tried to engage the man, only to die as the man moved through a series of blows that first forced the Ironborn warrior onto the defensive then off-balance and finally to the deck, missing both of his hands as they had been chopped off.

More Ironborn came between them separating them again, for which Asha was thankful. She wearily raised her sword and moved to rejoin the melee which had moved almost entirely on to the deck of another Ironborn ship while other Ironborn began to move up to her side, as well as behind her.

Some sixth sense warned her and she shifted her weight, turning to look behind her just as a dagger went in her back, piercing her chain mail and thrusting deep into her previously unwounded side. But again thanks to her last-second dodge, it simply skittered across her side rather than finding her kidney.

"What!" she exclaimed, staring in horror at the Ironborn all around her, one of whom was grinning maliciously.

"Euron sends his regards." Said one of them, knocking her sword out of her hand while another man grabbed her by the shoulder pulling her around for what she knew would be a death blow. "The Drowned God calls you, personally!"

From somewhere within her somewhere Asha found the strength to charge forward, her hatchet smashing the sword of the Ironborn who had spoken up to one side as she bodily rammed into him, taking them to the gunwales behind him. They teetered there for a brief second and then both of them went over the side of the ship and into the dark waters below.

Through the tumult of the battle Addam had seen that beat of betrayal, and frowned heavily. The woman might not have had much skill, but she had courage, and to die like that to a traitor struck him as wrong. Still he had more important things to worry about. He began to bellow orders to his men, restoring some sense of order in the chaos of the melee, while the larger battle continued.

Asha had planned her attack almost perfectly, but there was one thing she had forgotten in her calculations: the Ironborn signaled to one another through use of signal flags, usually brightly colored flags tied from their masts. But in this tempest visibility was so poor that they couldn't signal one another. So several dozen war galleys were heavily engaged, while many more were not engaged at all, or only engaged one-on-one.

Soon that began to tell, and more and more longships were sunk where they had grappled with their victims. Perhaps Asha could have figured out a way to rally her longships, or perhaps not. Once battle was actually joined, Ironborn were incredibly hard to control, and any attempt at doing so might have seen her labeled a coward and ignored even by the longships of House Harlaw. Yet without Asha, there was no coordination any longer, and even with the storm the war galleys were at least able to see friend from foe.

Hours later as the storm finally began to clear the death toll was bad on both sides. Of the forty-two longships on the Ironborn's side, 20 had been sunk outright. Fourteen more had taken massive losses to their crew, including Baelor Blacktyde and his forces but scattered enough for the ships to survive, for now. House Harlaw and its allies fared a little better, retreating out of the straits back to the Iron Islands, but even they had taken severe losses to their crews, and they lost four more ships sinking due to the damage they had taken on the way back to the Islands.

Ironically, among those ships lost with all hands were the ships whose captains had decided to betray Asha. Addam and his armymen had wiped them out to a man before setting fires in their holds before their ship pulled away from the gaggle of ships that had been tied together during that portion of the battle.

Of the thirty-four war galleys of the Lannister fleet eleven had been lost outright, and six others had sustained damage that would force them to put in at Banefort for repairs. Seven more were complete write-offs, having lost their

rudders or been gutted on the rocks which actually did as much damage to the ships themselves as the Ironborn. Of the men on those ships, most of their crews had been lost, but the remainder made up the losses that the rest of the fleet had sustained.

The ten undamaged ships and five merchant galleys, which had not been engaged, continued on their way defending their wounded fellows as they made for Banefort. After they were repaired however, the invasion of the Iron Islands would begin.

OOOOOO

Thanks to the size of their army and the fact that the Blackwood portion of it wasn't used to the pace that Ranma set, the march to Riverrun took them a week and a half from the Raventree Hall. This was hampered by the need to once again go around the village of Sallydance, and the number of refugees on the River Road heading back to their various holdings along the Red Fork.

While many of the Riverlords were happy to see this, Ranma was actually rather ambivalent about it because he knew that when winter came most of those farmsteads would have to be abandoned in any event. They simply wouldn't be warm enough to get their owners through the winter nights. Worse, many of the smaller holdfasts out in the countryside had been destroyed by the Lannisters, simple one-story stone keeps torn down so they couldn't be used as rallying points. *Thank the old gods that half of the Riverlands are still untouched, and that the Lannisters didn't have enough time to really ruin the land between the Blue and Red Forks. We might be forced to abandon some areas south of the Red Fork, but that just means we'll have more manpower to throw at other problems elsewhere.*

When they came into view of Riverrun Ranma paused in surprise. "What?" Daenerys asked looking at him from where she and Merry were as usual sharing a horse. The two dragons were flying overhead, glorying as always in flight, but with orders to remain above the army for now.

"Given what we learned from the smallfolk, I'd expected there to be a shantytown of some kind built up by the refugees outside the walls." Ranma replied with a shrug. "I can't see any sign of one though."

"They wouldn't be on this side of the river." Tytos replied from where he rode on Daenerys' other side turning from a conversation he had been having with Rickard, who had caught up with the army along with Domeric and Alayaya, Jason and a few of his men a bare day ago, with Rickard reporting what he had heard of the Salt Pans. "There might be some on the other side though, the Whispering Wood is only a day's walk from where the Tumblestone goes around Riverrun on the other side, which would be a fine source of material and put the towns on the opposite side of any attack coming from the Lannisters."

"Make sense." Ranma said with a nod. Riverrun was built on a small island set between where the Tumblestone merged with the Red Fork before continuing down to the Trident. It had decently high walls that came out of the river there, and a moat between the castle and the city that took up the rest of the island that could be opened to the river to cut the castle off entirely. Ranma had plans for that waterpower, and hoped that Vincent Ryger had been hard at work on his designs.

As they neared Ranma could see banners on the walls and was surprised to note that House Grell and House Paegre were in attendance. Next to them were some of the neutral Houses, including Piper and even House Vance of Atranta next to one he didn't recognize, a red fish on a white background surrounded by a yellow stripe. "It looks as if were not the only ones that received a call from my grandfather." He said, pointing them out. "What's that third one there?"

"I believe that is House Mooton, Ranma." Tytos stared at the banners, then out across the army sighing faintly.

"What is it Tytos?" Daenerys asked.

"I'm feeling rather maudlin your grace just thinking of how many Houses have been destroyed in this war. In that way, I think at this war might actually be the most horrible war on record."

Ranma bit back a sharp retort, that it was about time that the Houses of the nobility who went to war began to pay the lion's share of the price for doing so, but restrained himself for with difficulty. He remained silent as the army moved on, smiling faintly as he began to hear the blare of trumpets singing out from the walls.

"Speaking of which." Tytos said, trying to move off that depressing subject slightly to something somewhat more amusing. "You had time to get to know lady Ravella and her daughter, correct?"

"Somewhat." Ranma replied with a shrug, while Daenerys nodded. Both ladies were very much in the mold of southern flowers, so his dealings with them were severely limited.

"I spent some time with them, though they seemed to be a little leery of me for some reason." Daenerys replied with small smirk on her face. "I found them..." she paused looking for the proper words. "To be properly reared ladies, who no doubt would make fine wives for someone." Implied in her statement was that their knowledge was sorely lacking in areas that she found interesting, or perhaps vital for a queen. "Do you wish to discuss a suit for their hands my Lord?" Since no surviving male members of the family remained it was up to Ranma to discuss matters of marriage as the representative of the Lord Paramount.

"Yes actually, but for the Lady Ravella rather than her daughter." Tytos shrugged a small but very wry smile on his face. "My second oldest boy Lucas has always had a penchant for older women, and she is still of childbearing age. Moreover..." he leaned forward a little conspiratorially. "She seems to have returned the affections whereas her daughter hasn't replied to any interest shown her."

Ranma laughed. "He's not the only one I know who has a liking for older ladies. I doubt you've ever met her, but the lady Donella Hornwood is a good looking woman, and my brother Jon had a huge crush on her when he was younger."

"Are we going to exchange embarrassing stories now Ranma?" Jon asked defensively, a bright flush on his cheeks. "If so I have quite a bit to return fire with."

Daenerys laughed and Myrcella did as well. "I have one of those stories too." Myrcella replied, looking over at Ranma with a smirk. "Has he told you about how he and Fenris began to get Fenris used to carrying him?"

Now it was Ranma's turn to blush, while around them the Lords chuckled and the march continued. An hour later they were at the bridge over the Red Fork into Riverrun, passing under a heavy portcullis and through the gates at the far end of the gate tunnel to a tumultuous cheering from the crowds of smallfolk that were everywhere in the city.

At a glance you could tell that the city was crowded but not nearly as bad as King's Landing, nor as uncomfortably dirty. The common smallfolk here looked much cleaner than back in King's Landing, and the crowd wasn't as large as it would have been in that city.

Ranma and Daenerys would later learn that this was because Lord Tully had prepared Riverrun for the refugees the moment news of Wayfarer's Rest fall reached him. Instead of a shantytown on the other side of the Red Fork there were dozens of very decent wooden longhouses, each of which could billet three families in relative comfort. The families could then use the wood from the Whispering Wood to build their own huts slowly. A dozen families had even decided that they wouldn't be going back to their former farmsteads even after the war was over. That plus the severe edicts that the city guard kept on things such as freshwater and refuse had kept the city relatively clean and prosperous even with the massive influx of refugees.

There were gasps of awe and surprise when the crowd realized that Ranma, Jon and Arya were riding direwolves, but that was nothing in comparison to the gasp of surprise that the sight of two dragons flying over the city caused. There were some screams here and there at that sight, but not many. Evidently word of how well-trained the two dragons were had spread to Riverrun which was a very good thing in Daenerys's opinion. Her appearance too caused some shouts of surprise, but more shouts of welcome. While their Lord might have rebelled against the Mad King, the smallfolk still held a certain amount of awe in the Targaryen family.

Soon enough however, the army had trooped through the city and into the castle itself, where they were met by scores of servants moving forward to take their horses, looking in awe at the direwolves. While their mounts were quickly led away and men began to lead the army off into the barracks (and the prisoners to their temporary dwellings) Ranma and his lords were ushered into the keep and then into the dining hall.

There they found Lord Darry, Ser Grell, Ser Paege, Ser Blanetree and four unknowns. One was a young man wearing the tower and green dragon of house Vance. One wore the maiden of House Piper, another wore the red fish on white of House Mooton, and the last wore a tabard wearing a shield with wavy white, yellow and green lines. A young woman of fifteen or so stood next to the man from Mooton, wearing a dress of her houses colors. She was a pretty enough girl, but there was something about her eyes when she stared around her that set warning bells off in Daenerys' mind, or perhaps it was just when she looked at her father...

All of them rose as the Ranma, his wife and their allies entered. The young man went so far as to go to his knees for a moment to Daenerys and Ranma, while the others merely bowed their heads.

It took Tytos whispering in their ear to tell Ranma and Daenerys who the unknown man was. "Lord Butterwell, his House sat out Robert's Rebellion since they are still recovering from a massive loss of influence during the Blackfyre Rebellion. Even now they are barely a Knightly House in size. I would look to him to follow Mooton's lead, for better or worse, though I don't know either very well. Lord Piper is a habitual fence sitter, rumors say that he was tempted to disown his son for the idiocy that got him captured by the Lannisters. His House is still strong, but not well led in the field."

Ranma nodded his head slightly. "My lords, I see we were not the only ones ordered to appear here. I am certain we all have fears about why that might be, but first, what's your name lad?"

"Er, Kirth, your, my Lord." The man said, trying and failing to cover the fact he was rather bemused about Ranma and obviously smitten by Daenerys. Ranma and Daenerys exchanged an amused look which thankfully for his ego the youth missed. He might be Ranma's age or at best a little younger but he was really a babe in arms in comparison. "Um, I, I was sent as my House's representative, because my father is blind and going lame my lords."

"I see, my condolences." Ranma replied. "For that and for your losses. Your House did the best it could against the Lannisters, I just wish we could've gotten down soon enough to save your men and your brothers."

The man nodded, and Tytos stepped forward. "Ranma and Daenerys Stark-Targaryen, be known to Lord Piper, Lord Mooton, and Lord Butterwell."

Lord Mooton bowed floridly while the others merely nodded their heads. He was a middle-aged man with a fat, overfed appearance, and small beady eyes that reminded Ranma of a mouse, with all the skittering timidity of the breed. "Your Grace, long has my house and others waited for the Targaryen's return, congratulations on that and on your victories to date."

Before Daenerys could reply, an elderly man came through the doorway. "My lords, I am Utherydes Wayn, steward of Riverrun. Please, follow me." Without another word he turned and moved out of the room to the staircase, expecting them to follow. Ranma looked at Daenerys, who shrugged, and then they and all the other lords followed the man out.

As they walked up the steps, Utherydes spoke up again. "My Lord Hoster doesn't have long Sers, and he must speak to you all immediately. News has reached us of a certain offense, and we need to take it into account going forward. Then I think he'd like some time with his family." He looked back at Ranma shaking his head sadly. "It's a pity you did not bring your mother along my Lord, I think he would have liked to have seen her or even Lysa, but such is not to be."

Ranma closed his eyes tightly for a moment then shook his head before opening them. "I knew he was failing quickly, but I had hoped..." he shook his head. "I guess it doesn't matter now."

Behind him Jon and Arya both looked sad as well. Despite having never met the man Hoster was still family and the passage of family was always to be mourned. Even Jon who technically wasn't related to House Tully felt that way.

To one side of the Starks, Brynden's expression was much more conflicted. He and his brother hadn't really gotten along for most of their lives, which was further exacerbated by Hoster's heavy-handed attempt to get Brynden to marry someone who would strengthen the political ties of the family.

As they were led up from the second floor to the third a voice coming from one of the guest rooms on this level interrupted their passage. "Roger, there you are! I was told you'd probably be arriving with the rest of this lot, but if you hadn't arrived soon I was all set to head out to search for you."

Roger and the others turned at the sound of the voice and Roger gaped in shock at seeing his wife. "O-Osha, what are you doing here?" He gasped, shaking his head then smiling waving his hands in the air placatingly as the former spearwife's eyes narrowed. "I'm not unhappy you're here, I'm just wondering how and why. And who is looking after our son, Robbett?"

"The boys being looked after by yer family and the milk-girl well enough." Osha replied brusquely moving toward the group, her Common heavily accented. "Did you honestly think I'da wait at home for ya to return when yer out havin' adventures?" She smirked then shaking her head. "Mind you, I had a few of my own. Hah, there be a bit fewer people out there who'da try ta take advantage of a poor, lonely woman out on 'er own."

"I can't imagine my father actually letting you go out alone." Roger replied.

"As if I gave him da choice. 'Sides, 'e wanted someone to deliver this to you." She said holding out a sword in its

sheath to Roger. "I volunteered, and when he turned me down I caught up wit' the group he sent with it, stole this from them during the night, left a message and then moved on." She shook her head sadly. "The men he chose tw'eren't 'xactly the best at keeping night watch."

Ranma laughed shaking his head, while Jon and the others were all smirking. "Why don't we just leave you two to get reacquainted Roger, you probably have a lot of catching up to do."

With that the rest of them left Roger and Osha heading further up the keep. Soon enough they were being led into the family suites, then into the bedroom that Hoster had occupied for over a year now.

Hoster was sitting up in bed with the aid of half a dozen pillows. His eyes were open, but rheumy with age. His hands and arms that were visible was palsied, and his breathing was labored, audible even from the doorway.

Ranma, his family and the Lords of the Riverlands trooped in with Ranma moving forward to touch the old man's hand gently. "Grandfather? I'm Ranma, your daughter Catelyn's oldest? I wish we could've met before this, but better late than never, right?" He asked with false cheerfulness.

The old man turned rheumy eyes on him, smiling faintly. "My eyesight hasn't gone yet, nor my mind. Heh you look exactly like the descriptions your mother sent me of you." He turned slightly to face, Jon nodded politely at him then moved on to look at Arya. "And you must be the runaway Arya. The last few messages from your mother have told me how you ran away to join your brothers' army. I can't say I approve, but I suppose that kind of strength is necessary in these days. Welcome child."

"Hello, grandfather." Arya said, nodding her head politely. If she was Sansa she might've moved forward to give the old man a kiss, but frankly Arya was a little disturbed at present by the smell of the room. Even so staring at the old man she could see the family resemblance between him and her mother. The cheekbones, despite being sunken with age were pretty obviously the same shape as her mother and a few of her brothers, Bran in particular. And the chin too, that looked a bit like what Arya herself had, as did the shape of the eyes.

Hesitantly she moved forward to take his other hand. "I..." she paused then went on, smiling slightly. "I don't suppose you have any embarrassing stories about my mother do you? That seems to be the best way of bonding with family, sharing weird stories."

Hoster laughed wetly, shaking his head and gripping both their hands with what little strength he had left. "We'll get to those eventually child, I will say that if your mother ever gave you any grief about your wayward ways, she was being hypocritical. There was many a time when she was young that she wished to gallivant off into the woods or go climbing."

He turned away from Arya with a sigh. "Unfortunately there are other things we need to speak of first." He looked over at Daenerys where she had respectfully remained by the doorway. "Welcome milady. While I may have rebelled against her family, it was never anything personal for me as it was for Robert or even Eddard. I simply felt that your father was becoming madder with every passing month, and he had to be removed for the good of all Westeros. I would never have been a party to the murder of children, nor of Elia Martell."

Daenerys's eyes narrowed but she replied calm enough. "I understand my Lord, and I have learned about my father's madness. His actions were unconscionable for any sane individual, king or no." She smiled faintly looking at Ranma and Arya. "If I do not hold the actions of the Starks against them in that war, I must extend the same to you."

Hoster nodded, then turned to the others then without further ado turned to the topic that was the reason he'd requested all of the loyal Riverlords come to Riverrun. "The Master of Whisperers has spies everywhere, but I have known some of his agents here in Riverrun for quite some time. I did not know until recently however that he knew that I knew."

A faint wintry smile crossed the old man's face for moment before he shook it off. "He used the spy, a unit commander in my city watch, to pass on a message to me." The old man closed his eyes, his hands moving as if to clench together, but he didn't have the energy to do so. "My son is dead."

That simple sentence sent a bolt of lightning through the gathered Riverlords and their heirs, and Tristan Ryger in particular looked shocked and appalled. Ranma and Arya were also shocked and Ranma sighed sadly wishing he had met the man before this. *Still, I suppose after Tywin's defeat it makes sense they'd execute their hostage to send a message, really I should've expected this.*

Before any of them could do more than shout and exclaim to one another Hoster went on his soft voice cutting



through the bedlam easily. "He was not killed in retaliation for some of you turning against the Lannister's army, he was not executed for that which could, in the realm of politics have been understood. Edmure was not simply killed. Not to send a message, not to do anything!"

"Varys' message actually says that the Queen and the Hand were not even aware he was executed. They might have eventually decided to threaten him in that manner, but King's Landing was under siege when that message was sent to me by the forces of the Reach and Stormlands under Renly Baratheon. They had no time to spare for thought of what was going on here in the Riverlands."

Ranma's eyes narrowed at that, while he pulled thoughtfully at his ponytail. They had figured that King's Landing would be under siege, but they hadn't heard any confirmation of that before this, though Alayaya and Domicer might have since he'd last talked to them. *How long has it been going on? King's Landing can't survive an actual siege, it'd stand well enough against any physical assault, or as well as any city could. But against a siege, where you simply stop supplies from getting in? It's got way too many people!*

Not knowing Ranma's thoughts had gone off on a tangent Hoster continued. "No, instead my son and heir was **butchered!** Tortured before he finally died in the torturing. And this was done not by the Queen, not by the Hand's order, but by Joffrey the Bastard King himself!"

That caused a new round of exclamations of shock and surprise, but Hoster continued, his voice now an alloy of remembered grief and rage. "Apparently the boy is a sadist of the first order. Before my son's death..." here again Hoster had to stop to get his voice under control. "Before my son's death, Joffrey apparently went out into the streets to pick up random smallfolk and abuse them before depositing the bodies everywhere he wished. He is a monster beyond anything I've ever heard of before, earning the name the Vile One among the smallfolk."

Ranma growled angrily, as did the other Starks in the room while the Riverlords all were still looking very angry at Edmure's death rather than how he died. Hoster however had moved on and he gripped Ranma's hand feebly. "I have had my time to grieve for Edmure's death, and now need to deal with the results of it. With my son's death, you become my heir Ranma. All I ask would be for Riverrun to have a local lord chosen from your family to rule it in your stead. Other than that I concede the Riverlands to you. May all my loyal lords follow you as they would do me from this point forward."

His eyes swept the crowd, nailing Lord Darry, Lord Mooton, and Lord Butterwell in place, staring at them so hard Mooton actually quailed. After a moment he closed his eyes squeezing Arya's hand. "Now if you'll excuse us, I think I would like some time with my family. Including you, brother. I, I would not pass on with this enmity still existing between us."

Brynden looked at him from where he had stood by the doorway, then nodded slowly and moved forward, pulling up a chair next to the bed.

Still somewhat in shock at the horrible news they had just been given the Riverlords all trooped out, following Lord Wayn's brother into one of the nearest rooms. Behind them Ranma and his siblings remained by the bedside, talking quietly to Hoster.

Utherydes shook his head looking at them all. "That news arrived here about two and half, three weeks ago, and it nearly killed him. It was all maester Vyman and I could do to keep him alive after the heart attack hit. I don't think Hoster has even a few more days frankly. His body's just giving out on him." The old man smiled wryly. "Something I am beginning to feel myself frankly."

Lord Piper coughed slightly looking at his fellow Lords speculatively, in particular Lord Ryger and Lord Mooton. "Is no one going to comment about how fortuitous this is for Lord Stark? After all, now that the invasion of Westerlands has been halted, how many of us here would be willing to back him in the battle against the Baratheon brothers further south?"

"I would." Tytos said coolly echoed by Ser Blanetree and several others.

This of course included Lord Jason Mallister, who was looking at the man with scant favor. "And if you're trying to imply that Ranma had something to do with Edmure's death, I will tell you now not bring that idea up in conversation where he could hear it. Ranma would personally challenge you to a duel and then most probably rip you in half like he did Gregor Clegane. If you spend any time at all around the Starks, you will learn that family is incredibly important to them."

He held up a hand to stop the man from talking. "Not their family's personal power, but their actual well-being. They

care about family, and even if Ranma never met Edmure, he was family to Ranma. In fact, Ranma was more than willing to discuss exchanging some of the Lannister prisoners for him in the future." The two of them had talked about that along with Tytos during the days Ranma had spent as Tytos' guest at Raventree hall.

"Indeed." Daenerys said from where she had been following the Riverlords, unnoticed by most of them. Now they all turned to her and she shrugged her shoulders slightly. "One of the things I most admire in Ranma is that he is a caring individual. Ranma would never torture anyone, and the very thought of harming or even planning to harm anyone like that is anathema to him."

Lord Piper would have said that she was a biased source, except looking around he noticed that the only three that were even listening to them at all were Lord Butterwell, Darry and Mooton, and none of them were speaking up in defense of the idea. "Very well," he said backing away verbally from the topic. "As you all know him better than I do, I will take your word for his thoughts on actions such as that."

"For your own sake my Lord, I would listen to lord Jason and never mention that concept again." Daenerys replied coolly. "Ranma isn't the only one who would challenge and kill you for it, regardless of the political problems it would cause later. Arya and Jon are both capable of doing the same thing, and even some of the Stark men might do it if they heard you insulting their King so."

She looked around at the others. "I am going to go talk to Patrek and the other Wolfsworn as well as the about housing for the prisoners. After that my lord steward, I will need to talk to you about organizing a space for several dozen trials. Regardless of this new tragedy we will need to see to the disposition of our prisoners before we turn our attentions elsewhere." With that she left him there, and the Riverlords turned to one another talking quietly.

It turned out that Utheryde's estimation of Hoster's life was off by two days. He had only been holding on through sheer willpower in a desire to talk to his grandchildren. Later that very evening, Hoster Tully passed away quietly with a smile on his face while Arya and Ranma were telling him about one of Arya's misadventures.

An hour or so later Ranma walked down the stairs into the castles dining hall, where all the gathered lords and many of their heirs were eating together, sharing the news that Hoster had told them with their northern fellows. Daenerys too was there, talking to Myrcella about the city's organization and a few of the city watch commanders.

They all quieted instantly as Ranma entered, followed by Arya and Brynden. Behind the trio maester Wyman walked, carrying a single candle. He set the candle down in front of the Lord's seat at the front of the hall, then Ranma and the older man, his eyes red with unshed tears, draped a long black cloak over the seat, signifying Hoster's passing. It was only every really used when a lord died of old age or in peace time, but it still had to be done. After a few moments silence, the maester formally put the candle out ending the ceremony.

Having sat nearby Arya surprised herself somewhat by actually feeling tears in her eyes. Those few hours she spent with her grandfather had been interesting and fun, but she couldn't say that she had really seen him as family, not really. Yet even so his passing hurt her somehow.

A second later she was surprised to feel Bess and Edric, who sat on both sides of her, each grab a hand where they lay on her lap under the table and squeeze. She looked at them and smiled nodding her head before she wiped away the tears.

Ranma stood next to the seat staring out across the gathered Lords and heirs, finding a few here and there to stare at harder than the others but mostly just letting his eyes roam over their faces. "My grandfather has passed." He said softly yet even so every man and woman there heard him, speaking much more formally than was his normal mode. "He passed peacefully, despite his son's horrible death. He was a great man, and a good, just ruler. I regret not having had the chance to get to know him better, but age is the one enemy that will eventually come for us all."

"By right of blood and by his own words, I was his heir and I am now Lord Paramount of both the North and the Riverlands. I have no doubt that my northern Lords have shared the fact that they have named my wife and I King and Queen of the North. I ask you all formerly now, will you weld the Riverlands to the North? Will you follow me?"

The Lords of the Riverlands all looked at one another then Jason Mallister stood, followed a millisecond later by his son. "I have stood with you thus far, and I will continue to do so. My sword was yours when you were only acting as your grandfather's voice, I see no reason to change it now when you have become my liege."

He made to kneel formerly, but Ranma held up a hand. "**No!** I ask no man to kneel to me. You said it yourself Jason, you've already stood with us in battle. That is all I ask. Will you **stand** with me? Will you stand alongside us as we face the threats to come?"

Knowing her cue even though they hadn't actually discussed it Daenerys moved forward at that point. She took his hand and joining him in staring out at the Riverlords. "Will you follow us, will you follow our new House, House Stargaryen?"

"When the Lannister's came despoiling, burning and raping across our lands, the Baratheons did not answer." Said Tytos getting to his feet. "You did, you came to not just the aid of your family but of the entire Riverlands, and of my family in particular. I will stand with you, my King."

Silas was next, simply standing with a firm nod alongside Ser Blantree. Tristan and Vincent quickly rose to stand with them, prompting their uncle to reluctantly stand as well. "Long live Ranma Stark, King of the North and the Trident!" The two brothers shouted together.

Lord Charlton also stood, bowing his head slightly. But saying nothing as was his want. Kirth Vance stood next, his voice no longer showing any hint of wavering. "You avenged my brother's deaths, you've proven yourself an able general, and from what I've heard an able Lord as well. I also agree that you alone seemed to care about us. May you and your lovely Queen rule long and fairly, Your Highness."

Lord Mooton was surprisingly the next one to stand and speak, his voice smooth and polished, yet somehow ringing false in Ranma and Daenerys' ears. "Long has my family wanted a return of law and order, of precedent and lineage, rather than brute force." He smiled suddenly. "You seem to have both on your side now. Long may the Wolf King and the Dragon Queen reign!"

All the other lords and knights stood and shouted their approval, the Northerners reaffirming their loyalty with roars of sound and the Riverlanders formally acceding to Ranma and Daenerys's rule as king and Queen for the first time. Even Lord Piper, for all his concerns about their youth and about the nature of how Ranma became his grandfather's heir, was swept up in the moment. Where Ranma could have demanded their loyalties, he'd instead won them, where he could have demanded they kneel, he only asked them to stand. In that moment he had not just one then their loyalty, but their admiration as well.

The tales of Ranma had already begun with his masterful campaign against the Lannisters, but this solidified it. It also the first time someone penned the name that would remain with him throughout his reign. Daenerys too, would earn her own name in days to come. When she took the lead on the trials of the Lords they had captured and then organizing the laws of Westeros and streamlining the legal process. When she began to give rights to the smallfolk that had never formally been theirs before and making the laws so much easier to understand, Daenerys would earn her own name: the name of Daenerys the Just.

But for his deeds, both politically and on the battlefield, Ranma would be called something else, a name pinned that night by Domic the bard from where he watched, his eyes gleaming as he watched the future of Westeros change for all time. For his deeds, Ranma would become Ranma the Great.

OOOOOO

That evening Ranma and Daenerys met with their most trusted counselors. Tytos and Silas were also there, as representatives of the Riverlands along with Jason. That Tytos was there despite not having fought with the army was a mark of Ranma's trust in the man, who he had come to like almost as much as Jason.

The group however did not include Brynden, who was off getting quietly but competently drunk at the moment grieving in his own way for his brother's passing. The two of them had been able to come to terms with one another in the last moments of his life, but that only made Hoster's passing hurt all the more.

Ranma leaned back wearily rubbing at his forehead for a moment waving one hand at Daenerys to start. Daenerys nodded, rubbing at one of his shoulders commiserating. She didn't really have any family, but she knew that caring for his was one of the main tenants of Ranma's personality, even one who he didn't know at all like his grandfather.

She turned to the others nodding her head at Alayaya and Domic. "Let's start with you too, since you joined us so late in the march. Before we get to any of your news elsewhere, have you been able to get a feeling for the morale of the smallfolk in Riverrun?"

"They are joyful and ebullient my lady." Domic said smiling faintly. "That's what happens when someone learns that their side won the war. However, there is also a **lot** of underlying anger against the Lannisters. I don't know if you all heard it when you were marching through, but there are a lot of people in those crowds out there that want to tear the Westerlanders apart."

"I've already talked to a few of my former sisters in the business." Alayaya said delicately. "Several of them have long-term clients and one or two of them are worrying. They definitely have connections to the Westerlands, business-related ones for the most part, and I'd say at least one of them is a Lannister agent. He's a wealthy merchant, with several dozen armsmen to his name apparently."

"Is he a threat?" Tytos asked skeptically.

"Not alone my Lord, but..." Alayaya shrugged. "We haven't even been here a full day, yet there is already a rumor that Tywin will pay his own weight in gold to whoever aids in freeing him. I don't know who among our forces is letting that message out, but I think we need to take it seriously."

She smiled thinly when Domicer looked at her in surprise before leaning back and crossing her arms under her chest theatrically, bringing attention to her assets with the ease of long practice laughing internally as the eye of practically every lord in the room followed the gesture. "I have certain advantages in getting men to talk to me that you don't Domicer." She replied to his unanswered question in a dry tone.

Ranma came out of his funk somewhat to laugh at that, winking at the former whore who winked back with a giggle. After a moment however he addressed the matter more seriously. "I would prefer to put off Tywin's trial and execution until after we dealt with all of his men but those trials are going to take at least what, two, three full days? In your opinion Domicer, Alayaya, would putting his trial for that long be tempting fate? "

"Yes." both spymasters talked at once, then looked at one another shrugging. "Frankly my Lord, his swift execution would send a very strong message, putting it off to the end might make it more dramatic but in this case I don't think it's necessary." Domicer replied for them both

Daenerys nodded. "In that case, we will start with him the day after the mourning period is over." She closed her eyes in thought. "The Lord's dining hall here will do as a court room. We'll want about a hundred or so witnesses from among the smallfolk, as well as all the lords currently in attendance and a neutral scribe to take notes during the trials. Or rather several scribes. One for our own records, one for House Tully's, and one to be sent to the Lannisters. We might wish to check with Lord Piper and Lord Mooton on that, I think they are the most neutral Lords towards us at this point."

Tytos shrugged. "It's nothing personal my lady, as I said, Piper's a fence sitter, he's always been one to couch his bets. He's a cagey man, but you can at least trust him to do what is best not only for his family but for the smallfolk who look to them for protection."

"That's fine my Lord, but that doesn't mean I necessarily want him or his men serving with the main army. And speaking of which, it won't be all the Lords here. I think that the majority of the army with us should turn around and head to the camp outside Harroway. Greatjon, Rickard, you'll be in charge of that. I believe that most of the Riverlords should be here for the trials, is that correct?" Ranma asked.

Tytos and Jason both nodded firmly. "They'll want to see justice done, and the ones who haven't dealt with you in the past will want to get a better feel for the both of you Ranma." Jason said. "And after the trials are done, there will be other issues to deal with, specifically what will happen to the lands of the traitor Houses and the ones that have been wiped out by this war."

"Those are things with my wife and I have already been thinking about my Lord." Ranma said squeezing Daenerys' hand for a moment as she actually flushed at the memory. Ranma had only a few thoughts along those lines. But Daenerys, and she was quick to point out Merry, had a lot of ideas on that score, not just about what to do with the Westerlands after the Golden Tooth was taken. The make-out session the two of them had after she shared their brainstorming had been **intense**.

"We won't talk about that topic until after the trials however. For now, let's concentrate on the military and logistics. Domicer, Alayaya do you have any idea what's been going on further south?"

Domicer and Alayaya looked at one another wondering how Ranma would take their news. Alayaya hadn't taken it well when she first heard of it, fearing for her mother's safety but not able to do anything about it. So Domicer spoke up again for both of them. "The two Baratheon brothers are apparently going to do battle in the near future according to rumor, or at least that was the case when we left Harroway, which means the battle might have already occurred, we might be able to get confirmation of that here in Riverrun, though that's doubtful. That fights going to happen near King's Landing, where a plague has apparently begun to reave through the people."

Everyone in the room gasped in shock and not a little fear. Plague was the one enemy that everyone feared equally.

No sword or ax or strategy could work against a disease, and an outbreak could kill more people than the most horrible war. "How bad is it?" Daenerys asked her face paler than usual.

"Horrible." Domic said bluntly. "The only reason we know about it at all is because Renly's army isn't trying to attack the city any longer, they haven't been trying for weeks. Rather they've been interdicting it, making certain that no one can leave. With the number of people in King's Landing there is almost nothing anyone could do to stop a plague from ravaging the city. There simply wouldn't be enough troops to control the smallfolk, and they would panic and riot and..." He shuddered a little cursing his bard's soul for once as it forced him to once more imagine the horror that King's Landing had probably become.

Ranma looked over at Myrcella who had paled visibly, even further than Daenerys, and her hands were clenched together almost hard enough for her nails to draw blood. He reached over, pulling her into a hug wordlessly offering what support he could. Whatever else had happened Merry still cared for her mother and even her uncle Jaime, both of whom were stuck in King's Landing apparently, along with servants and teachers and even a few acquaintances that she had known most of her life.

"Did you hear any hint about this Vile One that Joffrey is supposed to have become?" Myrcella asked after a moment. "I think it fits his personality, but not his skill. He'd need someone's help to get in and out of the Red Keep without mother finding out, especially during a siege. She must be keeping him even closer than normal now."

"I'm afraid not your Highness." Alayaya replied sadly reaching over to take the younger girl's hand in one of her own smirking internally as she noticed that Ranma haven't relinquished his one armed hug on the over the girls shoulder and that Daenerys seemed perfectly content with the sign of affection. *Interesting.*

"What are you are you thinking about Myrcella?" Ranma asked looking down at the girl.

"Remember how I told you that Joffrey and Petyr seemed to be coming close before my brother's death? I'm wondering if Petyr decided to back Joffrey for some reason. I am struggling however with what he would get out of it."

"Actually, I think that would be the easiest part of it." Daenerys said with a shrug. "In times of war a Master of Coin isn't exactly the most powerful position after all, especially for someone who doesn't have any other powerbase. But the King? He could add to Petyr's powerbase quite a bit even if he's a useless young monster like Joffrey. Do we know who the Hand of the King is?"

Domic and Alayaya shook their heads. "That's kind of thing is a little too detailed and a little too high level for rumor among the smallfolk to pass it on this far away my lady." Domic replied.

"Then is there anything else you can tell us about events happening elsewhere?" Daenerys asked.

"The Ironborn have taken the Arbor and the Shield Islands." Alayaya replied bluntly, grateful for the change in topic. "Wine merchants have heard all about it. Apparently, they used some kind of fire ships to cause a lot of chaos before their own fleet arrived, though how they took the Shield Islands no one seems to know. Since then, they've sent reaving parties up the Mander, no one knows how deep they've gotten."

"Joy." Ranma muttered shaking his head angrily. Frowning thoughtfully he tried to conjure up a map of Westeros in his mind then shook his head. "If Renly isn't a complete idiot he'll have already split his army and sent at least a third of his men back into the Reach to deal with the Ironborn. The Ironborn simply don't have the numbers to hold the Shield Islands and the Arbor, even given their skill at sea. But that will leave him facing his brother with what a four to one advantage or something? Do we have any idea how strong a force Stannis has been able to put together?"

"Other than the fact that he took Duskendale and seems to have at least four or five Houses from the Stormlands on his side, no. My best guess would be around 20,000 or so." Domic said with a shrug. "Merchants that travel to Duskendale with their goods brought that news back to Harroway, but exact numbers? Why would they care about that? Um..."

The bard looked between Ranma and Daenerys for a moment then went on delicately. "On the subject of the Reach my lords, we received a messenger from the Lady Margaery to you Ranma. Note, I, I said the lady Margaery, not House Tyrell. I convinced the man to wait until we learned what your grandfather had summoned you to Riverrun for before asking for an audience with you, but he has no idea what the message is."

"Huh." Ranma shook his head, surprised, while Daenerys merely cocked her head thoughtfully. "Well, I'll speak to him first thing tomorrow I suppose. That bit of business will be allowed during the mourning period won't it?"

Daenerys nodded at that, seeing no issue with it. She and Ranma had talked several times about Margaery, and Daenerys knew the girl was no threat to her position by his side or in his heart. *Though does **she** know the same thing?*

"You can meet with him and read his message for certain, but nothing to do with laws or the running of the city should occur during the time of mourning." Jason replied.

"Anything else we need to go over tonight?" Ranma asked.

"There are countless rumors of this or that area in the Riverlands being plagued by bandits, but there aren't actually as many as I had feared. The rumors that you will actually try and execute the Lords mostly responsible for the atrocities have spread to the smallfolk, and the general response is a wait-and-see attitude. Smallfolk have been promised a lot in the past, they're waiting to see if you actually follow through." Alayaya replied.

"Oh we will do that. We surely will." Ranma replied grimly.

OOOOOO

Early the next day the majority of the army turned around, heading back towards Harroway under Greatjon and Rickard's joint command. They left behind 7000 men but had gained around 1,500 from House Tully consisting mostly of archers, light cavalry and scouts to join Meera's growing command. But that was not House Tully's only contribution. Not only would Riverrun now become the center of the army's supply lines, but Hoster had also raised a pike regiment in the style that Jon and he had introduced in the North. They weren't as well trained as the Northerners from House Stark or House Cerwyn, but they were quite good and that final bit of training could be added on the march.

He had already turned that task over to a few of the unit commanders from the Northern Regiment, and was confident they would be whipped into shape by the time they were needed. The remaining Army however was there to guard the prisoners, not just the Lords but all of the Westerners soldiers that had been captured and gathered in Riverrun for the present time. House Tully retained around 900 heavy horse, around 500 archers and another 1000 heavy infantry.

Ranma also had plans for some of them, but that was for later. Right now, he had a letter from a friend to see to. He called for the Reach messenger to be brought to him in the dining hall while Daenerys remained in their rooms, having sent for Alayaya for something.

The knight from the Reach was a man of slightly below middle age with the kind of build that Ranma had often seen in heavy cavalymen, heavy shoulders matched with bow legs. He also radiated a sort of solidness, which Ranma found familiar, having searched out men such as that for his small unit commanders all along. "Ser Knight," Ranma said as the man about his head slightly. He smiled, knowing that the brevity of that bow wasn't an insult, simply a statement that Ranma wasn't his king, or even Lord Paramount. "I'm told that you have a message for me from Lady Margaery?"

"Ser Willem Wythers, my lord. The Lady Margaery wrote it about a month and a half ago, so what is in it might not be all that accurate anymore. But it was my duty to deliver it to you in any event."

"I understand the fog of war Willem, believe me, I've even used it on occasion. May I have the message please?"

The knight nodded, and moved forward handing it over. Ranma leaned back slitting open the parchment, noting absently that it was sealed with both House Tyrell's and Margaery's own seal. The seal of House Tyrell was a large flower as seen from above with five petals and five thorns between them. Margaery's was a rose laid on it's side. Wondering why she used both Ranma unrolled the parchment, and began to read. 'Ranma, I hope this message reaches you. In some ways, I know it won't reach you in time, but in others I hope you take it to heart.'

From there it recounted in concise sentences what had occurred since Renly had left with his army, before reiterating the fact that she had not been in favor of the marriage. She made a point of noting that Willas had been sent northwest to deal with the Lannister despoilers sent into the Reach, before stating:

'Now the Reach lies practically defenseless, and the Ironborn have taken advantage of it. My father is a buffoon, my brother Loras is love-struck, Garlan has been roped into service to the buffoon, and Willas is dealing with one of the two threats already. Hopefully Garlan will have returned by this time and will be dealing with the Ironborn threats, but even if we beat off the Ironborn, the Reach will have been ravaged badly. What is worse in a way is how we came to this impasse and it is this matter that I wish to speak to you about.'

'I have heard that you have married Daenerys Stormborn, and I cannot honestly fault you or declaim you an oathbreaker, since my family broke off the engagement first. But I would ask you and her to look favorably upon my House regardless of my father's actions. While I am in no position as yet to decry those actions, he is with the army, and I am still here in Highgarden, the seat of our power. Think on that for a moment.'

Ranma did, smiling slightly as he went over what else Dmeric had shared with them last night. *Seriously have to get some up to date news or at least the best we can get here about what's going on down there.* After thinking about it for a moment Ranma went back to reading:

'As the only Tyrell within Highgarden at the moment, I have certain powers of regency. As such, I am formally recognizing the primacy of House Stark-Targaryen, and not only pledging Highgarden to you as king of the realms but I offer myself to you and your Queen as surfeit of House Tyrell's loyalty. I pray that this will be enough to offset whatever anger is incurred by my father's actions, and that you will look favorably upon your loyal servants. Signed, Margaery of House Tyrell.'

Staring at the last bit of writing Ranma brought his hand p to pull at his ponytail then began to laugh. *Well played lady, well played indeed.* Shaking his head he looked down at the Willem who was looking at him with his head cocked to one side wondering how Ranma had taken the message. "I doubt that you'll be able to head back to Highgarden with a message anytime soon Ser Willem, and I have to talk about the contents of this letter with my wife in any event. However, I can tell you that I personally am looking favorably upon what she says in this message, and what it could mean for the Reach in general."

OOOOOO

Elsewhere in the castle Alayaya stared across the small table at Daenerys, then chuckled a little, her full, sensual lips quirking into a small smile. Though she had wondered, she hadn't really expected something like this. "I am going to look at this from two perspectives. One of them is from the perspective of your friend. From that perspective, I would simply ask you two questions. One, would you be comfortable with sharing Ranma with another woman, and I mean **really** comfortable with it? This isn't you trying to force yourself to bring her in because you think it would make him happier is it?"

"No, nothing like that." Daenerys shook her head. "I haven't even broached the subject with him. But I can see how he and Merry interact, and I can tell even if he can't that he loves her. Not as much as he loves me, or possibly not in the same manner yet, but there will come a time when he realizes she's blossomed into a woman, and his love will change."

"As to your question, if you had asked me four or even three months ago if I would be comfortable with the idea of sharing my husband, my answer would've been no, and I might've slapped you for even suggesting it. But since then I've come to care for Merry myself. Indeed I've spent so much time around Merry, it would feel wrong not to have her nearby."

Alayaya smiled thinking about another aspect of what was going on here. She knew many sisters of her former profession that enjoyed the touch of women just as much as men or even more so. Most of them had horrible experiences with men in the past, but some were simply born with that lack of preference.

While the first was obviously not the case here, there was an easy way to check if the second held true. "And you find yourself looking at her as well don't you? When you're talking to her and when Merry's laughing, you smile. When you're sharing a horse, when your arms are around her and your head on her shoulders, you think how good she feels in your arms, how nice she smells. Have you caught yourself thinking it would be so easy to lean in for a kiss?"

Daenerys flushed hotly, looking away then back at Alayaya. "W, Where did that come from!?"

"Is it true?" Alayaya pressed.

"I..." Daenerys paused. "I don't...possibly." She looked away again. "Possibly. I don't find her as attractive as I find Ranma, but there have been times where... where I've had thoughts like that."

"So this wouldn't just be about Ranma and Merry and then Ranma and you, it would be a true three-way if she feels the same way toward you." Alayaya said nodding her head. "That's good, the only way a three-person relationship can really survive is if they are as equal as possible behind closed doors, so to speak. That you all love and care for one another is incredibly important."

"On that note, I think that approaching the matter with Ranma after you've made certain that Myrcella feels the same

way towards you might be a good idea. I've seen the way the two of them interact too, and you're right it's only a matter of time before Ranma wises up and realizes that Merry isn't his little sister no matter how often he tries to convince himself of that. But if she isn't attracted to you Daenerys, I think you should pull back and then find some way to send Merry off somewhere. Having her nearby would be a wrench on all of you in different ways."

Daenerys looked miserable at the very idea, having missed Merry almost as deeply as Ranma when she was with him and his portion of the army baiting the lion on the other side of the Red Fork. Still she nodded, knowing that having Merry around and not having her in the relationship might cause issues later on.

"If it makes you feel better, I think she is attracted to you in some way, but that's for the three of you to find out." Alayaya sighed, then her face firmed as she went on brusquely. "Now we come to my response to this issue as one of your spymasters."

"I doubt I have to point out the political downsides of this idea to you, but what about the social ones? The Seven teach that polyamorous relationships are a sin, and I'm afraid you already have too much sin built into you from their perspective for you to get away with adding more. The smallfolk have already been a major help thanks to the septons deciding to back you and Ranma. My information network has grown in leaps and bounds because of that, and I know that the Army is getting its supplies even faster than would otherwise be the case. Jeopardizing that asset is a very bad idea."

"And politically it would be a very bad idea as well done." Daenerys replied nodding her head. "You don't have to tell me. And yet, I can't shake the feeling that the three of us would be happy together."

"Politics and happiness rarely go together your Majesty." Alayaya said sadly. "Unless you can think of some way of keeping the knowledge of your relationship from getting out, and there really isn't any way to stop that from happening eventually, I would recommend that you wait until we are forced to acknowledge she is a Waters rather than a true-born Baratheon princess. I doubt there will come a time when we would be in a position to place her as heir or lady of the Lannisters, so the connection to the Baratheon line is the more important aspect."

"So long as she is known as a baseborn, you'll have more leeway in what you can get away with in terms of keeping her by your side as a handmaiden or confidant rather than needing to think of arranging a marriage to secure her line. Until then, I beg you not to act on your feelings. With what Viserys has recently tried and added to your own dubious background it would cause a social shit storm like you would not believe!"

Daenerys nodded rueful agreement, and the discussion turned to other things. Though she was still worrying about the problem the back of her mind even as she walked out of Alayaya's room several hours later wondering if it would be worth it even so.

OOOOOO

Later that evening Ranma and Daenerys sat taking a meal together alone for once in the suite that Ranma had taken over here in Riverrun. It was not the lords apartments, those Ranma refused to live in. Not only did they still smell faintly of his grandfather, but Hoster had lived there for so long his stamp was everywhere. They were in fact Edmure's former quarters, but they had been cleaned and personal effects removed long before Ranma had arrived.

"Interesting." Daenerys said thoughtfully laying down the message. "I wonder what she means when she says that she offers herself in service."

"I think we couldn't do very much better in terms of a representative on our counsel for the Reach in the future." Ranma said after swallowing his piece of bread quickly. "For right now, I think we need to wait until Domic and Alayaya have time to hunt up some of the latest rumors from the Reach if they can."

"You realize if we agree to take her at her word, we might be forced to back Margaery against her father don't you? We will be setting a very strange precedent. If her father doesn't swear loyalty to us at any rate."

"Reading between the lines of the message, I think that she believes that Mace is too far in with Renly to back out now." Ranma paused thinking about what he knew of the man which unfortunately wasn't very much, and all of it built from secondhand sources. Mind you some of those secondhand sources were very good indeed as the man's own daughter was one of them. "I think that Mace will continue to fight for whoever offers his family the best chance of becoming tied to the royal line and I mean immediately tied."

"Which means Margaery is the tool of choice for him?" Daenerys asked scowling at the very idea. She knew that marriages between Houses were important, and she knew that women were a commodity in that market, but it



seemed callous to her particularly when the man might not even be able to do his husbandly duty as in the case of Renly. "If she rebels against him then, will she be able to make it stick?"

"Again that's a question we can't answer just yet. Even so, it could certainly sow some discord among any Reach forces we meet."

"But if we agree to take her at her word it also forces us to send troops." Daenerys said critically. "What kind of forces could we send them, and would they even arrive in time to do any good?"

"The force to send would be easy enough. House Keath didn't send a representative here, which means we'll be forced to deal with that family's keep. They're situated at the mouth of the Blackwater, which we could use to transport a force much quicker down to the Reach than on foot. After we take the Golden Tooth, I'll send Jon and a force down that way, the composition of which I'll think about after we get some hard data both from the Reach and from what's going on in King's Landing."

"What do you think is going on?" Daenerys asked looking at him thoughtfully.

"I think that Stannis is going to massacre Renly." Ranma said flatly. "Renly never struck me as very intelligent and certainly has no experience at war. Stannis has both, and they might be closer in numbers than Renly would like."

"Stannis will be our more most dangerous opponent then. At least until my brother somehow shows up somewhere." Daenerys mused.

"From what you told about me your brother he didn't sound like he'd make a very good general, and frankly I think Oberyn is a little overrated as a warrior let alone a general, which I don't think he has any experience in even if he was a mercenary over in Essos for a time." Ranma shrugged. "With you, Sunfyre and Rhaegon able to take Viserys and the dragon you're certain he has out of the equation, we could beat any army he fields like a drum."

He watched Daenerys wince remembering that egg, but reached across grasping her hand tightly. "Daenerys," he said softly. "I know you still feel bad about leaving that egg behind, but you made the right choice at the time given what you knew about me. And even if you had confided in me, remember I couldn't fight an entire city up in arms, and if they had closed the port against us we would've been stuck."

"But there is something else you need to know." He went on earnestly, moving around the table still holding her hand and going to one knee in front of her to stare into her eyes. "That Dragon, whatever he could have become under you and your gentle touch, there's no way he's become that under your brother. Can you honestly say your brother would have been training him the same way you'd have yours, even without me telling you how to warg with them?"

Daenerys stared into his blue eyes for a moment then slowly shook her head sighing sadly. "No. No, I have no doubt that my brother has created a monster. It doesn't make it any easier, but up if it comes to that, I will I will do my duty there. I will even be, be a kinslayer if I must."

"I hope it won't come to that, and I'll try my damndest to make certain it doesn't, but the dragon, you might have to deal with." Ranma said honestly squeezing her hands. Ranma could do it, if he tried, but only if none of his own men were around and even then he might have to get a bit closer than he could in a full battle situation.

Daenerys reached forward with her free hand, gently stroking Ranma's hair for a moment then cupping his chin and pulling him gently to his feet. "Kings shouldn't bow or kneel to anyone, not even their queens." She said with a laugh. Then she went on more seriously looking up at him thoughtfully. "We need to talk about something else soon. We need to talk about Merry after the trials."

"Merry, what about her?" Ranma asked trying to keep up with changing conversation and failing miserably.

"After the trials." Daenerys said firmly. "We'll discuss it then." *After I make a decision about my own feelings.* "Until then I want both of us on task."

"Oh really?" Ranma said with a laugh, leaning down to kiss her. She tried to pull back, but his arms went around her lifting her out of the chair as easily as if she were a babe. Holding her against his body while still kissing her ardently, he moved them over to the bed. "Well, right now." He said pulling back slightly. "I wish to focus on a different task."

Daenerys laughed, then began to help him untie her clothing.

OOOOOO

Loras had been on the road after the false king and the other Lannisters for about five days now, but had been unable to catch them up just yet, while in turn a messenger from his father had been able to catch up with him and his force. He stared down the Kingsroad in that direction then back down at the message from his father. Then he looked across at Lord Ashford. "I have no wish to serve Stannis," he said simply. "I am a believer in the Seven, and his new religion is anathema to me. Then there are the rumors that we've already begun to hear from the smallfolk about some great burning going on further south. Whatever that is, I cannot imagine it was anything good."

The older man looked back at him, his own thoughts a jumble. For one thing, he somehow knew that if this force had thrown its lot into the battle back at King's Landin, they would have certainly changed its outcome, especially if they had attacked from the back or flank of Stannis's forces. And somehow he also knew that Loras knew that, and wasn't displeased or pleased about it. Whatever had happened between him and Renly had obviously been far more important than Lord Ashford had thought.

With that in mind he blurted out, "What happened between you and Renly my lord?" He held up a hand as Loras opened his mouth. "Please my Lord, I need to know. Did you throw that battle purposefully?"

"No." Loras said after a moment, thinking up a lie on the spot. "I did not. As to what happened between myself and my brother, I learned that he had decided to repudiate his agreement with my family, and to send overtures to the Dragon Queen to coerce Harroway from the Starks. He feared her dragons you see, and had felt that they and she would give his claim to the throne even more legitimacy."

"But then that Shadow Assassin attacked, and killed Emmon, who was the only other witness. Renly was going to send him as a messenger. After that, it would've been my own world against his, and even my own father would not have believed me under those circumstances, not since everyone knew the two of us had been estranged since my injury." He raised a hand to touch the burn scars on his face, scowling angrily as he remembered the pain of them.

That actually made a lot of sense, though it still was a little cold-blooded not to care overmuch about Renly after being his friend for so long. And Ashford could also tell Loras was still holding something back. *Yet I too have my doubts about this new religion, and the rumors from further south have redoubled them.*

There was also something else bothering him. "Lord Mace has changed sides so quickly and too readily for my liking," he said aloud. "Flip-flopping like that shows a lack of spine and mental ability. Worse, he is intending to marry your sister off to Stannis just as he did Renly? The idea of Stannis's setting his wife aside does not speak well with me."

Loras nodded but remained silent watching the man closely. After a moment Ashford smiled. "My family is loyal to House Tyrell my Lord, we have been for centuries, we will continue to be for centuries more Seven willing. But our loyalty to House Tyrell does not mean we have to be loyal to Mace. What do you wish us to do from now on?"

At that circumspect declaration Loras smiled, reaching across between their horses to slap the other man on his shoulder. "I think we should continue on, my father even commands us to do so we're not going to be forcing an issue there just yet. If we catch up to the Brat King and her party, if we capture them we'll have our own bargaining chip. And from there we can head up into the Riverlands easily."

Lord Ashford's eyes widened, but then he nodded quickly. All of the Reach had been loyal to house Targaryen, not just House Tyrell, and the idea of taking them such powerful tokens of their loyalty as Cersei and her brat would mean Daenerys and the Starks would look favorably upon them. "Catching up to them won't be easy my Lord." He cautioned. "All of them are pushing their horses hard, and we've got infantry."

"Yes, but we can live off the lay of the land just as easily as they, and no doubt Stannis has already sent out orders to all the remaining Crownlands Houses he can reach with ravens. They won't find any help at Sow's Horn. When they break off to head there, we'll send some scouts after them, but keep our main force heading up the Kingsroad, and then split off further north of their position. The Kingsroad will allow us to get ahead of them heading north, and we can then move east and cut them off from House Edgerton. At worst, we'll force them back towards the Riverlands."

Ashford nodded, going over a mental map of the Crownlands that wasn't very good if he was honest with himself. Still, that made some sense to him. "And we can stand a messenger up the Kingsroad towards Harroway my Lord, if the Starks have any forces there, they might send them south to aid us."

"Excellent notion my Lord." Loras said with a laugh. "But for now, let us continue the march."

OOOOOO

The next day started with Hoster Tully being sent out into the Red Fork on a bier set alight by seven fire arrows on the

first of two days of mourning Ranma had ordered for his grandfather, where businesses were closed and nothing formal could happen. Normally it would have lasted seven days, but in times of war the normal mourning period could be cut down. Having any time before the trials began was going against his spymaster's advice, but Ranma was adamant in wanting to honor the man, and his other advisors were right in how it would have looked to the city-folk if they felt Ranma was not grieving his grandfather's death appropriately.

Of course Ranma still used this time to train and to talk to Daenerys about some ideas he had going forward to deal with the fall out of the war so far in the Riverlands. The most important thing was the meeting they had with a merchant who had ties to Myr. They were able to negotiate a deal between them for enough glass to build a glass garden to match Vincent's design.

It would be very work intensive, and take a lot of coal to keep the waters running through it warm, since Riverrun lacked the underground hot-springs that had allowed the original to be built there. But it would work, using a portion of the area between the actual castle and the rest of the island to water the plants, while fires set into clay cisterns below it would heat the water which would create steam above, and keep the temperature in the glass garden regulated.

The startup cost was enormous, larger than the army's wages thus far by an order of magnitude. Even if the glass was on hand that would have been the case, but the fact it had to be transported from Myr over the ocean to Harroway and then up the river, multiplied the cost by three times. Indeed, it was only the fact that Ranma planned to take the Golden Tooth that allowed them to negotiate the deal at all.

The rest of the Wolfsworn did various things. Roger spent time with his wife of course, while Eddy and Hathan trained to get Hathan back up to speed. Smalljon, Dacey and Arya explored the city with Patrek, Vincent and Tristan as their guides. Daryn arrived a few days after the army with the bulk of the prisoners they had taken in the battle at the Ruby Ford, along with Wendel and the prisoners from the Kneeling Man ford.

The arrival of the prisoners caused a wave of anger through the refugees everywhere in the city, since they all were still wearing their tabards. The city watch however was up to the task of keeping a lid on things for now, aided by the rumor that the prisoners had been brought there to be formally tried and sentenced. That actually won Daenerys and Ranma some goodwill, since it showed yet again that they believed in justice and the rule of law.

No, it wasn't those prisoners who were the issue.

Ranma had placed Jon in charge of the prisoners along with Domic. The two of them watched all of the servants who entered the prisoner's tower like hawks, and the two of them were able to intercept a message for Tywin at one point, and foil an attempt to get a knife to one of the other prisoners. Both times the servants were caught and questioned, leaving two different merchants who had ties to House Lannister. Those merchants were seized in turn, questioned, then executed as spies in wartime, their liquid assets added to the Stark-Targaryen war chest and their business given over to the Castle and to run in House Stark's name.

This was however only the prelude to the real attempt to break Tywin out.

The fourth night of the mourning period Jon was once more on guard, patrolling the corridor of the tower that was housing the noble prisoners. Ghost was around the place somewhere, but Jon hadn't been able to figure out a way to both be aware of what Ghost was doing, and watch his own surroundings. So he didn't have any idea where Ghost was in the tower at the moment.

Jon moved silently, having learned that at least from his bonded, and he didn't carry a torch either, trusting to his merely human eyesight. He moved through the dark of the corridors like just another shadow, pausing occasionally to listen before moving on.

It was his hearing allowed Jon to spot the strange discord, an almost inaudible scrape of steel on steel where there shouldn't have been anything. At that point he had just exited the intermittently lit stairwell onto the third floor of the tower to check on the rooms that had been given over to Stafford and Daven. At the sound however he turned back quickly, moving into one of the shadows by the doorway as he stared up the stairwell which wound on until it finally ended at the door to the room Tywin occupied.

Jon took a moment to get in touch with Ghost, who was currently on the first floor patrolling near the entrance. The direwolf had sensed something, a scent that shouldn't have been there, and was tracking it when Jon reached out to his mind, so Jon let him be. Jon then slowly pulled out one of his short swords, careful to make no noise as he did so. He waited a brief moment then moved up the stairwell on silent feet, pausing occasionally to listen. He stopped in the shadows directly before the last floor of the tower, staring upwards.

There was a man standing there on guard while a second man behind him was working on the lock to Tywin's room. It was the sound of one of his tools against the metal of the lock that had alerted Jon. Both of them were illuminated by a torch outside Tywin's cell, while Jon was practically invisible in the darkness of the stairwell below them.

Briefly Jon wondered if he should take one of them prisoner, then decided that yes that would be a good idea since if Ghost ran into any he doubted his bonded would be able to think of that. As such, Jon turned his blade slightly in his grip so that he would be striking with the flat rather than the edge before bounding up into the light of the torch.

His sudden and silent appearance took the two men completely by surprise. The one on guard had a brief second to gasp "wha-?" before Jon's blade smacked with punishing force into the side of his head, knocking the man out before he even hit the floor.

Though not on the level of a Faceless Man or a Sorrowful Man, the would-be liberator working on the lock was a thorough-going professional of the sort Tywin had seeded in many of Westeros' cities, and he reacted with all the speed he could. Turning he whipped out a small soot-darkened dirk lunging at Jon.

Anyone but another wolfsworn might have been surprised at the man's speed, but Jon negligently smacked the dirk to one side with his gauntleted hand, kicking out at the same time to catch the man in his midriff. The man flew backwards slamming into the door to Tywin's room with a booming sound, and when he tried to rise, another kick to the head knocked him out to join his fellow.

Jon moved to the door leading into Tywin's cell, looking inside to see Tywin standing near the doorway glaring at it and then at him when he showed his face. "Nice try, but not quite enough." Jon said, smirking just a bit to irritate the older man. Then he turned, grabbing the two prisoners and hauling them to their feet before placing them over his shoulders and heading back down the stairs. Behind him Tywin stared after the Stark bastard, biting his lip so hard it nearly bled.

Down below Ghost had found a group of invaders that had possibly been a diversion of some sort, five men moving around the first floor of the tower trying to release the Westerlands noblemen imprisoned there. Before they could open the first door however Ghost was on them like a wraith out of the night.

"GAHHH!" The first the men knew of his presence was when one of them screamed shrilly as Ghost chomped down on one of his legs, ripping his entire leg off with an ease that made the act all the more terrifying. With his first victim's leg still clamped in his jaws Ghost barreled forward, his head smashing into one man while he dropped the leg he had been holding.

Leaping to the side he dodged a man who had been about to thrust his sword into Ghost's side. One paw flashed out to catch the man in the shoulder and neck, breaking both upon impact while the man's body was sent careening down the corridor.

"Damn it's just a fucking animal, kill it already!" Two men tried to strike at him with their short swords, only for Ghost to dodge backwards, his forepaws flashing out catching one man. Then he smacked the other man's sword aside, lunging forward to almost rip him in half with his jaws.

"M-monster!" The last man tried to turn and run, but Ghost bore him to the ground with a single leap, then his bloody maw reached down, ripping the man's head off.

Ghost stood there for a moment as cries of alarm, shock and horror began to be uttered by the prisoners all around him. He looked down at himself rumbling mournfully before resolutely turning away as the noblemen in their cells all began to shout out questions trying to figure out what had happened. Ghost didn't care about them, he cared about finding someplace to bath for a moment to get rid of the blood on his fur.

OOOOOO

The next day Brynden and Domico questioned the prisoners, finding out the name of the man who had hired them. A promise of sending them to the Wall rather than executing them saw to that. Ranma allowed Domico to lead the raid on the man's house, while Ranma himself had decided to go out into the city. He had Domico and Alayaya's reports of course, but he wanted his own read on what the townspeople thought about his grandfather.

He'd first thought to spend time in the godswood, here in Riverrun, but when he did, he still got the sense that he had to travel to the Isle of Faces, only much more clearly than he had in Raventree Hall. Ranma figured that it was a matter of distance, the old gods couldn't project enough of their presence this far south, not without a major local focus. A single weirwood tree wasn't enough to pass on whatever message the old gods were trying to send him.

Ranma was able to get a sense of slowly growing urgency, but that was all, and Ranma had decided to turn his attention to other things for now.

In his normal clothing with a hood covering his face Ranma looked enough like any other off-duty northern soldier to blend into the city with ease. Moving from one bar or market stall to another Ranma was able to get the impression he wished, and found that Domic and Alayaya had the feelings of the city-folk spot on. There was a great deal of grief at Hoster's passing, despite the smallfolk having had so long to get used to the idea that he would eventually pass.

There was a sense that while Hoster had his faults as Lord Paramount, he had been a masterful city administrator. The signs of that was everywhere. Even with the massive influx of refugees, the streets were decently clean and very well patrolled. The city was crowded, but it wasn't a messy sort of crowding. The city watch also looked well trained, and Ranma could tell that their unit commanders were old armymen, who had served House Tully in the field before being allowed to semi-retire to the city watch. Even when he headed down into the poorer areas of the city that was the case, and there was no sign of the sort of slums he had feared.

Around midday Ranma headed back to the castle, hoping to find Daenerys in their quarters. Halfway there however he was halted by a servant. "Your Majesty" said the servant bowing his head. "A tailor has arrived and is waiting for you in your room to fit you for some formal apparel. Her Highness has asked me to inform you that the trials will be a 'command performance'?"

Ranma groaned a little but nodded his head. "Ugh, very well, but where might I find the queen?"

"She and the Lady Myrcella have taken over the suite of rooms that Lady Catelyn used when she was in residence." the older man replied, smiling faintly at some bygone memory. "I feel certain however, that they would prefer you to be fitted before going to see them." he said returning to the here and now.

"Too true," Ranma replied, shaking his head. Sighing he made his way to his rooms, where he did indeed find the tailors. For the next hour Ranma bore up with their poking and prodding him stoically, but when they began to talk about hose and leggings he put his foot down hard. He thought those things had been a horrible affectation of the court in King's Landing, and he would never wear the damn things. This caused some consternation among the tailors, as did his insistence on austerity. "I'm a Stark," he said sternly. "We are not known for ostentatious display, and I refuse to allow such now."

Eventually he was fitted with good simple black trousers, a black doublet with an image of a direwolf worked into the sleeves, and a cloak of wolf's fur. Fenris, who had been watching all this with amusement, sniffed audibly at that, but didn't make any other sign of irritation. The tailors on the other hand were morose, the design was so simple and barbaric, but it was one that Ranma could live with.

Ranma then left his rooms, smirking a little while he listened to the complaints of the tailors who were apparently not used to being told no, before he decided to try and find Daenerys. He wanted to go over the rules of the court with her one more time, because he knew that the trials to come would prove the basis of a new judicial system in the future. That was Daenerys' main area of interest, as the military was Ranma's (both of them could take politics or leave them at this point).

Eventually he found Ser Barristan guarding a hallway with the thousand league stare of a man sent away while women discussed fashion. A moment later he passed by some maids who were carrying several elaborate dresses each. Guessing that meant he was nearing his destination, he stepped to one side, allowing them to enter a room he had been accidentally blocking then moved on. Hearing voices coming from one of the rooms Ranma opened its door and stepped inside only to stop poleaxed at the sight before him.

OOOOOO

While Ranma went out that morning to explore the city, Daenerys and Myrcella got a early start on choosing the dresses they would wear for the coming trials. Myrcella however was still having some misgivings about it. "I still don't understand why you and Ranma both think I need to be involved in the trials. I'm flattered of course, I'm just not certain that it makes much sense."

Looking at Daenerys she giggled a little, seeing the expression on her face. Merry had long since learned how to tell when Daenerys or Ranma were warging with their animals mentally in some fashion. The slack face and the thousand mile stare was a major hint. "How are Rhaegon and Sunfyre finding the woodlands hereabouts?"

"Rhaegon just killed his first bear, the creature actually tried to fight back, amazing. Sunfyre is eating a dear of some kind, thinking it isn't as tasty as crab." Daenerys replied absent-mindedly, sending feelings of love and amusement

down her link to both animals, along with orders to come back to the castle of Riverrun when it became dark out.

That done, she blinked a little coming back to her own body quickly. "I'm sorry what did you say?" After Merry had repeated what she had said, Daenerys smiled, continuing down the corridor beside the young woman towards the rooms she had designated as the outfitting area.

Lady Catelyn had left several dresses here after she married Eddard either because they no longer fit or were simply not practical in the North. While the leaves had begun to fall and rains had begun to hammer the Riverlands one out of every four days it hadn't become noticeably colder yet, so that wasn't a problem. The problem of the dresses fitting could be solved with enough seamstresses working on the issue.

"Actually it is almost entirely a political maneuver my dear. Remember our position: officially, you are a princess, heir to House Baratheon. You might have removed yourself from the line of succession for the throne, but that doesn't equate to removing yourself from House Baratheon." Daenerys said, putting her arm over the other girl's shoulder so that they could whisper together more easily. She absently noted that the younger girl actually smelled rather pleasant, but not of the normal lilac and honeysuckle smell, she had added a rose or some other scent to her perfume.

"You know that's not true Daenerys, I've told you before." Myrcella replied softly, her own arm going around Daenerys's waist, smiling up at the slightly taller woman who had become her best friend and confidant over the months they had known one another. "Look at me, I don't have a single hint about me that I'm a Baratheon."

"True, but until we receive notice from the Citadel that daughters from marriages between Lannister and Baratheon also take after the Baratheon line we will continue to treat you as such. And besides, even without that, and leaving aside our current difficulties with House Lannister, you would be in the line of succession to that house as well through your mother. As such, you would still be high-ranking enough to put on the quorum."

"I suppose..." Myrcella replied shaking her head. "And I know this is rather silly of me, but I'd rather not be associated with the Lannisters at all after this war."

"Unless Kevan decides to remain at war with us and somehow forces us to invade the Westerlands, the Lannisters will still be a powerful family, Merry. Their control of Lannisport and the Rock would see to that." The silver-haired young queen smiled thinly. "If all goes according to plan they won't have access to the mines around the Golden Tooth soon enough, but they'll still have very deep pockets and a very strong logistical base."

Ranma was the one who had put it that way, but Daenerys understood what he was saying easily enough. "And if the city of Lannisport is as loyal to them as Riverrun appears to be to House Tully, taking it will be a nightmare."

"And of course the Rock would be incredibly hard to take at the best of times." Myrcella mused, nodding her head. Memories of the two trips the royal family had taken to the Rock went through her mind, and she quailed a little inside at what taking it would cost in time and blood.

Daenerys wasn't certain she agreed with that, she had seen what Ranma had done to the Twins. With that skill Ranma might be able to do the same to the spire of rock that Casterly Keep sat on, bringing the entire thing down. But that wasn't germane to the subject at hand. "True enough, but again you would only be the Lannister heir if we were forced to remove Kevan and all his children per force from positions of power. Frankly, we just **can't afford** to be bogged down in the Westerlands. Once Ranma takes the Golden Tooth we will have secured the Riverlands borders, and we will **need** to turn our attention elsewhere."

Myrcella nodded, leaving the subject of her being part of the quorum to the side for now as she looked at Daenerys. "Are you more worried about the fact we haven't heard anything about your brother, or the otherworldly powers that the Red Witch that Stannis employs can call upon?"

"Both." Daenerys replied, squeezing the other girl around the shoulders in thanks to the worry she saw in her face. "I'm worried that my brother has allied with Dorne, and I'm worried about what they might do. The Dornish are a strange people, full of strange, often violent passions."

She scowled, once more remembering the egg she had been forced to leave behind, and the princess that Ranma had been forced to leave behind. They couldn't have fought off an entire city, but still that decision to run was going back to come back to haunt them soon, Daenerys just knew it. "The fact we haven't heard from my brother yet in some fashion makes me very nervous."

"There's nothing we can do about that, so let's turn to more pleasant matters for now." Myrcella replied, squeezing the

other girl around the waist as they came to the rooms where they would begin changing. "I'm thinking that you should wear something in violet, or at least with a violet hint, it'll bring out your complexion and those eyes of yours. They are rather striking, you know."

"I've been told that before." Daenerys replied in a similar tone, "but those green eyes of yours are just as good-looking you know."

From there the conversation segued into types of fabric, cloth, cut, the time it would take to change some of Catelyn's old clothing to fit the two women, and of course what colors went with their skin tones as well as what makeup they would use. The maids and the seamstress took part in most of the discussion, with the seamstress having several good ideas about style of cut once Daenerys made the position out of what she wanted the dresses for clear. "It has to be stern of manner and cut, if we can get away without hinting at any kind of sensuality, all the better."

That threw the head seamstress for a moment. She was not used to dresses that were not made to at least emphasize a woman's body if not put it subtly on display. But she still rose to the challenge.

By around midday the two of them had picked out their dresses, simple affairs for the most part, with little in the way of ostentation or sexuality, though they still showed the bodies of the two young women off to good effect, nothing could change that. The maids and the seamstress went off to their workstation in the next room over, where several more seamstresses were waiting to aid them to speed up the process, leaving Daenerys and Myrcella in their underthings for a moment.

Staring at the older woman Myrcella sighed sadly. "I wish I had your curves Daenerys, you're so gorgeous! And your skin looks like a marble." Merry said, reaching out to stroke a finger down Daenerys' side.

Daenerys shivered a little under the other woman's touch, shaking her head as feelings of more than affection once more arose in her. *Curse you Alayaya!* "Your young yet Merry, you'll grow your own curves. Trust me, I can see the process already beginning. You've grown from being smaller than a handful to filling out quite nicely in the time I've known you." She said, reaching over to emphasize the point by lifting up the other young woman's breast with one of her hands before pulling her hand away quickly. "And, and your hair is magnificent. You can do so many things with it, I'm especially jealous of the fact you can curl it like that. All I can do with mine is keep it straight."

One of the maids had tried to curl Daenerys' hair earlier, but it refused to stay curled and Daenerys refused to try to use some oils to keep it such. "And while you think my skin may look like marble, your complexion actually allows you to wear more colors than me. I look like a ghost in far too many colors for my liking."

At that point the door opened, causing both women to turn wondering if one of the maids was returning for something.

OOOOOO

Ranma stared for a moment, unable to look away from the site before him. Daenerys and Myrcella were standing side-by-side on small footstools, dressed in nothing but their underthings, and as hard as he tried Ranma could not concentrate only on his wife. Myrcella at fourteen had become a young woman at some point without him noticing, her breasts blossoming from the small promise they had been, and she had gained curves to her hips as well. Her face had lost the last traces of baby fat, becoming as beautiful as her mother's had been, with none of the cold hauteur or the lines of fury that had marred Cersei's.

On the other hand Daenerys was simply magnificent, a very definition of beauty. Her body, which he had explored every chance he could, called to him on a deep level. The breasts lovingly worshipped were pressed up slightly by the brassiere she was currently wearing. Her legs, so long, so pristine and strong captivated him despite her simply standing still there. And her face, with its high cheekbones and small but pouty lips under her violet eyes, drew his attention like a lodestone.

Realizing he was staring at the two pictures of beauty Ranma turned around rapidly, slamming his head into the side of the door as it tried to shut behind him. "OW, um, I'm sorry you two, I, er I didn't realize you were still changing, I'll just, I'll just wait outside."

The two girls looked at one another while Ranma quickly made his way out of the door, rubbing his forehead for a moment. Then they began to laugh gaily.

It was a sudden thing. It caught Daenerys like a up-swell, carrying her along in a purely spontaneous action. As Merry and Daenerys leaned forward, laughing so hard their stomachs hurt, Daenerys suddenly stopped laughing. Instead she leaned forward, kissing Myrcella on the lips.

Merry gasped a little, but didn't pull back, instead leaning forward a tiny, miniscule amount before Daenerys regained control of herself and pulled back quickly. Both girls stared at one another then jerked back as the maids came back in, one of them laughing about having seen Ranma walking down the corridor still rubbing his forehead.

This allowed the two young women to set aside what had occurred just now, at least on the surface. They continued to take full part in the womanly pleasure of dresses and makeup, laughing and joking with the maids and one another while inside both of them were wondering where that had come from, and, more importantly, what it could mean in the future.

OOOOOO

The next day however, no one was feeling in the mood to laugh.

Tywin was not certain what he had expected, but being led into Riverrun's main hall before noon two days after the attempt to free him with the room full of smallfolk and Lords was not it. If Tywin was honest, he had expected to simply be marched up to a gallows and hung or executed, he couldn't remember offhand how the Northerners did their executions, but it looked as if they were going to perform some kind of farce of a trial.

*As if the Stark boy can really call me out on treason*, he scoffed internally staring hard at Daenerys Targaryen, sitting next to Ranma at the head of five lords sitting in judgement. Ranma and Daenerys were sitting in the center, with Jason Mallister to one side of Ranma, possibly as a Riverlord whose land had not felt the ravages of his army and could thus be called somewhat neutral.

The last two judges however surprised him. One wore the colors of a forked streak of lightning, and could only be Beric Dondarrion. Tywin had thought Beric dead, though the rumors of the Brothers without Borders and their attacks on his supply convoys had told Tywin that some survivors from that initial ambush were still around. Yet putting that minor mystery aside the last judge, the last could only be his granddaughter Myrcella.

The sight of her sitting there was shocking, as was the fact that she wore the colors of House Baratheon, without even a hint of Lannister colors about her person. Part of him wanted to nod approval at that, pleased that the girl had learned how to cozy up to the winning side. But the rest of him realized after a moment that there was nothing about politics in her alliance with the Starks. The fact she was glaring hatefully at him was enough for that.

*Foolish girl*, he thought coldly amused. *No doubt she is some kind of bleeding heart, angry at me for starting a war, pathetic. Still, at least if Stark wins this war some portion of my direct line will survive.*

He was marched to the front of the hall, where he stood with his guards behind him facing Ranma. For a moment the court was silent everyone, smallfolk and Lord alike staring at the Lion of the Rock brought low.

After a moment Ranma spoke shattering the silence. "Lord Tywin Lannister, you stand accused of treason against the former crown, inciting murder and banditry on the border of a peaceful land, and bringing war upon innocent smallfolk of the Riverlands. Do you have anything to say before the evidence against you is presented?"

Tywin's responded, voice cold as always and not hinting at the bit of fear he felt when Ranma's ice blue eyes locked onto him. "I find it amusing that you accuse me of treason to House Baratheon's rule when you sit there next to a Targaryen. Or are you talking treason against the Old, Mad King Aerys? If so, you would still be a hypocrite after all despite all the provocations, your House rose in rebellion against him as well."

"Actually my Lord," Ranma replied, "Only a portion of the inciting murder charge has to do with the events that occurred during Robert's Rebellion. No, the treason charge is defending your daughter and Joffrey Waters, the bastard on the throne. While his father is still unknown, the fact remains that there has never been a single son born between the Lannister and Baratheon that did not have at least some sign of the Baratheon side of the parentage. Moreover Joffrey himself is a murderer, apparently several times over, not as King but as an individual."

"Your evidence of my daughter's infidelity is circumstantial and would not hold up in any true neutral court." Tywin replied dismissively.

"That is true as far as it goes." Myrcella spoke up from where she was sitting at the far end of the judges table staring at her grandfather. "However, Joffrey is a kinslayer, Lord Lannister. He admitted that he planned the murder of my younger brother, and if you can come up with a good reason for that beyond his knowing that he was illegitimate and that Tommy was not, I am all ears."

While the smallfolk murmured in shock horror at the very idea of Kinslaying let alone the fact that someone who



claimed to be king was guilty of it, Tywin stared at her in shock. Kinslaying was one of very few things that Tywin wouldn't do. Put someone from his extended family in a position to be killed possibly, but actually plan the murder of close family? No, he hadn't even done that to Tyrion, who Tywin hated for murdering his wife with his birth.

"Yet that is not the only allegation against you my Lord, and you have not said anything to combat the other accusations against you." Daenerys said. "As such, I believe we can move on to the presentation of proofs. You'll have the ability to argue against them as witnesses are called my Lord, we want no one to accuse us of arbitrary justice here."

There was a murmur of approval from the watching crowd at that, and Ranma nodded firmly. "Call in the first witness."

The first few witnesses were from the Brothers without Borders, the men who had been sent out well before war had actually broken out between the Lannisters and the Starks to deal with the banditry going on around the borders between the Westerlands in the Riverlands. They told of how they had been betrayed by the Westerlands forces led by Ser Lorch, who was well known as a man Tywin used for dark deeds since the end of the Rebellion, almost as well as the Mountain that Rode, though nowhere near as feared. The brothers had even captured one of the Westerlands armsmen later on and he had admitted that their orders to betray the king-mandated expedition had come from Lord Lannister himself, passed on by Ser Lorch.

Tywin tried to call that into doubt, saying that Lorch was a mad dog, whose actions could not in any way be said to be his own fault.

Beric however responded that after the Mountain that Rode's execution, Lorch should have been too afraid to act out, and if he did, then why would he have acted in that manner? "Furthermore, the mercenary band the Bloody Mummer's acted to aid your army later by taking Acorn Hall before your invasion of the Riverlands began. Those mercenaries were the same that you yourself had begun to act as bandits on the Westerlands side of the borders. Therefore your argument is spurious at best."

Tywin frowned angrily as he realized that what he had seen as simply the next level up of the political backroom dealing that always went on in King's Landing looked very badly indeed to these men and women. *Don't they understand what politics is?* "I set that in motion to combat the growing power of the Starks," he said aloud now admitting it. "If any of you were a Lord Paramount you would've done the same thing."

"No." Ranma replied coolly we wouldn't have. "What you saw as a power grab my Lord was simply our family acting in honor due to our friendship and duty to the throne."

"And I say again." Tywin replied now actually angrily pointing at Daenerys. "That you cannot talk about treason when you sit there with a Targaryen by your side."

"It was Petyr and Varys who convinced Robert to send me to Essos my Lord." Ranma replied coolly. "And it was the death of Tommen that convinced my father to act against the Queen and Joffrey. If Tommy hadn't died, my wife and I would have been perfectly content to stay in the North." He smirked at his wife for a moment, allowing humor to show for the first time since this trial had begun. "For many different reasons."

Daenerys actually blushed, slapping his hand lightly mouthing the word 'behave' at him. This caused a ripple of laughter to go out around the smallfolk and Lords when they realized what Ranma had implied there.

Only Tywin was immune to it and he sneered at Ranma coldly. "Forgive me for not believing you, Stark."

"I will forgive you for that, there are more than enough other charges against you my Lord for that forgiveness to matter not at all." Ranma replied, smirking now as he watched Tywin twitch at his tone, but his eyes were bleaker than winter.

"We are not trying you as Lord Paramount, or as the mythic Tywin Lannister my Lord, and this is not personal, no matter how you try to twist it." Daenerys said shaking her head as she too became serious. "We are trying you as a man and as a Lord. This is about justice and the rule of law, which we hope to instill in all our realms after this war is over."

The trial continued from there, with smallfolk coming forward, having been found by Domic and Alayaya, actual witnesses who had survived the march of the Lannisters through the Riverlands. They angrily denounced what the Westerlands army had done to them, though only rarely was one called forward able to say that he had seen the Lannister colors on the ravagers. Nonetheless, the fact that those men were allowed to act out in that manner spoke

harshly against Tywin as their general.

Tywin tried to reply that such things happened with men at war, that it was human nature. Myrcella however spoke up before anyone else could, sharply reprimanding him on that pointing to the Stark-led army and its actions during the war so far, as well as the fact that such events had even happened on land of Houses that were neutral, Houses that had not had the time to declare one side of the other, and even allied Houses such as Bracken. There was a murmur of surprise from the smallfolk, watching the young Baratheon Princess take her grandfather to task, but the tales of Myrcella the Maiden of Healing had already spread, so it wasn't that big a shock.

After that Brynden came forward with his tale of the assassins sent after Eddard while he was in King's Landing, but here the evidence wasn't quite up to par. Eventually the witnesses were finished, and the judges removed themselves for a moment to a separate room before coming back quickly.

Ranma spoke for them all as was his right as king, staring down at Tywin from the small dais. "Tywin Lannister, this court has reached its decision. On the charge of treason against the crown, we find you guilty for knowingly trying to cover up your daughter's act of treason and acting against the duly appointed Hand of the king even before that began. On bringing war and rapine onto the lands of the Rivers, we find you guilty. On inciting murder, specifically the murder of my father Edward Stark, we find you not guilty."

That startled Tywin, he had assumed that the court would simply find him guilty of all charges, not that it really mattered. The other charges were easily proven, and his attempt to argue against them or try to wave them aside as simply how the game was played had not worked as he knew they wouldn't.

The effect of the trial however on the smallfolk and many of the lords that had watched it however was something he hadn't calculated. *They're destroying my reputation*, he thought with something approaching admiration. *They're destroying not only any chance of making me a martyr in the future, but also the reputation of my House. Before this, terror and fear would've kept people from talking out against us, but now, with the military victories Stark's won and this trial that will no longer be the case.*

*We might still have gold, and we might still inspire fear, but it won't be a respected kind of fear, simple loathing rather than dread. Character assassination at its finest all couched in a trial that allows them to showcase their own sense of justice. Well played.* Even now faced with his death Tywin was unable to truly change his thought processes.

Actually, the destruction of his reputation was really a secondary benefit to his opponents. Ranma and Daenerys primary goal was to show the smallfolk that their family would hold justice and honor over personal wealth, that even the highest of Lords would be called to account for their actions.

"There can only be one penalty for treason, only one penalty for starting a war as you have: execution, to be carried out immediately. Do you have anything to say before sentence is carried out?"

Tywin stared coldly at Ranma who have stood up and taken up Ice from where it had been laying on the table in front of the judges. He toyed with the idea of calling upon a champion to fight for himself, but knew it would be useless. Stark would of course stand as his own champion, and without Jaime here there was no one Tywin could call upon that would have a chance against him. "In the Game of Thrones you either win or you die, Stark. Whatever reason you are doing this, that is a truth that I have known my entire life."

Ranma at looked at the man then nodded respectfully, respecting the fact Tywin did not beg or plead for his life. He gestured, and Tywin's guards turned him around ushering him out of the room while Ranma made to follow. Daenerys stood as well as did the other judges even Myrcella following the group outside to the executioner's block.

Outside the keep the castle's grounds were somewhat crowded, but a cordon had been kept clear by armed soldiers from the door of the keep to the execution block, which stood on a raised wooden platform. As the crowd saw Tywin being pushed in that direction there was a murmur rising into a shout of triumph and many an insult and curse was thrown at him. Tywin ignored it all regally, staring straight ahead. With the attempt two nights ago, he knew his agents here in Riverrun were gone, without them no one would stand in his defense.

Tywin was forced to kneel, placing his head on the butcher's block as Ranma stared out at the crowd. Behind him Daenerys reached down, grabbing Myrcella's hand and squeezing it tightly. Merry squeezed back reassuringly, her eyes bleak as she stared at her grandfather, a man who had loomed so large in Westeros for so long, brought down at last.

"Tywin Lannister!" Ranma bellowed in a voice that quieted the crowd. "Was found guilty of treason against the crown and of inciting war and banditry in the Riverlands. The penalty for these crimes is execution. In the North, the man

who passes the sentence wields the sword. I passed the sentence, I Ranma Stark wield the sword." With that Ranma raised Ice in the air and without further preamble brought it down. With a swing of the Stark family blade Tywin Lannister, the Lion of the Rock died, one of many steps that would cripple the Lannisters and their ability to wield power in the affairs of Westeros as a whole.

There was a moment of silence, then the crowds broke out into a loud roar. *The Rains of Castamere* would never again be played in the Riverlands or anywhere else. Instead it would be the *March of the Wolf King*.

After a moment staring down at the body Ranma wiped Ice off on a cloth set nearby then motioned to the guards to carry the body away before turning to his fellow judges. "There'll be a five-minute recess before the next trial. I could use some water after this, or something stronger to wipe the taste of this out of my mouth, I hate executions..."

The other judges all nodded, but when they left Ranma caught up with Myrcella, putting his arm on around her shoulder. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine." Myrcella said, her eyes staring into the distance for a moment before she shook herself coming back to the here and now. "He, he was such, this... She paused again trying to gather her words. "His **presence** was always there. He was like a mountain looming over my mother over my uncle, over the court, myself and my siblings. He was held up as an example to us, as someone we should emulate, and yet he acted so cruelly here in the Riverlands. It's a relief to have him gone, but watching him die like that... I don't think I'll follow you out for the other executions Ranma, if that's all right."

"That's fine by me Merry." Ranma replied while Daenerys took his place hugging the younger girl to her.

"Fine with both of us," his wife said. "The Lords, Ranma will have to execute personally, but the others can be done by lesser executioners, otherwise we'd be here all year." She smiled grimly.

The trials continued from there. Surprisingly, many of the Lannister armymen were acquitted of charges against the smallfolk, and thus were added to the growing workforce that had been put under Vincent and the other engineers. They and all of the other prisoners thus acquitted would be sent up under guard to join the former Frey men already at work on the canal that would connect the Green Fork to the sea by Seagard. That work had proceeded apace since they left that city, and the canal was now fully planned with work well along near Seagard. It would still take a few months, but the canal would be done before winter hit.

The remaining captured Lannisters themselves were a mixed bag. Stafford Lannister had been seen looting House Deddings keep by a few of the survivors among the servants of that House who had escaped its final sack after its military force had been destroyed. But he had not been seen taking part in the rape or murder going on, so the judges could not decide on the death penalty for him. Beric and Ranma both wanted it, but Daenerys, Myrcella and Jason did not. As such, Stafford would be sent north to the Wall to take the black.

The three younger Lannisters however were acquitted of most of the charges against them. As such, they would remain as prisoners, hostages against their family's good conduct. When the war ended, and the monetary reparations demanded from the Lannisters arrived they would be allowed to return to the Rock. Actually, Ranma had plans for Daven. He'd impressed Ranma somewhat since his capture, and since he had been cleared of all charges (indeed no witness had seen him even leading troops that had taken part in anything outside of actual combat) he was the cleanest of the three.

For the next four days, the trials continued. Four more Lords, Hamell, Kenning, Moreland and Garner were executed and their men with them for their parts in the willful rapine of the Riverlands. Two of them, Garner and Hamell, were dragged to their execution still screaming at their captors that such things occurred in wartime. Lord Kenning however was made of sterner stuff, and actually demanded a trial by combat. He stood as his own champion, and Ranma executed him on the spot with a single blow from Ice. His men were executed along with the others. Moreland simply went to his death with as much dignity as he could muster.

Several of the surviving lords could not be found guilty of crimes that would have called for the murder penalty. Lord Spicer came through the war with as clean a record as any of the Westerlanders, though his men had already paid a high price in fighting it. There were only a handful of them alive, but they and Spicer would be added to the workforce on the various projects here, though separated of course. Spicer would stay here and a few other lords and prisoners from earlier in the campaign to enlarge the housing on the west of the river.

Lord Stackspear being acquitted was a surprise, but he personally had not led his men on attacks on the smallfolk. His son however had, and four women from Bracken land came forward telling of how he raped them, the women having been found by Dacey after the siege was lifted. When he verbally attacked them in court, calling the women

sluts who had enjoyed it, the court found him guilty immediately and Ranma took some pleasure in executing him. Even the man's father looked appalled at his son's attitude, and did not speak up for him as he was led outside.

Eventually the court ran through both the men and the Lords. It wasn't perfect, as Ranma knew all too well. They no doubt missed a few murderers and rapists here and executed a few here and there that hadn't. All they could do however was go by the evidence they had which centered around the colors the troopers wore to signify their allegiance to one Lord or the other. It was the best they could do, and that would have to be enough.

After that, Ranma and Daenerys turned their attention to politics. Proportioning the lands of the Riverlands houses that had been wiped out took a full day, but eventually everyone was, if not totally pleased with the outcomes at least happy with them.

Lord Mallister received some of the lands of the now defunct House Nayland that had controlled Hags Mire, and halfway up to the Green Fork, along with a promise of royal aid in building a new wall to protect the town of Seagard once it became too large for its current environs, as it would no doubt do, fueled by the trade of the new route.

From there up to the former Twins then down to the new canal junction was declared Crown Lands. A town was planned where the new canal joined with the Green Fork, but that would be in the future.

House Blackwood, as the only house south of the Red Fork to continue to fight the invader, was given more than half of House Bracken's land. They were also given even more territory to the southeast, which had been former Whent land, though that declining house hadn't exerted control over the area in years.

However Stone Hedge itself and the lands west of it would be kept for now by the crown, to be given as a reward to a knight who proved himself in the campaign to come. Lucas Blackwood and Ravella Smallwood would be wed here in Riverrun and would take over the ruins of Acorn Hall.

Shawney for his service would be given the former Vypren lands, giving him a goodly chunk of the land between the Red and Blue Fork. House Ryger would control most of the lands around the Ruby Ford down to the Trident, with Blanetree owning their land and a portion at the Trident itself, including a portion of the taxes from Harroway.

House Paegge was risen from the Knightly to the Noble status, and given half of House Lolliston's former land. Further, they had been given a crown charter to allow Fairmarket to grow into a city. House Grell was given the other half of Lolliston's land.

House Piper would retain their lands, but would receive no recompense or aid in rebuilding the town of Mummer's Ford. They did not help the invaders, but nor did their lord fight them, so they wouldn't gain or lose anything. Lord Piper didn't argue it, since he might have a chance to win more lands going on from the defunct House Harlton, which had been abutting his southeast borders before this.

House Wayn would gain the former House Haigh's land, but that was all, though their men would now join the army at Harroway and take part in the war from now on. Utherydes and his son both vowed to that effect, and Ranma would hold them to it.

Kirth Vance's House would gain quite a bit more land to the west of their castle and port town which was former Deedings land. That land was rich farmland and unspoiled thus far, though the keep there had been put to the torch. They also received a royal charter to enlarge their town, which sat on the massive inland lake called the God's Eye, into a city provided they meet the new taxation laws that Ranma and Daenerys would put in place after the war.

Because of their aid in defending the Cape of Eagles against Ironborn raids, House Charlton was raised to noble status, and given the land of the Cape as fief. Many had expected Lord Mallister to object to this, but while he had looked to that land as his to defend, it had actually never been his houses to control, and given the riches that was going to flow into his coffers from the trade of the new canal he was more than recompensed for the lost.

Charlton also received two royal commissions to begin mining copper, nickel and tin there, where deposits of those precious metals had been discovered a few years back. Daenerys and Ranma would fund the start of those mines, then the crown would receive half the mines output into perpetuity afterwards.

Of the Houses that had fought for the Lannisters, only House Wode was not removed from the roll of nobility. Ser Wode and his men would serve in the army without pay for five years as punishment for following the noble house they were sworn to, Whent in this case, into treason. House Whent, whether it still served the Westerlanders manning Harrenhal willingly or no, would also be destroyed.

Darry, Mooton and Butterwell would not receive anything at this time, but might later on from House Whent's lands. Whent was still allied, willing or no, with Westerlands forces, so would be annexed after Harrenhal fell. Keath had been sent a messenger according to Utherydes, and they had also been told about their lord's death along with his forces. But they had not sent a representative to Riverrun. Therefore, Keath would also be dissolved. That left several chunks of land that could be handed to worthy men, who could be raised to knighthood.

Then Ranma and Daenerys outlined their plans for the Westerlands. That there would be no invasion even though Ranma explicitly stated he would be attacking the Golden Tooth and the mines around it was a surprise to the Riverlords. Ranma however waved their astonishment off. "My Lords, we cannot invade the Westerlands and do onto to them as they did to you without seeming the hypocrites that Lord Tywin called us in his trial. Furthermore, Domic and I have been going over the numbers of both the Lords and the Army we've faced here in the Riverlands. Domic?"

Domic nodded, smiling slightly. "Essentially my Lords, nearly all of the Houses of the Westerlands mustered their forces for this army. That army is now not just beaten, but annihilated. There hasn't been a victory this lopsided in centuries. The only areas that might have enough men to challenge us is the area around Deep Den down towards Silverhill, Banefort and Crakehall."

"House Lannister may have a few thousand more men to their name, as does Marbrand but that's not enough to form an offensive force. They just don't have enough manpower to face us in the open field any longer. It would take them at least a year of summer to train up another army. And without Tywin, many of the other Houses will probably rebel if called up again after this disaster. Kevan is a good organizer and administrator, but he doesn't command the respect and fear that Tywin did. If we take the Golden Tooth, we will show that we have the ability to strike at them, and be dealing with all of the Houses in the Westerlands from a position of strength."

"Taking the Golden Tooth won't be easy," Lord Piper said, stapling his fingers and looking at Ranma quizzically. "You seem to almost be glossing over that in your planning. It isn't the largest castle, and it doesn't have as formidable a reputation as some other fortresses, but its defensive position is one of the best. Taking it will require either a full siege or months of work and lots of lives to try and crack the walls somehow."

Ranma and Jon exchange an amused look. "That will be a task for the Wolfsworn my Lord. You haven't had enough time to really understand what we are." Jon replied for his brother. "We're not just the best warriors, we're something else entirely. Specialists at sneaking around and taking castles like that being one of those things."

"My wife will stay here to further see to the administration of the Riverlands and lead the army at Harroway, while I lead five hundred Tully men and the wolfsworn down to take the Golden Tooth." Ranma added.

Piper was not the only lord who looked astonished at that, but those who had known Ranma for longer all simply nodded, and Tytos and the other southern Riverlords subsided. However after a moment Jason spoke up. "One area we haven't talked about is the former Tully lands my lord." he said apologetically. "Will Brynden be taking his place as Lord Tully?"

"I think that Brynden would react rather violently to the very idea." Ranma replied laughing while Brynden scowled. He didn't want to enrich himself right his brother's death like that, even if both law and custom dictated that he was now Lord Tully. "Besides," Ranma went on, "I have something else in mind for him. When we take the Golden Tooth we'll need a commander to place in charge of it and the assaults on the nearby mines. And after this war is over, that position will be one of the most important in the Riverlands."

Brynden looked at him in surprise then nodded his head, formally agreeing to the idea.

"In that case who will hold Riverrun?" Alayaya asked. "I have to say that the people here are much more loyal to House Tully than they ever were to House Baratheon in King's Landing. I would highly recommend someone at least connected somehow to the family or else you may have issues here later on. You have a connection with them Ranma thanks to your mother, will you hold it as Crown lands?"

"No." Ranma said shaking his head. "I think there should always be a Tully holding lordship here, just like a Stark in Winterfell. And I have the one in mind too. Tell me my Lord," he asked looking at its Tytos for a moment. "Which of your sons would you say is the best administrator?"

"That would be Edmund, or Ben as we call him, my fourth son. He's not the best blade, but he's a good administrator and a very decent mind. he's out with his brothers at the moment in the godswood." Tytos replied promptly, looking at Ranma in speculation.

"As I said, I think there should be a Tully in charge here Riverrun, and I can think of no one better to take over than my sister Sansa." Ranma smirked as shouts of surprise abounded around the room, though most of the reactions were positive ones. "Therefore, I will be sending Ben Blackwood and Edd Karstark up with a small party to escort her down from Winterfell. When she arrives, she will be formally inducted as Lady Tully, leaving the Stark name behind."

Tytos and Rickard both got it at once then smiled thinly at one another. It wasn't very subtle, but the trip down from Winterfell would not just be a trip. It would be a courtship, with their sons vying with one another for Sansa's affection.

Watching the two lords Ranma smirked. He had known about Edd's crush on Sansa for years now, but he honestly doubted that when the two spent time around one another anything would come of it. Ben however, was something different. From Ranma's interactions with him, he knew the man was a romantic, as good with a lute as with a pen, though he was also solid, and had a very decent sense of humor that Ranma felt Sansa would enjoy.

Tytos however had some concerns. "My Lord, if that journey goes the way it might, my son Edmund would not be a very strong sword for your lady sister. That could cause issues in the future."

"No it won't," Ranma said, laughing while gesturing at Jon and Arya who nodded. "She is our sister my Lord, she will have our swords on call regardless of the future. She needs no other. And let me be clear on this, she will know from the beginning that Edd and Ben are there for more than protecting her, and it will be her decision who she marries. There will be no pressures either on her or on Edd and Ben." He stared hard at Rickard and Tytos until both men nodded.

With that Ranma went on. "House Tully will continue to control Riverrun and the area between the Red Fork and Tumblestone towards Golden Tooth." There was some muttering about that, after all there had been three other Houses in that area.

Kirth in particular looked angry, considering it would mean that no attempts to produce another cadet branch of his own House to hold Wayfarer's would be heard. But given the way they had all been enriched in terms of land and other things none of them could honestly complain.

The meeting broke up shortly after that, with the Riverlords leaving then the northern Lords and the wolfsworn, leaving Ranma and Daenerys alone once more. "Are you as certain as you make out that you can take the Golden Tooth so easily?"

Ranma laughed quietly kissing her briefly on the lips before pulling back. "I'll give you a hint if it's bothering you. What is the one direction that humans never look to for danger?"

"Directly below them." Daenerys replied promptly.

Ranma twitched. "Okay fine, the second direction."

"Above them I suppose." Daenerys replied frowning thoughtfully then smirked at Ranma. "Your little joke failed. Remember I am a Targaryen and I was weaned off stories of dragons fighting one another. In that kind of combat, you always look above you for danger. Though I still don't understand what your allusion could mean in this case. Now," she said dragging him to his feet. "I think we can find something far better to do with our time tonight than exchange bad jokes."

Ranma laughed getting to his feet and easily picked Daenerys up in his arms, her legs locking around his waist. "I think we can too."

OOOOOO

"What?" growled Cersei, glaring angrily at the man before them, a messenger from out of Sow's Horn.

He was a youngish man, thin and weak looking, but he stood there resolutely even if he didn't quite meet her eyes. "My Lord Hogg has decided not to give you shelter your grace," he said again. "Ravens have been sent to practically every castle in the Crownlands, informing us of your son's illegitimacy." He backed away quickly as Cersei made to strike him. Thankfully Joffrey wasn't there, having been directed to where the forage parties were already making up some food.

All around them Lord Serret's men were quickly and efficiently moving supplies off the mules and carts the young man and his party had brought with them, adding it to their own very meager stores or cooking it up on the spot. Foraging had slowed them down badly, and their back trail scouts had started clashing with their fellows among the Reach force that was pursuing them yesterday.

After a moment he went on. "Lord Stannis has declared himself King of the Crownlands and Stormlands."

"He declared himself that before he actually marched." Said Cersei still glaring. "What exactly changed to make you and possibly others in the Crownlands believe him now?"

"He has emerged victorious from the battle down in King's Landing against his brother, and now commands the largest army in Westeros. Perhaps the Riverlands and the Northerners could match him, yet my Lord feels that the Targaryen has had its time." Actually Lord Hogg didn't, he just felt that Stannis was going to defeat the Stark youth in battle, regardless of whatever trickery he had used against the Westerlanders.

But the young man Hogg had sent as messenger wasn't about to share that bit of news with Cersei, not with her standing in front of him looking like she wanted to rip his throat out like the lion on her family's crest. He'd never been in her presence before, and it was overwhelming.

She wasn't quite as beautiful as the tales told when she was glaring at you like that, and she was certainly thinner than most stories made out in face and body, but that didn't take away from her intense glare which seemed to be drilling into him even when he wasn't looking into her eyes. Unfortunately for the messenger, his men didn't have quite his grasp of how to keep silent.

"Mother!" Joffrey's whiny shouted from somewhere else in the small camp. Cersei turned to see her son and two of his Kingsguard came forward, the two Kingsguard dragging a third man who was looking frightened, and had been around the face a bit already. "Mother, you'll never believe what lies this fool is saying! He's saying that grandfather lost entirely, that he was captured, and the Westerlands army crushed! I wished to whip him for telling lies, but Ser Swann stopped me. "

Cersei turned angrily to the messenger. "Is that true?"

The young man gulped twitching worse than ever now when the Kingslayer moved up to stand beside his sister glaring angrily at him. He looked around, now realizing that he was so entirely surrounded by Lannister men. "I, um, I am..."

"Speak the truth boy." Said a deep voice, and Lord Serret pushed through the throng of Lannister armsmen. "Is it true? No harm will come to you so long as you tell the truth." He glared at Cersei and Joffrey making certain they knew he was serious.

Cersei simply nodded sharply, understanding that news was more important than punishing the messenger while Joffrey simply scoffed and looked away. Rupert glared at him for a moment, he had becoming more and more wary of the boy throughout this trip. There was just something about him, something about his eagerness to go on the hunt with the foragers, and the way that his eyes gleamed now when he mentioned whipping the man who had apparently been overheard discussing rumors.

After a moment the House Hogg messenger replied. "I, yes my lords, Your Highness, it's true. We don't know any of the details, but rumors have spread from the Riverlands quickly, the Westerlands army is literally no more. All that remains of it is small groups of bandits here and there. We have no idea how it happened, but the rumors say that Lord Tywin himself was captured and is already in Riverrun awaiting trial and execution."

By this time Tywin had already been executed, and Ranma was well on his way down to the Golden Tooth and Daenerys back to Harroway. But rumors had to spread both ways, from the source of the rumors on back to them here in Sow's Horn territory.

Cersei and Jaime exchanged a shocked glance. While there had been scant love between them, their father had dominated the largest part of their lives and the affairs of Westeros. To hear he was brought low was simply impossible to consider, no matter how much Cersei in particular had wished to see the man get some sort of comeuppance.

Joffrey on the other hand raised a hand angrily. "You lie! How could he be beaten by those Northern barbarians!"

"Remember Stark might have two dragons on his side, Your Majesty." said Rupert, stepping forward slightly to be close enough to stand between the whining brat and the man from Sow's Horn just in case.

Joffrey scowled at him then turned away angrily. *He was serving the legitimate crown, how dare he lose! I'll have his head for this, all their heads for this! Stannis, Ranma, my sister, grandfather, his men! My enemies will die, and those who failed in their service to the crown will join them! I am King and I will make all of Westeros realize that!*

Behind Joffrey, Rupert stared after the youngster then nodded at Ser Swann and Ser Buckwell who he had come to respect as an able sword and honorable man. When the men came forward to stand close by he whispered. "Watch him and his cronies among your brothers. I don't like how much control he has over them, or how close he is to Lord Edgerton."

*Those two have been as thick as thieves since Edgerton rejoined the column.* Though thankfully Edgerton's own power base within the column had been smashed during the feint that got them out of the cordon around King's Landing. He only had a few men to his name now, but all of them were close to Joffrey for some reason.

Buckwell nodded, shrugging his shoulders in his white enameled plate armor. "I understand, and I'm not exactly happy about being brothers to most of those men milord. One or two of them might have the skills of a Kingsguard but for the rest..." He shrugged again. Bowing quickly to Cersei and to his commander, the man left, while Ser Swann stayed a moment to bow himself before following.

With that done Rupert waved the messenger away with his thanks, then moved close to Cersei and Jaime. "I had never really intended to stay overlong at Sow's Horn anyway. Maybe leave a few hundred men there to help defend it and make it look as if we were still in residence but Sow's Horn isn't a large castle, it could barely accommodate us all, and from what I can remember it's a rather weak one as well, is that not so?"

Cersei seemed to be staring off into the distance for a moment but she shook herself and replied while Jaime continued to stare out across the Crownlands around them, frowning angrily at the news of his Septon. "Yes that is so, but where do we go from here?"

"We'll make for House Edgerton on a straight route as possible Your Highness." Rupert replied. "As I said that was the way I would have been going anyway."

*Though honestly I'm a little more leery about it now. I'm not certain I want to put myself in to Edgerton's power like that. Although, how many men can he still have left? I wish I knew more about the power of the Crownlands houses, I know they were smashed in Robert's Rebellion, but how has Edgerton recovered? They had a lot of men in King's Landing, but was that their full complement? For some reason he didn't want to ask Varys or Lord Edgerton himself those questions, because he was almost certain he wouldn't get a straight answer.*

He was still thinking about that as around him the column began to reform, moving away from the carts and mules from Sow's Horn quickly marching off down a side road from the small track they had been following. Eventually it would lead them to House Edgerton, but not quickly. Thankfully the Crownlands here were rolling plains, the soil not quite good enough for farming in comparison to other areas nearby, but they would be passing through a few hamlets on their way up to Edgerton land. That would allow them to resupply at least.

Rupert was roused the next morning by a growing clamor outside his small tent, one of the very few that they had been able to bring with them. He pushed himself to his feet quickly grabbing up his axe before hurrying out brandishing it in both hands. "What is it? Have the Reach forces caught us up somehow!" He roared.

One of his guards shook his head. "No my Lord, something seems to have roused the Lannisters over in the Royal section of the camp."

Rupert carefully didn't mention the man's contempt when he said the 'Lannisters' or the 'Royal section'. It was a small area of the camp where the Lannister men had cordoned off an area for Cersei and her family, but that wasn't what drew the contempt. That was Joffrey, who every man who was beholden to House Serret had begun to look down upon in private.

Cersei still commanded their esteem, since she had put up with the hardships of the journey without complaint, and carried herself in such a way that demanded that respect. And Jaime the Kingslayer was too deadly with a blade for anyone to not respect. Joffrey's constant whining complaints about the trip, coupled with the vicious way he'd tended to his horses before he was stopped coupled with the fact that he hadn't taken part in the battle to break them out of the cordon had eroded what little respect remained for his crown in their eyes.

Nodding at his guard Rupert hurried in that direction, coming upon Jaime coming out of the Royal area looking around angrily. "My Lord hand." Jaime said crisply. "The eunuch seems to have disappeared."

A quick check of the entire camp turned up no trace of the Master of Whisperers or anyone who had seen Varys the evening before. He was simply gone along with two of the horses. Rupert had to stop Joffrey from having the guards on the horses flogged for that, as well as the guards on the royal portion of the camp, but Cersei came to his aid, her



mind on other things.

After Joffrey had been brought to heel, Cersei turned to Rupert. "Has he fled us entirely do you think, or do you think he'll be coming back at some point with news?" Her tone made it clear which response she considered most likely.

"I think we both know what the eunuch is up to your grace." Rupert said with a sigh. *A rat leaving a sinking ship, why am I not surprised?*

"Traitor!" growled Joffrey, his hand moving to his sword, which Rupert knew the boy had never actually drawn in battle, and very rarely even in practice. "We should send a party to hunt them down, even with two horses he can't have gone far, could he? An example needs to be set for what happens when someone betrays the crown!"

"We don't have the men to spare, and I doubt that Varys would be brought to heel so easily." Cersei said shaking her head. "Before he was Master of Whisperers he was both a merchant and a spy in his younger years. If he meets up with any smallfolk, he'll blend in easily, and we'll have sent men off on a wild goose chase."

Joffrey glared angrily at his mother before stomping off. Cersei looked after him in shock at his bad manners, but Rupert was staring after the boy once again thoughtfully.

OOOOOO

Having left only a small force to pursue fleeing royals from behind Loras and his main force had followed the Kingsroad north quickly, before cutting east overland to get in front of the Lannisters making for Edgerton castle. It had been hard going with the infantry, but Loras and Androw Ashford had hit upon a solution, allowing the infantrymen to rest occasionally by riding some of the spare horses in groups. It sped them up somewhat, and their better ability to forage given the number of scouts they had allowed them to get in position in front of the Lannisters.

"They are just out of sight my Lord, and they don't have any scouts out in front" said one of those scouts, a common-born man named Alec. "They must be using all of their scouts on their back trail against our fellows."

The land here around the Reach force was almost flat, with a few rolling hills here and there. Currently Loras and his men were currently in one of the dips between two such hills, out of sight slightly but even so Alec was quick to point out that the Lannisters would see them coming the moment they crested the hill line.

Loras nodded. "Alec's right, and Lord Serret is a wily bastard, remember how he tricked us near the Blackwater. Don't assume anything, but let's get ready to meet. From all around him the knights of the Reach nodded their heads, moving their horses into a line, while behind them the infantry readied themselves to follow up.

The young Tyrell knight turned to Lord Ashford. "I want to smash them if we can, but I don't know if we'll be able to do it in one battle. We should probably concentrate on causing as casualties to them as we can, so we'll try to envelop them. If the chance comes to capture one of the royals, I want us to take it." He sneered a little. "No doubt the queen and her brat will be somewhere in the back of the column once we begin our charge, but the Kingslayer will be at the front."

Ashford nodded, though internally he had no wish to cross swords with Jaime Lannister. The man's skill with the sword was superlative and Ashford knew his own skills well enough to not want to test him.

Soon enough the other army was in sight., and Loras nodded his head grimly, waving high the Tyrell banner he was carrying o signal the canter before handing it off to his standard bearer.

Across from the advancing Reach force Rupert scowled angrily. "They got ahead of us somehow." he growled to Jaime, who was riding at the head of the column with him.

"I think I see a bit of rose-enameled armor over there." Jaime said with a laugh. "I didn't realize that we were being chased by the Rose Knight himself!" He pretended to feel faint, holding up one hand to his forehead. "Oh no, whatever shall we do?"

Then he let his hand fall back to his sword hilt, his smile becoming more like a shark than a human's. "I don't suppose you'd mind me just going forward to deal with him would you? Loras thinks himself my equal just because he's pretty with a lance and blade in tourneys. I would dearly love a chance to disabuse him of that notion."

Serret burst out laughing, but shook his head quickly. "No, I'll want you with your sister and her brat." With battle coming, Rupert wasn't about to waste time hiding his opinion of the royal idiot. "Keep the Kingsguard all around you, and follow the rest of the column, but give all your banners to some of my men first. I have a plan..."

While the Reach force continued to canter towards them, waiting until they got within their horses charging distance Rupert quickly reformed the column. He put his arms men who knew their way about on horses and the few remaining knights backing them up with the Kingsguard on the rightmost portion of his line. He also made the line thicker there as well, though somewhat at a distance, almost creating a second, far smaller line of battle. He also ordered his archers to drop from their horses and began to fire on the Reach forces. Rupert doubted they'd do anything, but riding them down would take some of the Reach forces away from pursuing the rest of his men.

Lord Edgerton anchored the right side of the battleline, while Serret himself was near the center, his bannermen all around him. His personal banner was high in the air, while the Lannister and House Baratheon of King's Landing banner was on the right behind the Edgerton portion of the line.

By the time he was done the Reach forces had reached charging distance, and their lances came down. There was a bellow of war cries, but most of all there was "Growing strong", and "For the Reach!"

Lord Serret flipped his visor down, couching behind his shield grimly in the saddle. He nodded at his banner bearer, who dipped his banner slightly. "Charge!"

That first charge was somewhat disastrous for Lord Serret's forces. Only a few of his knights had lances or even makeshift spears, and the lance was the weapon of choice for horsemen for a reason, it gave much more range than anything else could in the saddle. The Lannister forces must've lost at least six or seven hundred men in that first few moments of the charge.

But Loras, in his attempt to encompass Serret's forces, hadn't been able to create as much depth in the charge as he should have and had put all of his own men with lances in the first line. After that it became a much more even contest.

For a moment all was a snarl of combat, and Rupert hacked left and right with his axe, using one hand as often as he could so as to let his shield be of use in blocking return blows. One man fell from the saddle his armor ripped open by Rupert's axe, then another man fell, his horse going down under him from Serret burying a back swing in the animal's neck. "I have no rival!"

Behind the Lannister's initial line of battle, Jaime and the rest of the smaller, reserve line had quickly raced from the right side to the left at Rupert's signal, leaving behind their banners and even leaving the archers unprotected. There they joined the battle, swiftly smashing into the snarl of combat on that side, but not as a line abreast, but a column.

Jaime had ignored Rupert's orders, moving toward the front of the initial battleline quickly. He was one of the few men there who was able to slay one of his counterparts among the Reach in that first line, ducking under the man's lance and smacking it upwards with his shield while he leaned far out of the saddle before righting himself and bringing his longsword around with all of his weight behind it as they passed each other. That man's horse continued on his way, while his rider slowly fell out of the saddle, head nearly chopped clean off. **"HEAR ME ROAR!"**

Jaime then forced his horse around rather than continuing the charge through the enemy line laying out about him with his longsword, seeing that Buckwell was down, unhorsed, his helm and shield missing and shield arm hanging loose at his side, but his sword was flashing out, cutting one man down then hacking at another's horse. Jaime slew four more knights of the Reach trying to defend his sworn brother before he fell, then Jaime turned angrily, hastening away to catch up with the royal party which was just now blasting its way through the back of the enemy line.

Elsewhere the battle wasn't going nearly so well for the royal forces. While their leftmost flank was cutting through Loras' lines, the rightmost flank had become bogged down quickly, and now the infantry among the Reach forces was getting involved, racing forward everywhere.

What they should've done though was to try to move around the battle to encompass it from all sides, but Loras didn't have a man among the infantry as good at their job as his brother Willas did. The unit commanders simply charged forward with the rest, getting bogged down quickly. But the weight of their numbers further slowed the charge of Lord Serret's forces, which would've been enough to win the battle, if Lord Serret had intended to try to win it in the first place.

No, Rupert knew that he couldn't win this fight not with the numbers against him like this, and with most of his own men trained infantry rather than cavalry simply placed in the saddle. Rupert himself had continued moving, his men following grimly, ignoring their downed fellows. Eventually they broke through onto the infantry, cutting several of them down in turn but losing two more men, before breaking through the infantry line as well.

*You didn't leave enough gaps boys, Rupert thought grimly. That allowed us to punch through, some of us at least.*

With that he raced on, rejoining the rest of the royal house and two men around it which had burst through the line with Jaime at their lead, his sword and armor stained with blood.

Behind them the battle continued. Half of Serret's forces were pinned in place and were slowly being wiped out. But local control was utterly lost, with Loras and Lord Ashford involved at the front of the battle. "Away!" Rupert bellowed, pointing westward. "Away! Before they realize it!" Around him about 1,400 of his remaining men raced on, along with the royal family.

Loras had been unhorsed at one point, a lucky blow impacting his shield with enough impetus to carry him out of the saddle. He'd gotten his revenge however, cutting the other man's own horse's legs out from under him before going the man with his sword. Now he dueled with four unmounted men in Edgerton colors, cutting one man down swiftly before backing away from the others bringing his shield up into play to block a blow.

Ducking under another sword thrust he thrust a boot forward tripping that man up, then rolled heavily down upon him. Not to kill him, but simply dodging more blows from his fellow before coming up quickly. His sword flashed again, cutting into one man's thigh almost cutting his entire leg off before he brought his shield around to block another blow. The downed man groaned, but before he could get up Loras' shield drove down side first into the back of his neck where his helmet had fallen askew, breaking it.

That left only one man facing Loras, and he died quickly from a lance from behind him. Lord Ashford pushed up his visor, scowling angrily. "We've been tricked!"

Loras looked at him uncomprehending for a moment. "What?"

"The royals were never on this side of the charge, and Cersei was definitely not among the archers and the others left behind!"

Comprehension dawned on Loras and he growled angrily searching for his horse, one of Willas' best, which had moved beside up him, waiting faithfully. He patted its nose affectionately for a moment before pulling himself up into the saddle as he looked around them. Everywhere they looked the battle was dying down, men either surrendering or dying where they stood while in the distance a small band of cavalry was chasing the remains of the archers who had fled the battle the moment they could without being cut down by their own fellows.

*Dammit*, he thought to himself. *I knew Lord Serret was wily opponent, why didn't I think he'd try some trick!* "Which way did they go you think?"

"I don't know, our scouts were involved in the battle as well of course. We'll have to get them out and searching quickly." Ashford shrugged. "With the forces he lost today anyway, I doubt Serret will try to match us in an open battle again."

Loras nodded. "Get the men to go through the wounded, I want to know what our own losses were, and I think we deserve to take the rest of the day off from this chase. Except the scouts of course."

He moved his man well enough away from the smell of the battlefield before setting up camp, and every man there was effusive in the victory, jubilant for the most part though their own losses had been quite a bit higher than Loras had hoped. He had lost somewhere between 900 and 1,200 men, though they killed and turned about 3000. That first charge with lances against mostly swords and axes had been decisive, but not decisive enough.

Elsewhere Lord Rupert rode to one side of where Cersei was once more trying to keep her son under control, his anger at 'fleeing the battlefield' in his words a palpable force in the air. "I didn't want to go to Edgerton anyway." He said aloud bringing Joffrey's screaming remonstrance to a halt as he, Cersei and Jaime all looked at him. "Remember it's not that good a castle just like Sow's Horn. I would have been more in favor of heading towards the Riverlands anyway."

"But if the rumors are true we won't find any aid there!" Cersei said sharply. "Why would we head that way?"

"We might not have found much in the way of aid from House Edgerton." Rupert replied with a shrug. "But I know at least one castle that our forces are almost certainly still holding."

"Harrenhal." Jaime murmured thoughtfully. "Yes, Father would never have allowed Whent to remain neutral, and would certainly have invested it with at least..." he paused for a moment. "Maybe 800 men, no, at least two times again the forces of House Whent. He wouldn't want them to be able to do some kind of double-cross, and lady Whent isn't exactly the bravest sort either."

"Exactly." Rupert smiled thinly. "With the forces already there, and our own men, we can hold that castle till doomsday. At the moment, that's probably the best we're going to be able to do."

OOOOOO

The evening before his departure, Ranma and Daenerys spent most of their time going over the messages that he would send into the Westerlands from the Golden Tooth, as well as a few more they would be sending from Riverrun. Those would not go to Westerlands houses, but rather to other castles in Westeros, to practically every non-Riverlands castle the maester here had ravens trained to.

One of them was sent to Dragonstone. Ever since Jon had told him about it, Ranma had long been concerned about needing to use dragonglass against the others, and had decided that whatever the differences between him and Stannis were, he wanted the men Stannis had left behind to know that he would pay good silver for all the dragonglass arrows and knives they could hack out of the stone for him. They wouldn't be in a position to actually take possession of any such shipment for a while, but it would be good to get the work on that started now.

Another message was penned for Highgarden, which included his reply to Margaery's letter. It would lay the groundwork for the position of the men he was going to send down there under Jon, but it was important that those in Highgarden understood his and Daenerys's position. Thus that letter was sealed both his own and Daenerys's personal seals as well as the seal of their new house. That was a dragon and direwolf moving around one another tail to snout in what Ranma considered a yin-yang symbol, though no one save the Wolfsworn and his wife, who he had explained it to, would recognize the term.

Daenerys read it aloud before affixing her own seal. "We, the royal house of Stargaryen look favorably upon the measures that Lady Margaery Tyrell has taken in ensuring the safety of the realm. In regards to her offer of loyalty, it is accepted, and further aid will be coming to defend Lady Margaery from any threats, both foreign and those within her own house should the need arise.

"We are sad to hear that the **former** Head of House has become so disdainful of all honor and duty as to continue with his current course rather than seeing to the smallfolk and the lands that are his charge. As such we remove him from his position as Lord Paramount, and formally acknowledge House Tyrell under its eldest son Willas as Lord Paramount of the Reach. We are glad to know that Lord Willas and his own forces have battled so valiantly to protect the men and women under their care from the depredations of the Westerlanders. Further rewards for this show of duty and loyalty will be forthcoming both for House Tyrell and those who stood with Willas upon our formal meeting in the future."

"Signed Ranma and Daenerys Stargaryen, King and Queen of Westeros."

She smiled faintly after stopping her recitation. "I know you're not exactly happy with the wording Ranma, and I'll admit it does go against your northern sensibilities to claim something like that when you actually haven't won it just yet on the battlefield, but we need to start acting the part now. Especially considering how much trouble this might make for the Reach forces down the line."

"Not so much in their army I don't think. I doubt word of this will get to them in time for it to do anything, though if it does that would be nice." Ranma said with a laugh. "But you're right it's kinda hard for me to talk like that."

"Yes you're such a down to earth fellow." Denny replied laughing as she sent the letter down. She moved around the table, standing behind him and beginning to knead his shoulders. "Are you nearly done your letter to your family?"

"Almost." Ranma said raising one hand to take one of her hands in his kissing it gently before turning back to his message. "Have to convince my mother somehow to let Sansa out a for sight again so she can come down here, but I think that the fact we're sending Ben and Edd up will be the selling point. She'll see what that could mean right away. And she shouldn't have any fear of her safety with one of the Wolfsworn with her."

Daenerys nodded, continuing to knead his shoulders and neck while Ranma went back to writing his message. As he finished however she stopped. "We need to talk about Merry."

"You mentioned that before, but I don't know what you mean. Is there something wrong with her? Or are you worried about taking her back out into the field?"

"No, none of that, in fact I wouldn't like leaving her behind all, and that is sort of part of why I want to speak to you about her." She moved away from him, gesturing him over to the bed where she sat down. Ranma moved over to her, standing in front of her looking at her quizzically. Daenerys looked up at him with a faint smile on her face. "She's

not a little girl you know." She smiled wider. "In fact I **know** you've noticed that. When you walked in on us your face was quite a picture, and it wasn't just me you were reacting to."

Ranma flushed and looked away, his mind going over that day before he could stop it. "I did apologize y'know."

"That's not what this is about." Daenerys sighed faintly reaching forward to take his hands in hers. "You are a good man Ranma Stark, too good for your own good at times. That little crush of her's, or what you thought was a crush, it isn't. She really loves you. And that that poses a problem, because I can see it in you sometimes, that you love her as well. And I don't think it's just as a little sister any longer is it?"

Ranma looks down at her, then away quickly. "You know I would never..."

"I know that." She said firmly interrupting him and pulling at his hands to get Ranma to look back at her. "And that wasn't my question. My question was do you realize that you have also fallen in love with her?"

Ranma stared in him into her eyes, then sighed with a nod. "I do." He said honestly. "But again you know I'd never act on it, and frankly the change, it, it just sort of sort of came at me from behind you know, creeping up on me. Part of me still sees her as that little girl who just needed a big brother around, and the rest see the..."

He paused and Daenerys spoke up before he could go on. "And the other half sees the magnificent young woman she's grown into since this war really began. And she is magnificent, inside and out. Myrcella is the sort of person that is very easy to fall in love with. In fact, if she wasn't we wouldn't be having this conversation. If she and I..."

Daenerys paused in turn before going on. "If I hadn't..." she looked away then back again taking a deep breath. "If I hadn't realized that I was falling in love with Merry and vice versa we would not be having this conversation."

"What are you saying?" Ranma asked frowning.

"I'm saying that I think I think that I would be happy to have her join us in our bed and in our lives going forward. It doesn't erase the problems that having her do so will cause. Our official stance is still that she is the heir to house Baratheon, let alone House Lannister, and that isn't considering the social issues it would cause if it became known. Polygamous marriages were one of the two main reasons why the seven was so often at odds with my family."

Ranma went down on one knee in front of her where she sat on the bed staring into Daenerys's eyes. "Are you sure about this Dae? The problems you mentioned with this are big ones, but they can be overcome, or covered over or whatever you want to call it. But...but are you really sure about this?"

Daenerys smiled, one finger touching her lips as she remembered the kiss that she and Merry had shared after Ranma had walked in on them like that. The two of them hadn't spoken about it in the past few days, both because they were so busy, and because neither of them really understood what to do next.

But now, Daenerys was sure of what she wanted to do next. "I think I am more than sure, I am happy." She smirked then reaching for to twist one of his ears playfully. "But Merry is the only one, you understand me? I don't care how good-looking this Margaery woman is, or how close the two of you had become as friends before you were sent to bring my brother and I back. I'll share our bed with Merry, but no more."

"Wasn't even dreaming of it." Ranma laughed, leaning forward to kiss her on the lips pushing her back onto the bed as he began to work at her laces.

OOOOOO

Myrcella chuckled, smacking Fenris lightly on his nose when it began to quest upwards towards the basket that she was holding. "No, that's for your master and our mistress. You already ate today anyway and I know it, you greedy little wolf."

Fenris huffed turning his head away, though whether or not it had been to be called little or greedy was something Merry couldn't tell. She shook her head still chuckling though not at Fenris. *Wait until I tell Daenerys what's going on in the servant's quarters right now.* Her face flushed a little as she thought of Daenerys and the kiss the two of them had shared. It had been brief but sweet, yet since then the two of them just haven't had any time to spend just the two of them.

What little free time Myrcella had she spent with maester Vyman and the local septons, going over what she had learned about healing while on the road so they could copy it all down. Ranma had been true to his word about wanting to start a Healer's Hall, and had already put out notices within Riverrun of the fact that the maester and

septon would be willing to test individuals on their healing knowledge in order to start taking classes. She would not be here to see that continue, but it was at least a start on something that Myrcella felt was long overdue.

*Maybe someday medical aid will be available for everyone, regardless of the rank of their birth* she thought to herself as she him to walk down the corridor. *That day's far in the future, but it has to start somewhere.*

She passed by Ser Barristan, who insisted on being on guard at least occasionally for Daenerys, even though Ranma was with her. She passed the man with a curtsy and a smile which he returned with a nod of his head even as he had to squeeze against the wall of the hallway to let Fenris and her past. Frankly, Myrcella thought the idea of his needing to stand guard like this was ludicrous. To get at Daenerys while Ranma was around you'd have to bring an army, and the only army in the vicinity was theirs.

Fenris huffed again and suddenly sat down, turning away and laying down across the corridor, a large, and furry wall blocking all passage. Myrcella looked down at him and he wrinkled his nose. "That's right, sorry Fenris." She said smiling a little trying to keep a giggle out of her voice. She knew that the smell of human sex bothered the direwolves sometimes.

She knocked on the door and after hearing Ranma's "come in" opened it walking inside, though she was surprised to see Ranma was still partially undressed. Not unhappy, since it allowed her to stare for a second at his bare chest and wide shoulders, just surprised since the army was due to leave soon. For all that he was now 20 or so, he still didn't seem to have any hair on his body, a possible holdover from his past life he said, but Myrcella couldn't care less. She wasn't one for hair anyway, and this way she could watch all of his muscles move under his skin so powerfully.

Daenerys on the other hand was almost entirely dressed, and she moved forward to take the basket for Myrcella. "Thank you Myrcella, I'm starving."

Myrcella tore her eyes away from where Ranma was going through some kind of stretch to wake himself up and turned to Daenerys. "The army is almost ready to go, both of them. Oh, and young Eddric wanted to talk to you before you all set off, Ranma." Eddric wasn't actually that young in comparison to Myrcella, barely a year younger if that but that didn't seem to cross her mind.

"I wonder what he wants." Ranma mused, coming over to lay a gentle kiss on Daenerys's forehead then reaching over to pull Myrcella into a hug. Myrcella missed the look he shot Daenerys, or the smiling, happy nod he got in return. One moment she was blushing hotly against his chest, the next she felt his hand gently her chin and Ranma was leaning down and...

The world faded for a moment, as Myrcella suddenly realized this was all a dream. She couldn't possibly be really feeling Ranma's lips against hers, feeling his arms tightening around her waist, her dress clad chest pressing into his bare on. It was only when she heard Daenerys laugh, and say "let Merry breathe you brute!" that she realized it wasn't a dream.

Myrcella opened her eyes wide, standing back rapidly her face flushed as she stared at the two of them. "What!" She gasped "What..."

"Do you remember that kiss we shared Myrcella?" Daenerys asked softly, coming from forward from the table to take the younger girl's hand in hers and slowly bringing her over to sit down. "Do you remember how it felt? I enjoyed it, and I think you did too."

Myrcella flushed but nodded her head shyly. "It was, it was lovely..." she said chancing a glance towards Ranma, who had followed them to the table and was smiling down at her. "But, but I don't..."

"That was..." Daenerys paused, frowning slightly. "It was a sort of a test I suppose, both of you and myself. I've long known that your crush on Ranma wasn't really a crush Merry, in fact I think I knew that long before we originally had our talk by the Blue Fork. I just didn't want to admit it. But since then I have come to love you as well, and I think you have come to love me. Is that not so?"

In response Myrcella nodded her head rapidly, squeezing the other girl's hands back. Then, feeling greatly daring. She leaning forward quickly to press her lips against Daenerys in a sweet but very brief kiss before she pulled back flushing. "Yes," she said gasping a little. "I I love you, and I love you Ranma! But this, where, we..."

"This is about you joining us Myrcella, joining our relationship. I don't think I'll ever be able to marry you or even kiss you or stuff like that in public, and I won't lie this **is** going to cause trouble if it ever gets out. But I think that it will be worth it to make all of us happy, or happier in my case and Dae's. Are you willing to face those challenges with us for

this chance?" Ranma asked touching her cheek gently.

Under that gentle touch Myrcella shivered again, but nodded fervently. "Whatever we face, if, if we're together we can, I can face it with you!" She stammered, not quite making sense but getting the gist of what she wanted to say across.

She watched wide-eyed as Ranma leaned in and kissing his wife ardently on the lips, so passionately that when they broke their lips apart their tongues were still dueling between their mouths for a few seconds while she watched, hyperventilating a little. It was easily one of the most erotic sights she had seen in her life, right up there with seeing Daenerys the morning after she and Ranma had spent a full night of fun together.

It got better however when Ranma turned to her and kissed her. Myrcella squeaked as she felt herself rising a little in her chair, with Ranma's hands gently gliding down her back, not touching her rear just yet but pulling her up by gentle pressure on the small of her back into the kiss which Merry returned as passionately as she could. She was still surprised though when Ranma's mouth opened slightly, and his tongue came out gently tapping at her lips. She gasped, opening her mouth slightly and his tongue entered her mouth, questing for her own.

Myrcella felt her body responding, arcing into Ranma's chest, as she began to perspire down below. Their tongues twirled around one another in her mouth, and she felt as if she was in heaven for a few moments.

Eventually however she had to pull back, her own smaller and much less rough tongue licking at the underside of his for a moment as she fell back into her chair her eyes wide and gasping. Myrcella looked over at Daenerys whose face was also flushed from watching, and leaned forward towards her, meeting the other girl midway and sharing and equally eager kiss with her. "I love you too..." she said after pulling back.

"Then I think that's all that matters between us." Ranma said with a smile as he moved off to find his shirt. "Unfortunately, we need ta deal with the real world for a bit before we can continue this."

Myrcella pouted, looking away. "Damned teases, the both of you."

Ranma and Daenerys laughed, but Daenerys put her arms around the other girl. "You and I will still be together Myrcella sharing a horse as usual."

At that, Myrcella clicked her fingers together. "That's right, I forgot to say this before, um," She flushed and looked at them both. "You two drove it out of my mind but the servants downstairs, they're frantically trying to prepare a carriage for you!"

While Ranma laughed, Daenerys looked at her blankly. "What?"

A few moments later the three of them had finished eating, though that was not to say the meal had not been interspersed by kisses, caresses and various cuddling. Now with Myrcella and Daenerys clasping arms together and with Ranma walking beside Fenris they moved through the keep and out into Riverrun's courtyard where the last portions of the army were preparing to go along with the Wolfsworn. And yes, a carriage.

The majordomo of the castle hurried up, bowing grandly to Daenerys and Myrcella. "Your highnesses, we have the carriage prepared, but we would have preferred to have some more time to choose out servants to go with you." Despite his bow his words came out sort of crossly. If you had told us that the two of you were leaving before we heard it from the soldiery, we would've..."

He stopped as Daenerys held up a hand looking at him quizzically. "I did not tell you to prepare any servants because I do not have servants while I'm on the march good ser."

"Y-your highness?" he asked hesitantly gesturing at two maids who looked much more worried about the upcoming trip than anything else. "But servants, your highness you are a queen, you need..."

"I need nothing on the march that my men cannot provide, or that I cannot carry myself." she replied sternly. "Myrcella and occasionally Alayaya see to what little aid I need, and vice versa. The march is no place for fripperies." Actually on this march there would be Bess as well, but that wasn't important right now.

She exchanged a smile and a nod with Grege, one of Myrcella's guards, who had come up just then with their horse. Daenerys let go of Myrcella's arm allowing the man to hoist the younger woman up into the saddle. "I hope good ser, that you made certain that nothing else was added to our baggage?"

"Aye lady, the servants tried to add some more dresses and all a few hours ago too, and there apparently was some

kind of row between them and Patrek and a few of his supply men. It might have come to blows but I'm not certain, you'd have to get the full tale from him." The man replied in that soft tenor and tone that sounded so odd coming from a face like his.

To one side Myrcella's Eric Proudthenn smirked evilly, an easy thing to do with his face. "The moment they hear the word 'queen' it seems to go to these southron's brains your Majesty. As if a carriage'd make any time in this weather even on the Kingsroad!"

"Truly!" Ranma laughed then stepped forward to help his wife into the saddle. He easily lifted Daenerys into the saddle, showing off a strength that few possessed before he turned away. "Now, I understand that Eddric wanted to talk to me?"

"I did your highness." Eddric said from behind Ranma, having moved through the crowd while Daenerys was dealing with the servants.

"We did." Arya said, standing beside her friend. "Eddric's coming with us."

Ranma looked at them quizzically then turned to Eddric. "Yes, that was the plan." he said slowly. "Eddric's in charge of the rest of the force coming down with us to Wayfarer's Rest." From there it would be easier to head east towards House Keath, the land wouldn't be as bad and there was an actual road for half the journey which would carry them to the Stony Sept. From there they could make for House Keath's keep at the mouth of the Blackwater easily enough.

"He and Lord Piper's son. Are you ready as well?" Ranma asked looking over at the Lord Piper, who nodded his head grimly.

His father had not been happy that his House wouldn't gain anything from their fellow's downfall, but nor could he argue against it. He couldn't even complain about being sidelined from the main action, since that was in fact what Lord Piper wanted. Eddric on the other hand, wanted a chance to earn himself some glory to offset his ignominious defeat at the Lannisters hands.

"No what I mean is he's coming with us, with the Wolfsworn." Arya said, clutching Eddric's hand tightly.

Ranma looked at the boy sharply, not commenting on the fact that his little sister was holding the other youngster's hand so tightly. "Are you sure you can keep up with us? We're going to move damn fast, and I think you should talk to Eddric and Eddric to understand what that means."

Or to Eddric's wife, who had insisted on following him into battle, though Arya had winced when she learned that Ranma was going to push the pace. Arya had experienced something of that when Ranma was racing home to Winterfell from Hornwood.

"I do my Lord, and I want to try at the very least. If I fall out, you are of course free to leave me behind." Eddric said seriously. "But I still want to be with you when you take the Golden Tooth. I, I have an need to prove myself worthy my lord, not just to my lord Eddric, but to the memory of my kinsman and the training you have already given me."

Ranma looked over at his wife who shrugged, then over to Eddric who also shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, but we **will** leave you behind if you start to fall out of the march." Eddric nodded again and walked over to his horse while Arya made her way over to stand beside it with Nymeria next to her.

After that Ranma and Daenerys, on her horse, moved over to where Jon was waiting with the rest of the Wolfsworn smiling slightly at the sight their younger sister and her friend. "I think those two might feel something a little more than friendship for one another" he said before Ranma could open his mouth. "I don't know if they've got to the 'practice kissing' stage yet, but I wouldn't be surprised if it happened sometime soon."

"Arya's leaving Bess here right?" Ranma asked looking around for the young bracken girl. "She didn't try to dress her up and hide her among Eddric's men?"

"Yes, Bess knows she's marching with the rest of the army. She and Cley seem to be close to an understanding of their own despite how young they are." Jon shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know if it's serious, or simply the fact that they're both the same age and somewhat friendly with Arya, but we'll see. Everything is ready for our departure."

"Well I suppose that will sort itself out without us needing to poke our noses in, though given the fact House Bracken's been broken, Cley's mother might not wish to pursue it." Ranma said then looked up at his wife and Arya, sighing sadly. "Which means it's time for us to depart, love."



Daenerys nodded and leaned down when Rannar leaned up kissing one another their while the rest of the Army watched on. After a moment Daenerys pulled back and stared down at his her husband. "I will see you in Harroway."

"I'll be there. I'll see you." He said his eyes flicking over to Myrcella where she sat in front of Daenerys making sure that the younger woman knew his words were meant for both of them. "I promise."

With that he turned away, moving over to the other Wolfsworn quickly. Edd and Arya had joined them, and he nodded at them all. "Let's run brothers." He said simply. With that he turned and raced off out of the courtyard out of Riverrun and out into the city beyond, where Jon and the trio of wolves along with Arya caught him up one after another, and from there out onto the River Road heading Southwest. Behind him the rest of the Wolfsworn save Edd who had departed days ago for Winterfell, either raced on, or put spurs to horses in his wake.

OOOOOO

After being given the command to retake Dragonstone, Davos had decided to take it slowly at first, not knowing what he might run into. With his ships well out to sea he went ashore on Driftmark, where under a simple disguise he began to mingle with the sailors and smallfolk of the port.

He returned to his fleet with news shaking his head. "Driftmark and House Velaryon joined the Targaryen whelp willingly. The port's all a flutter wit' news that Dragonstone has fallen" He sneered slightly. "Apparently they're trying to bait a trap for us, and the castle will still be flying this Baratheon banner, but let's not be fools all right?"

His captains and his pirate friend laughed, then Salladhor gestured at the extremely detailed map of Blackwater Bay and the waters around it. "So what do you suggest we do? What force do you think they've left there?" the gesture was flamboyant as all of Salladhor's movements were, and indeed that word seemed to encompass the pirate prince of Myr rather well.

Salladhor Sahn was an elderly gentleman about fifteen years Davos' senior, with a sleek build and a ready smile. He always wore extremely good clothes, mostly silk in silver and white, with a green cap decorated with peacock feathers. He could have been a bard or a musician or even an Essosi actor, but he was also one of the most renowned pirates of the last thirty years.

"I'll take my ships around the southern side of The Gullet, stayin' well out of sight of Dragonstone before coming back in and landing on the island's seaward tip. From there we'll march overland, I know several ways into the castle that I doubt the defenders will've had time to find." Davos replied.

One such way was a secret passage straight from the port and into the Castle itself. So long as they took the other end he could funnel men through it and into the castle itself, bypassing the walls entirely.

"Salladhor." He said nodding at his friend. "Can I trust you to deal with any ships that might be waiting in the waters around Dragonstone?"

"Show me the range of the Dragonstone's defenses." Salladhor said gesturing at the map again. Nodding his head Davos did so, marking out of rough circle around the site of the Castle itself on the map with copper coins.

Salladhor nodded his head. "Excellent, I'll keep well out of that range but I'll make it look like I'm trying to push whatever ships we see into the range of Dragonstone, as if I believe it's still in friendly hands, while we'll also try to stay out of its catapult's range."

"Good thinking." Davos nodded.

Several days later Davos led his men across the island, ironically tracing much of the same route that Ulwyck Uller had, until he broke off a straight march towards Dragonstone to make for the port. There his men disguised themselves with cloaks and entered the port swiftly. In the port they found the smallfolk going about their business guarded by several Dornish armsmen.

With his crew stationed all around the road out of the port up to the castle, Davos decided to chance taking one of the Dornishmen captive.

Two such were patrolling around a brothel set near the wharfs when both of them were suddenly surrounded. Before either could raise the alarm, they fell unconscious to sharp raps upside the head.

One of them woke up later that night with a splitting headache, only to find himself tied to a chair, his hands splayed out on a desk in front of him and tied thereby rope. At the moment his mouth was also covered, but as he shook

himself and tried to pull himself free someone removed it.

"Now, my friend," said a voice from behind him. "We're going to play a game. You're going to tell me what I want to know, and you get to keep all of your fingers. Every time you try to lie, you lose one. Then I'll start cutting off other things."

In this manner Davos learned that Viserys had left 500 men behind, all of them infantry and archers, as well as a few dozen men from the war galleys who knew what they were doing with the siege equipment. All of which were still in good condition, then sent having deliberately made certain that it was kept that way.

For his part Davos had upwards of 1,200 men to call on from the Royal Fleet. Every ship of the Royal fleet that had been sailing with Salladhor's pirate fleet had been sent with him on this, though he had only brought four ships crews ashore with him. Most of them were now hiding elsewhere on the island.

Davos decided to tell them to wait until they saw the gates being opened before advancing, since he knew they were safe where they were. He and his own crew, bolstered somewhat further, would be enough to open the gate from the inside. Besides, any more men being seen in the port might arouse the defender's curiosity and put the castle on alert that their ruse had failed.

With that in mind Davos made his way through the darkness of the port, stopping outside a small stone building, which had actually been the foundations of a large lighthouse at one point. Looking around he made certain the no one was watching him then ducked inside. Inside the roof had caved in, several of the beams crashing down onto the ground, making what looked like a large pile of rubble that almost filled the small hovel.

Davos moved over the pile very carefully and as he did what he was here to seek became visible. You could only see it if you stood on top of the rubble, but there was a small open area directly between it and the outer wall. The floor there was wooden, like the floor of the rest of the building and he moved down the pile, tapping at it thoughtfully. "Now, where... ah, there it is." Quickly he pulled at the small bit of loose wood in the floor, removing it entirely and placing it to one side. With that done he fit his fingers into it, pulling up on the floor rapidly. The piece of floor came loose, and he set it to one side, revealing an iron ladder leading down into the darkness of a tunnel of some sort.

Night passed quickly while his men joined him in threes and fours, heading down into the tunnel with torches until finally he had a force of around 400. With that Davos entered, pulling the lid back into place behind him while dawn was breaking. After climbing down what seemed a single story's worth of handles, Davos found himself standing in a long tunnel, which wasn't very wide, being barely wide enough for one man across.

Moving through his men to the front of the column was incredibly difficult, and cursing abounded in the tunnel as he made his way through them. Eventually however Davos was at the front of his men, and began to lead the way down the tunnel.

An interminable amount of time later they came upon a doorway, and Davos laid his head against the doorway for a moment listening hard. He couldn't hear anyone from the other side, but given what was on the other side that might wasn't definite.

With a shrug Davos reached into a pocket pulling out a small key and fitting it into a lock before slowly turning it. Luckily there was no noise of rust or grating steel. Instead there was a light click at the end, and when he pushed the door gave way easily. Davos moved forward quickly, drawing his sword while behind him his men began to pile through, all of them thankful to be out of the claustrophobic confines of the tunnel.

This side of the tunnel was the wine cellar for the Castle, but thankfully there was no one here. As more and more men began to come through Davos ordered them up into the rest of the Castle. "The servants can't all be on their side, but best ta order 'em to keep silent as you go. But no killing of the servants unless they try'n rouse the Dornishmen."

After that the battle was rather anti-climactic. The defenders had almost to a man been up on the castle's balustrades, readying the siege equipment while out to sea Salladhor went to work on the five ships that Viserys had left behind either to date or close his trapped one of the others. They looked up in shock as they heard the noise of the castles gate being opened, but by then Davos and his men were in firm control of the gatehouse and the hallways leading to it. There were a few moments of intense combat there, but after that the rest of his men stormed into the keep, and the Dornishmen were quickly overwhelmed.

Out to sea it was even easier. Salladhor was a consummate professional at his craft and came in too fast from too many different directions for the crews of the five war galleys, all of whom were captured Royal Navy vessels, to

compensate for. He cut off any attempt that the Dornish ships could use to escape, forcing them back into the range of the catapults on the castle. When those catapults went to work firing on them in earnest and sinking one of the captured ships outright the remaining four quickly surrendered. The men on them would be sent with four ships of Sahn's fleet to Essos and sold there as slaves. That would give Salladhor and his men some recompense for his work thus far.

That was a point he was quick to bring up with Davos later that evening. "I like you Davos, truly I do, and I never truly liked the Targaryen or the Lannisters, but I am a businessman, and I need to be paid."

"I know." Davos said looking at him and then down at the map in the map room, not making any mention of the fact he knew the pirate captains had run a very profitable black market while around King's Landing before the plague hit. "Why are you bringin' that up now? Ya know that Stannis promised ta pay you at the end of the campaign."

"Ahh, that was before news of what went on in King's Landing reached me. Without the booty from that city, I'm far less inclined to believe him."

"What news?" Davos asked, going cold inside for some reason.

"You mean you didn't know?" Salladhor actually looked surprised, and reached across to grasp his old friend's shoulders. "You didn't know? You really didn't?"

Davos looked at him irritably then shook his hands off. "No I didn't, what happened?"

"A conflagration of green and red fire was seen bursting up into the sky around Kings Landing. Fishermen from further into Blackwater Bay are reporting it was seen for dozens of leagues around! The city is gone, possibly entirely, and if there's any gold or jewels to be had amidst its ruins, getting at them will be quite a bit of work, work my pirates and I are not suited for."

Davos slumped into a chair, not the Lord's chair just another chair in the room around the map table staring at his friend. "Are you certain?" he whispered. "Are you really certain?"

"My friend, you can question some of the fishermen yourself." Salladhor somewhat wearily. "There are dozens of them out in the waters these days. They're desperate to bring in food before winter gets here. Apparently there are hints the oldsters can see in the weather and that the maesters have passed on that this one will be a longer one than normal."

He shrugged. Salladhor Saan was from Essos, and winter very rarely if ever touched that land save around Ibben or Braavos. But since he was from Lys he had never seen winter. Oh, he'd been cold of course, he'd even sailed to the port of Ibben at one point, but winter?"

"I, I think I'd like that my friend." *I know Melisandre had influence on My Lord, but I thought he was fighting it! In the name of the Seven, why! All those people!* Davos had been born in King's Landing, in Flea Bottom in fact, and the idea of all those little alleyways, those taverns, those brothels, being turned to ash was distressing.

"As for how you'll be paid..." Davos paused, thinking hard. "Let me think on that as well."

There was a cough from the doorway, and both men turned. Maester Pylos stood there, bowing his head somewhat obsequiously. The Citadel had sent him before Cressen's death to eventually replace the ailing Cressen, whose legs had begun to give out on him, preventing him from performing all of his duties. Pylos was a quiet sort, loyal to his birds and to his duties as maester rather than to any one individual lord, which might've been why you can left on after the sack of the keep.

The man had even been blunt about it when Davos questioned him earlier, saying, "I bowed my head and surrendered, bowing to follow the Lord of the keep. That is my duty as maester, to the keep itself, to Dragonstone and whoever holds it at the time. If that changes hands, what is that to me?"

"Yes Pylos what is it?" Davos asked, smiling slightly at the younger man. He liked Pylos, who seemed to have a very pragmatic sort of honor, and had never made even a hint of being interested in religion one way or another.

"A message from Riverrun has arrived this past hour Ser Davos. I looked it up in the books, and Riverrun has only twice before sent messages here, during the War of the Usurper in fact. As such, I thought to share it with you. That, and its contents are rather disturbing in their implications."

Salladhor raise an eyebrow and looked at Davos. "Riverrun, that would be the Starks and their Targaryen ally correct,

the Stormborn? At least so the rumors say."

"It's signed Rannar and Daenerys of House Stargaryen, King and Queen of Westeros, Lord Paramount of the North and the Riverlands."

"Hubris." Said Davos shaking his head. "Everyone seems to be declaring themselves kings these days." Even so Davos took the message from the maester, reading through it quickly. "It says winter is coming, and with it a force out of legend from the north, we need weapons to fight it, and as such we need dragonglass knives and arrow points..." his voice trailed off. "We, we will pay good silver for it to be delivered up to White Harbor."

"Silver for dragonglass!" Salladhor scoffed. "Why would they do that? Oh, the rock's pretty enough, and I've seen some work from the Basilisk Islands that are just incredible, but using it to make weapons? It's too breakable for that."

The maester coughed a little. "There's been a rumor my lord carried to me on ravens wings, that the black candles of the Citadel have been lit, that the lights which are not candles have begun to glow again. Those are signs that magic has returned. And the black candles in particular are supposed to be lit only when, well it's just ancient history of course but..."

"Spit out man." Salladhor growled, looking at the man angrily. "Don't beat about the bush."

"The, the Others my White Walkers. The ones the Wall was originally built to keep out. It wasn't built so monstrously tall and imbued with fell magics just to keep out the wildlings. As many as there are, a normal wall would've done the trick with them. But, but the Others, the Others haven't been seen since the Age of Heroes! Thousands of years!"

"And how long has it been since the black candles were last able to be lit?" Davos asked, still staring at the message.

"Four hundred years at minimum my lord, during the Doom of Valyria."

"The Northerners..." Davos went on slowly. "The Northerners mobilized their forces long before hostilities began here in the South. They sent half of their total strength up to the Wall, ostensibly to deal with some King uniting the wildlings for a push south. But what if they had evidence that was good enough for them of these White Walkers, but not enough to share with Robert or anyone else?"

Almost against his will Salladhor nodded. "I've never met any of the Starks, but I've had dealings with the men of White Harbor. They're shrewd fellows in the main, and their Lord is the shrewdest of all for all he tries to hide it. If he's willing to part with good silver, then they have strong evidence of these Others. What exactly are we dealing with here?" he asked looking at the maester. "Supernatural forces aye, but what kind?"

"I know not my Lord, I didn't make a study of ancient legends. They were, they were ancient! Past and done! All I know is that they had some kind of power over death. But this is simply preposterous! There can't be any..."

"You Maesters have long said that magic's time had passed in this world, but I think we've seen enough evidence that you were wrong there." Davos said grimly, thinking of all the things Melisandre had been able to do. "How many of the servants are still here? I want messages sent out, we need men to start mining dragonglass, as much is possible."

"What about chasing after the Pauper Prince?" said Salladhor looking at him quizzically and using the Essosi nickname for Viserys. "Or sending for more orders from your King?"

"Well you said you wanted to be paid. You can take tremendous amounts of dragonglass on your ships, and be paid in silver apparently in White Harbor." said Davos actually smiling a little now.

"Sailing that far north in this season isn't going to be easy." Salladhor shook his head. "I'd like a guarantee of that before I set sail."

"I know we have ravens trained to Winterfell, how long would sending a message there take?" Davos asked the maester.

"It would take about two weeks now given the weather. Even ravens are affected by wind and rain."

"Will the Starks word on it be good enough for you, my friend?"

"That'll do." said Salladhor nodding his head and now smiling. Silver for dragonglass, that would be an excellent trade in his opinion, especially if he could drive the price up higher given the demand for it. "And what about you and your

fleet?"

"I'm going to hunt down Viserys. According to the servants he was let in here by Petyr Baelish, that means they'll be making for Gulltown or Maidenpool. Maidenpool if Viserys want to get to grips with the Starks and his sister, Gulltown if he's trying to whistle up more support. Whichever, I'll be able to pin him in the Bay of Crabs. I know those waters almost as good as I know Blackwater Bay, and whatever his dragon can do, it won't be able to make up for the numbers or my men's skill at sea."

Salladhor nodded. He then poured them both a glass of wine and the two men drank deeply while Davos' mind continued to go over what had happened to King's Landing, and what that meant about Stannis. And, perhaps most importantly, what it meant in terms of Davos and his family's loyalty to the man.

OOOOOO

It had taken a week after the destruction of King's Landing for Stannis to reassert his control of his army. The Lords and the common armsmen's reaction to the sight of the capital burning as it did had been beyond what he had expected, but eventually Stannis had convinced the Lords that it had been the only way to defeat the plague, and they in turn had convinced their men. That wasn't to save the army was happy with that decision, they never would be, but Stannis didn't care one way another about that happiness, so long as they were willing to follow his orders.

*After all, I'm not happy about it, and they all know it.* Stannis thought to himself moodily, staring through the rain towards the remains of the city from well within bow shot of the remains of the walls.

It might have been that which allowed him to regain control of his army afterwards. The fact that Stannis showed genuine remorse for the act, that his grim self-control seemed to break when he viewed the remains of the city, might have done more than anything else to convince the men that it really had been a necessary evil.

He continued to watch the remains of the city watching a few men come out of its ruins, all of them wearing heavy leathers soaked in water, more than the rain could provide. Even now a week after the fires had died out the land of King's Landing was still incredibly hot, even steaming in the rain. As the men neared him Stannis barked "Well?"

One of the men was Lord Bolling, and he pulled off a heavy damp hood to stare at his king, shaking his head. "Nothing my Lord, you can tell where the Red Keep is, you can even tell where the Hand's tower and Maegor's holdfast were. But all the stone walls have melted! It would take weeks of heavy labor to break through to see if the corridors inside are still there, let alone get through to where the royal court is.

"I see." said Stannis softly, still staring at the ruins of King's Landing for a few moments. Then he resolutely turned his back, facing north not at all incidentally. A king could not keep thinking about the past, he had to think about the Future. "Get some rest my Lord, we have a meeting this evening, for wish I require your attendance."

"As you will, Your Majesty." said Lord Bolling smiling at his distant kinsman's back. The way Stannis had regained control of the army these past few days had been masterful, and truly showed that Bolling had made the correct decision in which Baratheon to follow.

That evening Bolling joined with the other senior (most powerful) lords in the army to listen while Stannis began to discuss the next campaign. "Thanks to information from sources still loyal to me there, we know that Dragonstone has fallen due to treachery. However we can leave retaking it in the hands of Ser Seaworth."

Mace was not the only Reach Lord to grumble at that, for more than one reason. For one thing, without Dragonstone and with Storm's End so far away and still not knowing of the change in House Baratheon's leadership, Stannis no longer had a real powerbase to call his own. For another, Mace wasn't the only one who resented the fact that Seaworth, a common born sailor had been raised to the ranks of the nobility. Added to these was the identity of the individual that had taken Dragonstone in the first place. If Viserys Targaryen had really come back along with a dragon, then there were more than one Lord there who might be willing to bend the knee to House Targaryen once again.

Stannis glared at them all angrily, quieting their mutters. "Ser Seaworth has the keys to several secret passages into Dragonstone, which will allow him to reclaim the castle in much the same way it was taken in the first place. Moreover, if the Dragon boy attempts to fight him at sea, Davos and Saan are well up to smashing his fleet to flinders."

Still seeing their ambivalent nature to the loss and to what he was saying Stannis smirked internally knowing exactly how to turn them completely against the newly arrived Viserys. "I hope that Viserys dies at sea, it's a horrible way to

die, but not so horrible as the one, that according to my sources, he used to execute my wife." Those sources were Melisandre's visions but no one here needed to know that.

Mace sat up abruptly at that. Despite the fact that Stannis had agreed to set Selyse aside it would have been socially awkward at best. Politically possible certainly, the precedent of setting a barren wife aside was there, but it had so very rarely happened in the past that there was still a stigma attached to it. Especially if the House in question stood to enrich itself so much by its new arrangement, as was the case here. Mace still considered himself a kingmaker, despite the massive losses the Reach Army had taken, but even so he wouldn't have wished to face his Lords ire if Stannis had done so.

But the other Lords were simply looking at Stannis quizzically. Stannis replied to their expressions by elaborating quickly. "Apparently after Viserys took the castle through connections that Littlefinger had gained there somehow, he executed my wife by throwing her to his dragon."

There were oaths to the Seven and shouts of disgust at that, and more than one man's spine stiffened, the idea of possibly opening up clandestine negotiations with the Targaryen heir banishing from their mind. If this new Dragon Prince was so lost to honor as to do that to a noblewoman, regardless of whether or not his House stood against hers, they wanted nothing to do with him.

From there Stannis went on, changing the subject to the main point of this meeting. "Replies from the ravens we have sent from most of the Crownlands houses remaining are supportive." Stannis had taken the ravens found in Duskenale, Stokeworth and Rosby, which combined had allowed him to send ravens to nearly every surviving Crownlands house, as well as retaining several more to send into the Reach and elsewhere, including the Vale. It was an eclectic sorting, but it allowed him to put things in motion elsewhere at the very least.

One of them went to House Crane, the nearest Reach house to where Willas was leading a campaign into the Westerlands. That campaign was apparently going well going by Melisandre's visions, but those men could be of better use elsewhere in the Reach, let alone moving up to join his army, though he wasn't about to wait here for them.

"The Crownlands will supply us with foodstuffs and anything else we need on the march north. They will also supply a force to meet us on the Kingsroad near the God's Eye on the Kingsroad, which should be around approximately 2,000 men."

More than one of the Reach lord's sneered, but Stannis didn't join them. Given his losses here, and the fact he'd been forced to send so large a force down into the Reach to reclaim the Mander from the Ironborn, he might have barely force parity with the Riverlands and Northern army. Though he hoped that the raven he sent into the Vale would offset that. It was high time that nation got off the sidelines and chose a side in this war.

"Speaking of going North my Lord," said Lord Staedmon delicately. "There is a messenger here from House Grandison." The men House Grandison had sent to serve under Renly had taken severe losses in the fighting, along with several other houses. Selmy, Cafferren, Fell, Estermont, Gower, Hasty, Herston, practically every Stormlands house that had sided with Renly had taken losses, from middling to horrendous or utterly wiped out, like house Swygert.

Most of their lords, those who survived had of course been allowed to swear allegiance to Stannis, much like Lord Staedmon. House Morigen and House Rogers were particularly important, because most of their forces remained intact.

House Cafferren however had not. They had defied Robert during the previous war, and had defied Stannis here, so the lord of the House had been executed after the battle. Their lands would go to reward some knight or other after the war, though Stannis had not sent any message to Fawnton to tell them of their change in status just yet.

The same was true of Estermont and Fell, much to the barely hidden delight of Lord Buckler. With Fell's death, his house and lands were ceded to Buckler after the battle ended, though it would be some time before they could take control of it.

Other lords, Hasty and Gower in particular, who had been captured during the battle, were quietly taken away and 'executed' during the chaotic days after the battle. Stannis knew those men, pious fools both of them, and knew neither would willingly follow him so long as he had Melisandre by his side. That this allowed their men, some three thousand all told, to be added to his own House's forces, making up much of the losses sustained under Renly, was merely a bonus.

On Stannis' side, Errol, Buckler, Massey and Stannis' own house troops had taken casualties, but they were still

powerful, since most of the losses he had sustained had been among the former armymen taken from the Royal navy. Bolling's armymen hadn't taken many casualties at all, given they had been in charge of gathering up Cordwayner and that disastrous initial charge.

Stannis knew though it was worse among the Reach Lords. Several lords had died while their forces remained intact, or both lords and their men had been wiped out. This of course included the group that tried to betray their fellows, among others. Kidwell, Inchfield, Redding, Oldflowers, Woodwright, Pommingham, and several minor houses had been wiped out.

A few of the larger houses however still retained much of their military strength, like Ambrose, Appleton, Tyrell, and others. Many others had their lords captured, all of whom had been forced to swear fealty to Stannis. This included Lord Cordwayner, who had been enraged at both Renly and Mace after waking up a prisoner, and had sworn fealty eagerly to Stannis. Bolling had taken more than half that initial force and every lord involved captive, giving Stannis a major boost to the cavalry he could call upon.

After reading the message Stannis shook his head. "The Viper's march is a feint for this Dragon Prince," he said scornfully. "I have no idea what madness has taken Oberyn to use such measures against the smallfolk, but I cannot allow his diversion to work in pulling us away from marching north to deal with the Starks and the Stormborn before dealing with the Dragon Prince himself."

Before House Grandison's messenger or the other Stormlords present could protest Lord Boling cutting quickly. "Where do you think the Dragon Prince will try to land my Lord?"

"If Petyr was not in cahoots with him, I would assume they would look to land at Duskendale which they've already attacked, or Maidenpool. As it is, they might land in Gulltown in the Vale though I doubt Petyr will find aid there."

Stannis really wasn't worried about the Dragon Prince, despite his fury at having Dragonstone taken while he was away. No, he was more worried about the Stark boy and the other group that was soon to be arriving, the Golden Company.

The Golden Company was such a highly trained and organized force it could have an impact well beyond its 10,000 man size, and Melisandre had been unable to tell him where that force might land. Not that she **couldn't** tell, having taken power from sacrifices in the past few days secretly she had the power to see decently well through the course of the present. But the decision where they would land had yet to be made. She gave him several choices, all of which made sense, but Stannis couldn't fortify all of them, or indeed any of them given the distances involved before the Targaryen's new fang arrived.

As for the Stark boy, Melisandre's visions and his own learning that Edmure had died while in Lannister captivity meant that Rannar could call upon the Riverlands not just those Houses who he had already aided, but the entirety of that country. Those Houses that had been leery of joining him or had been forced to stay neutral to the Lannisters would join him now as their true Lord Paramount's heir, if Hoster was even still alive. That meant that he would be able to field an army of around 20,000, giving Stannis only a bare 4 or maybe 5000 at best advantage over him.

Stannis was still certain that he could beat the Stark Youth as a general, and he had Melisandre and her acolytes working overtime to birth more Shadow Warriors to take north with them, to match Stark as a warrior as well as his so-called Wolfsworn. Tales of their abilities had already begun to spread to the smallfolk in song and story. But even so, there was no doubt that the Stark lad was his most dangerous remaining opponent. *I won't underestimate you like Tywin did, boy* Stannis thought coldly. *I regret the fact that we are enemies but I will smash you all the same.*

"We'll be moving north in echelons with each in turn combining forces from both the Reach and the Stormlands. Without the Reach's levy forces, I expect the Reach heavy cavalry to be able to perform much better in the future." Stannis went on aloud, stroking the Reach Lord's egos in a way that made his insides crawl but which was necessary. He knew that portion of the army that was the least happy with him, and he did not wish to deal with any internal dissensions now, not ever.

"I will command the first group. Lord Mace, Lord Ambrose, you will have command of the second echelon, which will comprise a somewhat larger than normal portion of the heavy cavalry. The second portion will be in a good position to react to attacks either on the first or third echelons."

Mace nodded, puffed up with self-importance in such a way that Stannis actually had to look away for a moment so as to not say something to burst his bubble. He exchanged a glance with Lord Ambrose, who nodded his head slightly understanding the message in Stannis' gaze. He would be the one really in charge of that echelon, no matter how much he had to sugarcoat it for Mace down the line.

"Lord Staedmon will serve as my second-in-command in the first echelon. Lord Buckler, you will command the third echelon, along with Lord Rowan as your second in command."

"My Lord, what about the Viper?" said Lord Peasebury anxiously. His lands were close to where the Viper was apparently attacking.

Stannis looked at the man, coldly at first but after a moment nodding his head in respect for the man's courage in speaking up. "If the Viper was going to stay in the Stormlands my Lord, I would send you and a force of our Stormlands infantry back to aid in dealing with them. However, remember the season."

It took only a second for every Stormlord there to get it, and all of them began to grin viciously. Lord Morrigen put it into words. "It's autumn now, no general wants to fight in the Stormlands in autumn!"

"Indeed. As much as I loathe what the man is doing, there is no doubt that the Viper's intelligent. Once faced with the reality of moving through the Stormlands in autumn, he'll either retreat back into the Boneway or make for the Reach. Which means that Lord Caron and his force might meet up with them somewhere. I'll write out a message to that effect and send it both by Raven and by messenger to House Caswell. I will also send a raven to the Houses in the Marches, both sides Storm and Reach, what few I have ravens for. I realize that House Dondarrion won't march nor will House Tarly, but the other Marcher Houses in both the Stormlands and the Reach will. I'll order them to organize themselves in such a way that they'll be able to meet with Lord Caron's command. Between then they'll have more than enough men to crush this Viper underfoot.

There were many nods of approval at that, though one or two of the minor Stormlords looked worried. Peasebury and Musgood in particular were looking concerned, since their lands had been named as areas that had already felt the sting of the Viper or might soon. But that simply would make them more determined to win glory in the coming campaign. If they could, Stannis would reward them, and they would make good any losses they'd suffered at home.

Shortly after that the meeting broke up, though Stannis ordered Mace to stay for a moment. "My condolences on the passing of your wife my Lord." Mace said before Stannis could speak.

"Yes." Stannis said coldly. "There was no love lost between us, and as I said she was barren yet there will be an appropriate mourning period."

"Of course." Mace said, smiling in what he thought was a crafty manner, but which made his face which hadn't recovered just yet from the blows it had took taken in the battle, to look even more idiotic. "But after that..."

"After that, yes. Did you send a message to Highgarden?"

"Indeed. I don't think that she will catch us up anytime soon especially if we are going to start marching north, but my daughter should arrive after we deal with the Starks and their allies. It will be a grand occasion, worthy of both our Houses."

Stannis nodded, not showing any of his thoughts about the buffoon in front of him on his face. After that he offered the man a drink wine, and the two of them toasted one another. Though again Mace didn't notice that Stannis's teeth were gritted throughout the pleasantries.

OOOOOO

"You have to admit that Stannis won back the army's admiration in the past few days." Said Lord Fossoway to Lord Cockshaw.

"Not the total Army, or else you and I would not be meeting here." said Cockshaw tartly. "Lord Peake, Ser Shermer, and Ser Varner are all with us here, as is Lord Lonmouth."

The other Lords all nodded, looking around them carefully. None of them understood the Red Witch's powers, but knew enough to fear being overheard by anyone, not just Stannis's Fire Guard, the reputation of which had grown tremendously after the battle. They were meeting in a tent well off the beaten path of the main camp of the army, which was broken into several smaller camps.

Like his brother, Stannis had taken a brute force approach to making certain that disease and other health issues did not hinder his army, bringing as many maesters and septons who understood what they were doing along his march. He had also added every single one of them that Renly had commandeered. But he still had been forced to split his command into several different camps to make certain that overcrowding did not become an issue.



"We don't have enough forces to survive if we strike out on our own," said Ser Shermer, shaking his head angrily. His forces had been in the front of the main battle and had taken heavy losses before he was captured and his remaining men forced to surrender. Stannis had given him his parole, but the man felt that after learning more about the Red Witch and what Stannis had allowed her to do with the Shadow Warriors, let alone her own attempted assassination on Renly, that his oath to the Seven and the Faith was more important.

He was at a loss however as to what to do about it though, as he had just pointed out. "Stannis won't hesitate to crush us, even if that would weaken his own army."

"No, but it isn't just Stannis that we're dealing with here. It's Mace." said Lord Fossoway, his voice biting and angry. "He's acting like a fucking sellsword, or a common pimp using his daughter like that!" The bard's songs of the 'Rose of Oldflowers' had begun to reach the army, and as a minor noble he was more in tune with what his men were talking about than most.

Fossoway knew how Margaery was looked at by the smallfolk, and that the forces have been left behind in the Reach would also be looking askance at the idea of simply exchanging one Baratheon for another. Especially considering the fact that when the plan was first discussed, Stannis had yet to set aside his wife. The reasons for that were understandable, but the timing was not.

"That doesn't really matter." said Ser Varner, sounding morose. "We just don't have the forces to do anything."

"Not alone." Said Lord Cockshaw. "But, we are marching north to face the Starks and their army. And if the tales are true, Stannis may find himself overmatched, whatever he thinks."

"You're talking about turning coat during the battle," said the knight representing House Peake at the meeting flatly. "It's possible, but I don't know if it'll be as easy as you think."

"Perhaps not, but if we remain in the third echelon of the army, it is still possible. Lord Cockshaw smiled thinly yet there was no humor in it, it more resembled that of an animal caught in a trap. "And perhaps, perhaps we can send a message to the Stark youth at least informing him of our intentions."

"Do you think the Starks will care?" said another knight bluntly. "He's a Stark, they're all about honor and keeping your word. And last I checked, we all were forced to give our oaths to the Fire-Sanctified king. That word came out like a curse in his mouth, and he spat to one side making a sign of the Seven Star for a moment.

"I don't think it could hurt anything to look into it." Cockshaw shrugged his shoulders. "Frankly, we're running out of options here. Either we throw aside our oaths to him, or follow a man that all of us believe to be a greater threat than the return of the dragons to Westeros." He let the silence of that statement linger for a moment before speaking again. "And with that my Lords I think we should break up before anyone notices us missing."

As they all did, he smiled thinly. Varys would be happy with that, and anything that weakened any of the players as the Targaryens at last showed itself once again was all to the good. Pawns after all didn't need to know the real reasons they were being moved around the board.

OOOOOO

Ranma had set a truly blistering pace out from Riverrun, not stopping for more than brief moments to eat or rest regardless of the weather or time of day, continuing to run through the night with the Wolfsworn. The Wolfsworn were able to take it, even Roger and Hathan, who had not trained to march on their own two feet could match the pace on their horses, changing horse every four hours. Though their horses were badly flagging by the time they reached Wayfarer's Rest, three days after they had left Riverrun.

That was a truly incredible pace, even for as small a group as theirs, since that same journey should have taken them a week at best in the autumn weather. Yet the wolfsworn had done it. As for Edric...

Several times during the journey Edric thought his rear and back were going to break, or he was just going to collapse out of the saddle. But he was determined enough to tie himself into the saddle, only undoing it when it came to switch mounts. Often he flagged, but then Arya would come back and slap his leg, and he would find it in himself to keep pushing.

And when they stopped at Wayfarer's Rest for the night, he saw something in the Wolfsworn's eyes that made all his pain worth it: respect. He collapsed into his bed that evening with a wide smile on his face, though when he was woken up early the next day, his body was quick to point out that he was still not quite as tough as he could hope.

That morning the holding force Jon had left behind here began to organize itself for the march into the pass. Mostly mountain men and a force of Hornwood and Grell archers they weren't going to be ready quickly, but that was alright, since the Wolfsworn would soon be heading up into the mountains, where their pace would slow considerably.

Ranma and the others met up with a local guide, who showed them a small trail that led from the main pass up into the mountains. He was a local man who had aided the Brother's Without Borders in the same way. It was obvious he had felt the sting of the sellswords depredations in some way, but Ranma and the others didn't push him for details.

The man explained the nature of the mountains to them as they went. "Ya can get small forces through the mountain passes milord, that's why da damn mercs were able to keep ahead of us, and why's bandits settin' up here worried the nobles so much. But, yer can't get no large force through 'em. Horses'll have trouble on most o' these trails, and that'll have been made worst by da rains."

"Most of the trails'll be unusable by now, but there're a few that c'n get us close ta da Golden Tooth. Though, I'sstill don't know what ye're going to do melord."

It had rained on the group once since leaving Riverrun, but that rain had lasted for a day and a half, and Arya and Eddric in particular looked like wet rats after it had passed. Now however Ranma merely shrugged. "You'll see."

Even with a local guide it took six long, slogging days for them to find away through the mountains that led above the Golden Tooth, and from there it took another day before Ranma found what he wanted: an outcropping of rock that jutted out from the mountain directly over the Golden Tooth, far below them. From here they could make out men here and there marching around on top of the keep's parapet, but they looked about a quarter of their real size.

Ranma had no idea what they had heard by now, but he hoped that the news of the disaster that had befallen the Westerlands army hadn't reached here. If it hadn't, surprise would do the rest. If it had, this fight would become much more difficult.

"So what is our plan?" Smalljon asked, while next to him Jon looked on askance as Ranma pulled off a large and very heavy pack he had been carrying since they left Riverrun. "I agree with the local, it won't be possible to get a large force around the Golden Tooth at this time of year, not before they learn we're coming anyway. And from what we can see, that wouldn't really help us much. We'd still have to besiege the place."

The Golden Tooth was not a large castle, in fact it wasn't technically a castle at all, the definition of that being an inner keep surrounded by an outer wall with the keep either integrated into the wall or separate from and surrounded by it. Instead the Golden Tooth was a keep, designed simply as a wall built across the pass between the Riverlands and the Westerlands at this point, which was one of the narrowest points in the pass.

This spot had been chosen because it was also close to the nearby gold mines which were the key to both to the Lannisters and Leffords power. Without those mines House Lannister would never have had the deep pockets it did, and the Leffords would not be as important a family as they were.

The walls of the castle were incredibly thick on every side, about twice the width of most castles, and the keep's main gates continued straight through the entire keep, but only had a single entrance to the rest of the keep. The tunnel had dozens of murder holes, and several dozen portcullises that could drop into place all along its length. The solid keep's roof had heavy parapets, along with five catapults and four scorpions that they could see from where they were. Taking it would be incredibly costly in any normal fashion.

"You're still thinking like a regular general Smalljon, not a Wolfsworn. Always try to think outside the normal methods of attack, if you can see what I mean." Ranma pulled out long lengths of rope and held them up. "We can't afford to simply wait them out, so we're going to attack them from a direction they aren't expecting, above."

Jon looked at the ropes then down to the distant Golden Tooth then up at Ranma again. "You must be joking." When Ranma didn't smile, Jon groaned aloud, while Eddric and Arya both looked over the sides of the cliff face then at the other Wolfsworn. Only Arya looked anything but incredulous, while above them the sky opened up and it began to pour.

It was pushing past midnight when Ranma began his dissent along the rope, yet it was still raining. He went down hand over hand silently as he stared down below through the heavy downpour, making certain that none of the few watchers still moving around the keep's top could see him. They hadn't made the mistake of having too many braziers around that would ruin their night vision, but none of them looked up either thanks to the rain. That was probably the best he was going to get.

He took a moment to stare down the pass towards the Riverlands, knowing that the mountain clan warriors from Wayfarer's Rest were waiting nearby, just out of sight of the Tooth. Fenris and Nymeria had hunted through the passes, making certain that the Leffords didn't have any watchers out, and finding surprisingly none. *Complacency is the downfall of many a castle.* Ranma thought now, rather coldly amused.

Alongside him Arya also rappelled down easily, grinning widely through the rain at her brother. This plan was so **Ranma** it wasn't even funny, so crazy and out there no one else would ever have thought of it, and she loved it!

Soon enough the two Starks were about fifteen feet above the heads of the watchers down below. Technically Ranma could've jumped even from the starting point, but none of the other Wolfsworn could have, and he wanted to show them that it was possible rather than simply showcase another impossible skill of his own.

Ranma looked at Arya, holding up one hand barely visible in the night and rain. In fact if lightning hadn't chosen that moment to light up the sky, Arya wouldn't have seen it. More lightning began to strike as the storm around them picked up, but Arya didn't have any concentration to waste on that, instead watching her brother's hands. When that hand ran out of fingers, Ranma let go of the rope with his other hand and legs, dropping the rest of the distance. Arya's eyes widened, then she hurriedly followed suit, restraining the urge to howl with difficulty.

He landed lightly on the stone below, directly behind one of the guards. Reaching out quickly Ranma grabbed the man around the neck with one of his arms, twisting and snapping his neck silently before turning and racing towards another man who had turned gaping at the dark apparition that had suddenly fallen on them. That man opened his mouth to scream and alarm, only for Ranma to throw a knife that caught him directly in the throat ending his scream forever. Another knife found another man in the back of the neck before he could to could turn.

The last two guards fell to Arya, who dropped directly on one, taking him to the ground loudly while Fang flipped out, catching the other man across the stomach. Stabbing downwards she ended the man below her and looked over at Ranma nodding her head. Ranma nodded back, then took one of the braziers, waving it in the air like it was a torch for a moment before setting it down lightly.

Above them Jon groaned, covering his face with both hands. "This will not be fun." he said aloud.

Daryn chuckled looking nervous. "Where's your sense of adventure Jon?"

"Down there on the flat, solid, ground." Jon replied growling angrily.

"Then I think we should go look for it, shouldn't we?" Roger quipped, tying the rope around himself before leaning out over the edge and quickly rappelling down, a silent Hathan beside him. They had to drop the last few feet, but that was easy enough. Hathan also took the trip down easily enough, showing he was closer to fully healed than his nurse had feared.

"I don't want to do this..." Jon groaned, tying the rope around Edric, after watching the fire below move again. He turned, staring into Ghost's eyes, who after a moment turned racing down the trails to get the mountain clans moving.

Dacey shrugged from where she was standing beside him. "I don't particularly want to do is either, but you know they'll need us in there."

"True." Smalljon grumbled, tying the rope around him. He looked over the side blanching a little then shook his head. "If Ranma ever thinks of something like this again I think I'm going to have to try to kill him." With that he and Edric turned then began to rappel downwards, the strongest of the wolfsworn aiding the young boy who had come so far with them.

Twice he had to help Edric when his grip on the rope slipped, and he hung there in midair for a few moments, but with Smalljon's aid he was eventually brought down to the top of the keep. There Arya greeted him, pulling his somewhat taller body against her own as she worked to release him from the rope around his waist. "Have a nice trip?"

Feeling greatly daring after the last few terrifying moments Edric replied by leaning in to kiss Arya on the cheek. "The end of the journey was much better than the rest of it."

Though no one could see in the dark Arya flushed brightly before pushing him away, huffing irritably. Nearby Ranma shook his head with a faint smile as he once again picked up the brazier and waved it through the wind and rain.

Above them, Dacey and Jon looked at one another then sighed and followed.

Jon actually closed his eyes as he began to rappel down the rope, not opening them again until he felt the rope

around his waist go taut. Then he opened them, reaching down to untie himself with a very firm grip on the rope before staring down at the two feet he had to drop to the roof of the keep. With relief he fell to the ground below, kneeling quickly and kissing the stone of the roof, before glaring at his sister siblings. "If either of you think of something like that again, I swear to the old gods I will kill you in your sleep."

"Harsh." Ranma muttered, shrugging his shoulders. "Shall we go my friends?"

With a heavy mace in one hand and a long dirk in the other Ranma led the way over to the steps leading down into the keep. They passed the first two floors down without incident, though but they ran into problems when the door on the third floor opened, and several dozen guards stepped out turning to head up the stairs. They took one look at the approaching Wolfsworn and began to shout "Alarm, alarm! Invaders inside the keep!"

Ranma raced forward, his mace flashing out to catch one man in the center of the chest and flinging his body backwards with a shattered chest plate and ribs before his dirk took another man in the shoulder. his kick brought that man down with a shattered kneecap, allowing Ranma to turn quickly bringing the mace around to smash into his head with bone splattering force.

The last guard however had turned and run, closing the door behind him. Ranma slammed that door the door open with a single blow from his mace, shaking his head angrily as he began to hear the noises of men shouting and women screaming deeper into the keep. "That's torn it! Jon, take Dacey, Daryn and Hathan down, open the gates! Roger, Hathan, Smalljon, Arya and Edric with me."

With Arya by his side Ranma made his way down the corridor on this floor, running into several dozen more guards as they barreled out of their rooms. Ranma had guessed this might be the barracks level since some of the men had been heading up to the roof from this level and that seemed to be correct considering the armymen coming out of nearly every door.

Most of the men facing them weren't armored, having been roused from sleep instantly grabbing up weapons. Many of them hesitated at the sight of the well-armed and very well armored men (and girl) moving towards them.

Arya jumped up, flipping herself in the air to kick off the ceiling of the corridor to land in amongst the men who had gaped up at her in shock only one of them able to raise his blade. Fang batted that blade aside and her free hand chopped out, catching that man across the nose shattering it before she used his head as a springboard, flipping herself around and lashing out with leg, foot and Fang to all sides.

Ranma also leapt forward, crossing the distance between him and the men facing them before they could turn to engage Arya, smashing into them with his mace and Dirk both flashing out slaying where they had. Edric howled behind him the motto of his family, "Thunder in the dark!" Then he raced forward, cutting and hacking at the men in the corridor to guard Arya's back, showing a skill and strength that even Beric would have been surprised by.

Behind them acting Roger and Hathan checked the doorways as they went. This guarded the three attacker's back, and the two of them knocked out or killed several guards who had apparently been given separate quarters. The female maids screaming their heads off gave the clue as to why. Hathan shook his head, "Don't worry!" he shouted trying to reassure them over the clangor of battle. "No harm shall come to you." He was not believed.

Hathán had Roger exchanged a glance after the first one, conveying the fact that they might well have just killed someone's husband, which was always a possibility of course, but hadn't yet been so bluntly shown to them before this. Yet there was nothing they could do about it now.

Arya and Ranma however had found the two barracks rooms on this level and were now each standing in the doorway holding them against the men inside. More than one man saw Ranma standing there in the doorways and quailed, not picking up their weapons instead layingback on their bunks with their hands visible on their chests.

However Arya did not get that response and several men came at her quickly, misjudging her dangerousness because of her size and apparent age. Those men died, and the ease with which Arya dispatched them convinced some of the others not to fight. By which time Edric had joined her in the doorway, the two of them able to fit in it easily.

Despite half of them choosing self-preservation however, the rest of the men in the barracks charged the people who had somehow made it to their barracks. For a few moments it was all Ranma, Arya, and Edric could do to hold the doors until Roger and Hathan could come up and help them. With the Five of them holding the two doorways on either side of the corridor the many inside couldn't get out and couldn't use their numbers to good effect.

Down below Jon and his group ran into their own difficulties. Thankfully since it was the middle of the night most of the servants were still in bed, and like servants everywhere when they heard the sound of battle they stayed put rather than running around until they figured out what was going on.

But they ran into problem the first floor. Here, forty-five men were stationed to guard the gate room. Worse, these men had had time to pull on armor before Jon and his group hit them. They tried to barricade the doors, but that failed when Dacey and Smalljon began to hack at it with their greatswords.

Dacey hissed as her shoulder took a hit from someone thrusting a spear through a rip in the door she had just made. The spear point smashed into her shoulder, then another hit caught her in the helmet, making her head ring for a moment. But the two of them had done their job, hacking the doorway into pieces, and now she fell back, letting the others go past her.

Jon raced in howling "Winter is coming!" His twin swords flashed, blocking five swords from finding his chest and head, then he pushing back at their owners, clearing the doorway for the others behind him. One leg lashed out, catching a man in the calf sending him falling to the ground with a scream of pain, while his blades flashed, battering and blocking.

Smalljon and Daryn hastened in after him, engaging the man all around Jon quickly. This allowed him to concentrate on three of them, hacking two down quickly before dueling with the final one as dozens more of them came up from behind, pushing in but mostly getting in one another's way thanks to the close confines of the gate room.

Dacey dropped her great sword, pulling out a small dirk and raced in after the others. The fighting in the gatehouse was close and heavy, where Jon's short swords proved deadly to the men facing them with longswords or worse spears. And the training, speed and toughness of the Wolfsworn saw them through.

The final man went down, and Jon gestured at Smalljon to the portcullis' wheel. "Get that open." he ordered. With that he opened the small door that was the only entrance to the actual keep from the pass between the two massive doors that led through the passage.

OOOOOO

Brynden and Beric had pushed their men hard to catch up with the Wolfsworn, leaving several dozen men behind who couldn't keep up with the pace even on horseback. Their horses had been added to the rest, allowing more remounts and allowing them to keep up a decent pace though they never came close to catching up with Ranma and the others.

At Wayfarer's Rest, the force split. Beric was left there with the majority of the men, while Brynden marched on with seven hundred men of House Tully, archers and infantry. Several days later, they met up with the mountain clansmen just out of sight of the Golden Tooth.

Being told what was being planned by the mountain clan's leader, who Ranma had told his plans too, Brynden shook his head amused. "Audacity has a new name, and it is Stark." He quipped. "Who would have ever thought that?"

Muldan laughed. "The Starks always fall on their enemies, this one just be going about it differently."

The mountain clansmen had sent forward several scouts to keep an eye on the keep in the dark, hidden it only as they could be from anyone looking for invaders from the wall. It was several hours past midnight when one of them came back to report. "The guards be gone, I think we best be moving."

By the time the doors were actually opened, Brynden and the rest of the attackers were almost to the doorway, and feeling very nervous about things. When it opened Brynden breathed a sigh of relief, and led the charge inside.

OOOOOO

Ranma stared out over the battlements, his hands methodically cleaning the dirk he had used in this battle, while next to him Fenris lay, irritated that he and his sibling had not taken part in the battle. The Golden Tooth was theirs, and the Riverlands were at last secure from further incursion from the Westerlands.

Fenris moved next to him then huffed as Nymeria lay her head down on his flank. Ranma turned to look at Arya, Brynden and Eddric, who were leading a somewhat richly dressed youngish woman towards where he sat on the edge of the parapets. She was a striking rather than beautiful woman, with sharp black eyes that spoke of intelligence, a nose that looked somewhat like Jason or Patrek's, long black hair hanging loosely down her back, and a frown on her face.

"Lady Alysanne." Ranma said, nodding her head. Alysanne Lefford was the only child of Lord Lefford, who had died in the campaign in the Riverlands. She had ordered her men to surrender the moment she realized that her keep's gateway had fallen, saving a lot of bloodshed. "I suppose it's obvious by this point, but I'm afraid you are now our prisoner. And regardless of anything else, your keep will be held in House Tully hands from here on, joining the Riverlands rather than remaining part of the Westerlands.

"Since you not only took my castle but apparently killed my old man I have no issue with that." Alysanne replied bluntly. She sneered a little at the mention of her father. "Let's just say he and I did not get along, and considering how disastrous being loyal to House Lannister has apparently proven, I have no issue with my House joining that of the Riverlands."

"There's a story there. Care to share it?" Ranma said cocking his head to one side, not commenting on her assumption that her house would remain intact. Her clear thinking had saved dozens of lives on both sides, and she obviously hadn't agreed with her father's decision to back House Lannister in this war. That could mean she might just be too good an asset to simply set aside.

"Well, I've always fancied knives for one thing, and horseback riding, never was really a proper lady as he saw it. He also was holding back my hand in marriage until Daven Lannister suddenly realized he needed a wife." She scowled angrily. "Several young men have come seeking my hand, and even a few I would have been happy to marry, but none of them matched my father's standards."

But she wasn't looking at Ranma, instead she was looking at Arya. No, not Arya, Brynden. Ranma noticed that Brynden was looking at the young lady with some interest, and the girl was actually responding looking at him equally interestedly, and Ranma suddenly had to hide a smile as a thought occurred to him. *It might not be a love match*, he thought to himself, *but I don't think either of them are going to be unhappy with that idea.*

Over the next few days Ranma and the others consolidated their control of the Golden Tooth, as well as emptying the keep of half its coffers. Several dozen pack mules worth of gold were taken, and began to make their way back to the Riverlands under guard.

While it was quicker than he would have liked, Ranma ordered Brynden and the lady to marry within a few days of the conquest of the keep. This served two major needs, tying the Golden Tooth and the House to the Riverlands in as certain a way as possible. And it settled down the locals' fears that the Riverlanders would force them all out and install another family in House Lefford's place. Despite what anyone had thought, House Lefford was looked on favorably by the locals, and doing so would have had major repercussions.

The septon of the keep at first refused to marry them, saying that marrying a woman under duress like that was wrong. However the lady herself took the man aside, and after a few minutes had convinced him that she was not exactly against this marriage. In fact over the past few days she and Brynden had been seen walking the keep together, laughing quietly to one another.

This had an effect on the armsmen they had taken prisoner, and every one of them had given their parole and was released. After that they began to head out with parties of House Tully. The workers of the local gold mines, the mines that had made House Lannister the danger it was, saw this and actually aided the patrols in bringing up even more gold, which was quickly shipped off back to the Golden Tooth. There it would be smelted into coins before sent under heavy guard back to Riverrun.

When Ranma asked if he was in love with Alysanne, Brynden shrugged. "Not yet, but I can see it happening easily enough. She's quite intelligent, well read, and outgoing, all of the things I like in a woman. She actually reminds me somewhat of Tyene Sand, though much more innocent in matters of the flesh. One of those that have quite a lot of anecdotal information but no actual experience." He smirked a little. "I look forward to correcting that disparity."

Ranma laughed, and left it at that.

Leaving Brynden the mountain clan forces along with the men of House Tully that had made the journey to the Golden Tooth, Ranma and the rest of the Wolfsworn left the Golden Tooth after lunch the next day. This was caused by Ranma needing to send the messages out via raven, and the rest needing a break. Thankfully thanks to its strategic position, House Lefford had ravens trained to all the houses he and Daenerys wanted to send messages to, not just Casterly Rock.

Ranma hoped that the diplomatic moves he and Daenerys had thought up would keep that land from attempting to make war against them again. In the long term the Lannisters might have to be dealt with further, but for now Ranma

could turn his attention to the two Baratheon brothers, or whoever won the contest between them at any rate.

With the messages sent winging their way out through the Westerlands Ranma led the Wolfsworn back down the pass to Wayfarer's Rest, where they met up with Beric and his men. From there the combined force moved down to the Mummer's Ford, crossing it quickly. Though not as quickly as they had been moving which was Edric, Hathan and Roger were extremely thankful for.

Beric and his forces numbered around 2,000 men made up from Houses Tully, Grell and Paege added to the Brothers Without Borders, and they picked up another seven hundred from House Piper. Their force would grow further when they joined up with the force that had marched overland from Raventree Hall to interdict House Keath, another 580 man.

This, and the anti-bandit force under Ser Blanetree still left Ranma the better part of 20,000 men, with a force of 6000 stationed around Harrentown and the rest up by Harroway. As he moved along at the front of the column Ranma chuckled evilly as he contemplated the numbers especially in relation to the force the North had started with.

Disease thanks to Merry and his own knowledge had not been an issue at all, something which would have amazed any other army in the history of this planet. And in battle, the northern forces had taken around 4,800 losses in the campaign against the Westerners.

The additions they had since gained since destroying the Westerlands army more than made up for it before House Tully, Wayn, Dary and the others joined (or were forced to join) them. Even better the pike regiments were almost entirely intact, their losses made good by the pikemen of House Manderly.

However such thoughts couldn't stay in his mind. Now marching through the Riverlands with nothing to really concentrate on Ranma's mind went back to the warning he had gotten back first in Raventree Hall, then again in the godwood in Riverrun. That the Old Gods needed to speak to him, but couldn't use a single weirwood tree to do it was worrisome. It meant they had something big they wanted to impart to them, and he badly needed to make time to head to the Isle of Faces to hear it. *Need to make time to do that on my run up to Harroway I suppose, or after.*

Five days of hard marching from Mummer's Ford brought them close enough to House Keath land that they began to see scouts from the force sent down here from Raventree Hall. They were quickly informed that the force that kept out of sight of House Keath, not wanting to warn the holdfast that it would be under attack soon.

"Excellent Job!" Ranma said clapping hands with the man that Lord Blackwood had sent down here, a knight sworn to his house by the name of Franklin. He was an older man, but still hale and hearty, and though he was missing one hand having lost it in the Rebellion, there was nothing wrong with his mind. "What is the holdfast like?"

"Small my Lord, decently made but small. It lies almost directly on the head of the Blackwater, you can hear the sound of the falls before you can see the actual keep. It's defenders appear to be very cautious, my men've been forced to dodge several patrols they sent out." He smirked. "Somehow I don't think they'll be anticipating the amount of trouble they're going to get."

"Too true." Jon said shaking his head sadly. "By the old gods why didn't they just bend the knee? With the death of their Lord in battle, and destruction of their forces at Raventree Hall we would have left them alone if they had just sent a representative."

Coming up behind them, Beric shrugged. "There's been a rumor for years that House Keath had economic ties to House Baratheon of King's Landing, and I know that they kept an apartment in the city, Jon. Perhaps their ties to House Lannister went beyond that or what came out in this war already."

"Doesn't matter," Ranma said with a sigh, then looking at the Blackwood knight keenly. "Franklin, did you see what else I hoped might be here?"

"Yes my Lord, they'd built several barges, in fact work is still going on them for some reason."

"Excellent, that will make your trip shorter Jon."

Jon frowned. They had talked about this several times already, but he still didn't like the idea of being sent further south. Still, he had to admit it somewhat made sense. "If I have to deal with the Viper, will there be any limitations on what I do? I don't want politics to decide what I can and can't do to him."

"No torture but other than that you'll have leave to do with him and his army as you see fit." Ranma said with a nod. "I think that the Dornish have shown themselves to have no understanding of honor or decency in this war. Hell if you

can, I want his army wiped out, not just defeated, but utterly destroyed. If it comes to it, I'll be doing the same to Viserys and any force they sent with him. With those losses, Dorne will have lost any ability to influence the rest of Westeros. And we'll be able to deal with them later whenever we wish."

He leaned forward, whispering his next words. "We can't do anything permanent about Dorne, it would take too long and you and I both know we've got other enemies we'll need to deal with. Something is telling me that we need to hurry this campaign up and head north again as soon as possible Jon. Whatever you do, do it fast and do it well."

Jon nodded "I will. Now, what about House Keath?"

Ranma smirked. "If they don't know we're here yet, I think we need to take advantage of that."

Later that same night Jon, Ranma, Aria and their direwolves slunk afford, moving across the open ground around House Keath's keep. The forest had been sharply cut back in recent times, allowing the archers on top of the keep a far better line of sight, and there was no natural cover anywhere.

Yet even so they moved as silently and as quickly as possible across the open land, pausing occasionally when they saw one of the silhouettes on top of the keep turning in their direction. There were a few braziers up there, set behind the palisade on the roof of the keep, so as to not take away any of the watchers night visions. But there weren't enough of them to cover all of the area around the keep constantly.

Soon the trio of humans were close by the outer gate of the keep, which was a heavy iron portcullis backed by another heavy gate of wood. At night of course both were closed, but that didn't matter to their current mission.

While her brothers went to work below Arya climbed up the gate, tying several large wineskins to it, though only a few of them actually contained wine. Most of them contained flour, very recently shaken flour dust. Following Ranma's instructions Arya shook several of them as she was hanging them. Ranma had simply said that they were more important than the wineskins to their plan, but she didn't understand why.

Jon and Ranma did the same, tying their own wineskins into place then moving along the wall quickly while Arya jumped down from below landing silently in the grass. She moved up to her older brother whispering. "Are you sure this is going to work? Why flour?"

"Not flour." Ranma said smiling thinly. "Flower dust in the air of the wineskins."

With that he pulled a short bow he had grabbed from one of his men off his back, motioning to Jon who handed him a fire arrow. The three of them waited until the sounds of the guards on duty above them seems to reseed, then Arya lit the arrow from a piece of flint and tender that she had kept with her. She and Jon leaned against the wall as Ranma raced forward a little bit away from it.

Someone up on the top of the keep was awake, and shouted "Light there!"

But it was too late. Ranma pulled back his bow, letting fly at one of the wineskins that he could see hanging from the portcullis.

"KRAKOOM!" There was a tremendous boom as the fire arrow penetrated the wineskins he had aimed for, which was one of the ones with powdered flour dust in it. The explosion was massive, and it was an explosion not just a sudden conflagration. It ripped the wooden gate into pieces, sending those pieces further into the keep while it smashed the metal of the portcullis as well, though it didn't actually knock it out of its runs entirely.

While screams and cries abounded Ranma saw that and cursed, nodding to Jon. "Grapnels, now!"

Jon raced forward with Ranma and the two of them stood in front of the gate while the keep guards were roused rushing to their stations. Arrows began to land around them but Arya stood in front of them, blocking the ones she could see in the night with a shield while her two brothers through grapnels into the portcullis. Waiting until they clanged into place the two of them then began to heave.

Elsewhere Smalljon, Roger and Hathan all looked at one another. "I think that was the signal don't you?" Roger quipped.

Hathan grunted in response, couching his lands and moving forward, shouting his new war cry. He hadn't yet decided what the words of his new family should be just yet. "Shieldarm, Shieldarm for the king!"

All around them there was the bellow of the rest of the army units around here. "For the king!" Then the men of the



North and the Riverlands charged towards house Keath through the night breaking out into the open area around the keep quickly.

Jon and Ranma heard them coming and redoubled their efforts, Ranma gripping the rope and heaved so hard that the portcullis came screeching out of its runs in the stone of the gate, skittering across the ground towards them. The rushing Northern and Riverlands men raced past them, slamming into the keep.

An hour later the battle was over. The Lord of the House, a sallow faced youth who reminded Ranma strongly of Joffrey in everything but looks, had died in the battle. His mother was captured, while most of remaining armymen of the house killed in the battle were executed after.

Ranma was grim as he ordered that staring hard into the woman's eyes. "You had a choice, you could've bent to the knee to me, and I would not have asked anything of your House given its losses already. Instead you didn't send a single messenger when called to Riverrun, defying not only me but my grandfather, who was your Lord Paramount at the time. That's treason lady, and your house will answer for it."

That very evening the lady of the House was sent to the Stony Sept, which had a small septa of the Silent Sisters, who would take her in. The House would be turned over to Franklin for now, which might be made permanent in the future. "After all," Ranma said the next day to Franklin, who was staring at him in astonishment. "There's a nearby town, and I think that a knight holding that in the name of the crown and another holding this keep would be a good idea.

There was no rest for the army however. The next morning the portion of the army that was heading south began to pack the barges. The barges that had been prepared for the Westerlands Army's arrival was barely enough to contain the men being sent to the South, but it was enough.

Ranma left that aspect in Jon and Beric's hand, while he personally questioned some of the servants, as well as a few of the smallfolk in the area as to rumors about what was going on further south in particular along the Westerlands border, and at King's Landing.

In this manner he learned that Stannis had won the battle at King's Landing and that something had happened in King's Landing, though the locals didn't know what. The last servant was walking away from where Ranma was standing by the Blackwater's edge when Arya walked up to them. "I'm going south too." She said bluntly.

Ranma looked at her in shock. "Um, what? I'd thought you'd want to stay with us and see what you could do against some of the Shadow Warriors we're bound to face. What brought this on?"

Arya blushed, looking away from him for a moment and Ranma followed her gaze. Nearby Eddard was helping some of the horses onto a few of the barges while bellowing orders to a few of the other men in a voice that a young boy of his age should never been able to use. Ranma had to admit that the boy's experiences meant he was no boy really, even if in comparison to the Wolfsworn he still had a long way to go.

"I see." He laughed. "You're going along to, what, protect your investment? Should I send a raven to our mother?"

Arya smacked him on the arm blushing hotly but not actually saying anything.

"I suppose you can go along, so long as you promise not to make me an uncle anytime soon." Ranma laughed again, enfolding Arya in a brief hug before moving out of punching range quickly.

Seeing his sister's expression he raced off, with her chasing him angrily, Nymeria joining in the chase quickly while the army looked on a bit bemused at the play of the royal house. "I'll, I'll uncle you, you, you cowardly wolf, you lizard lover, you rarrg!"

Nonetheless later that same day while the sky once again opened up above them Beric, Jon, Arya Eddard and their men began to move down the Blackwater. Ranma stared after them for a moment, before turning to the remaining Wolfsworn and smiled thinly. "Let us run my brothers." He said, deliberately using the same words he'd used back at Riverrun.

They all groaned aloud but even Hathan and Roger simply nodded, turning their horses and leading their re-mounts through the rain while Ranma sped off with Fenris beside him.

OOOOOO

At the same time that Ranma was leading the assault on the Golden Tooth, Daenerys was leading the remainder of

the army east along the River Road back towards Harroway to join the rest of it. It was an uneventful journey, despite the fact that every evening as the army set up camp Daenerys began to train her two dragons in carrying her. It was a slow process, but both of them were taking to it as well as could be expected though in very different ways.

Rhaegon could easily bear her weight for longer than Sunfyre, and the one day she decided to test his endurance he had been able to fly the entire day following the army with Daenerys on his back. But he wasn't quick to pick up the verbal commands, or what her shifting her body could mean. Sunfyre didn't have his brother's size and endurance, but picked up everything else far quicker.

"It's a tossup." Daenerys said to Myrcella one evening as the two of them lay in the cot they shared in their tent. With Ranna not there, neither woman felt comfortable with doing anything other than sharing a few occasional kisses. Myrcella wanted her first time going further than that to be with Ranna even if Daenerys was there watching or participating which Daenerys fully understood.

Cuddling however was something both girls enjoyed. "I think that Rhaegon would be ready to carry me into battle faster, but I don't know if I would trust him in battle as much as I would Sunfyre. Whereas Sunfyre will take longer to actually build up the endurance to carry me for long periods of time, but I think the two of us would work better in battle."

"I think that Rhaegon can look after himself with only a few mental commands." Myrcella said thoughtfully so used to the warging ability of the Northerners and Queen that she didn't even bat an eyebrow at it these days. "Sunfyre doesn't seem to have as much as an aggressive streak however."

"True." Daenerys replied with a nod. "Still I want them both trained to the saddle and to a rider. The best mental commands can't really substitute for a rider in the saddle. As fast as I can think, I can't react to something I see on the ground as fast as I would if I saw it from the saddle, you see."

Myrcella nodded, but didn't have any other advice to give.

Later the next day they came within sight of Harroway, or rather the army camp that was built around the town in various clumps. Their arrival was greeted by several horn blows and Greatjon and Rickard coming forward to meet her. "Your Majesty." Rickard bowed formally, while Greatjon moved over to envelop the short girl in a hug, purposefully getting both her and Myrcella in his arms where then sat in their saddle.

"My Lords." Daenerys were replied as Greatjon released them, smirking up into his face for moment and pushing him back slightly. "Anything to report?"

"A lot actually." Rickard said smiling thinly. "First, Lord Mooton and Lord Butterwell have passed through, heading back to their town and castle saying they'll meet us here after they raise the rest of their men." He sneered, showing his contempt for both men. "Frankly I think that's the last we'll see of them until after the war is over. There also seems to be a small force or two small forces moving down in the Crownlands near the border. We sent scouts that way to see what was going on but they haven't reported back yet."

"Jason sent word that he arrived at Harrenhal, and the portion of the army there is ready for battle." Greatjon said, moving his horse alongside the queen's on the other side from Rickard as they moved through the camp towards the town. He frowned then, shaking his head and pulling at his beard. There is some news from further south that have all the merchants in the town in a twitter, Domic's trying to verify it along with Alayaya right now. It just arrived with the latest merchants from further south, so I don't know what it is yet."

"That doesn't sound good." Daenerys thought to herself shaking her head. "Still, we should know what's going on regardless of whether it's good news or not."

"There's also a group of Seven worshipers here to see you, your Majesty." Rickard said scowling a little. He had no truck with the soft southern religion, finding it too easy to corrupt, and frankly too limited for his tastes. The Old Gods, for all the harshness of the North, seemed more compassionate than the Seven, yet also harsher and harder when he came to things like oaths. If the Seven worshippers believed in oaths and honor as much as the Northerners, none of them would've had to come south in the first place.

"Are they led by an old man who looks as if he was hewn out of a tree?" Daenerys asked thoughtfully.

"Aye," said Greatjon nodding his head. "I'll tell you plain, I don't like much of the Seven, all that stupidity of worshipping in a man-made place, and the idea of the Seven itself always makes me laugh. Yet that man, he's **hard**. He could've come from the North hard as he is."

*From Greatjon that was a great complement, Daenerys thought amused. "I'll meet with them in Harroway's keep. Before that though, give Jaryd Waterman enough horses and men to see him to Crackclaw Point. Ranma and I have a message that he is going to deliver to the houses there for us."*

"You expect them to offer any aid?" said Rickard doubtfully. "Those houses aren't very strong, are they?"

"No, but supplies, food, weapons and arrows would be a help. Besides, in comparison to the rest of the Crownlands, those houses weren't as badly hammered in the Rebellion despite being loyal to my house to the last. Their combined strength might add around 3000 man to our forces which is nothing to be sneezed at."

"Speaking of supplies," Rickard said changing the subject. "Supplies have arrived from further north, more weapons, carts pieces for repairing armor, and something from Seagard as well: three shipments of those odd spears that Ranma ordered from the smiths there. I tried a few, and it took me a while to figure out what he intended with them." He smirked evilly. "Those are going to come as a big surprise to any infantry or cavalry force that runs into them."

"I'll take your word for it my Lord, since off the top of my head I can't remember anything about them." Daenerys replied with a shrug. "Tell me about the other supplies here, will the army be ready to march, and how is morale? Oh, and before I forget have the local fishermen prepare enough crabs for my little ones. Both of them have been looking forward to those ever since they realized we were coming back here."

OOOOOO

Later that day, Ser Barristan frowned heavily as he stared at the seven septons in front of him. One of them was carrying what was undoubtedly a sword under some kind of cloth. "Your highness stay back." he said coldly, moving forward and loosening his sword in its sheath.

"My knight, I doubt that this is an assassination attempt." Daenerys smiled, affectionately laying a hand on his shoulder. "Nor do I think that the Faithful have any reason to do so to me. Is not that correct Septon Sparrow?"

Septon Sparrow smiled slightly, bowing at his head deeply to Queen. "That is indeed correct your Majesty. It has been decided through debate among the septons of the Seven that given some of the signs and portents that we have seen your own actions and the actions of your husband the King, it is the duty of every right thinking Faithful to proclaim you and Ranma King and Queen of Westeros."

The words were simple the impact behind them was not. Even the Northerners behind Daenerys gaped at that, while Lord Ryger and the other Seven worshipers among the Riverlords gaped in astonishment. Such an endorsement at such a time as this was a massive boon for the legitimacy of Ranma and Daenerys's campaign further on.

It wouldn't matter so much to the military side of things. But after they won those battles they would have a much easier time convincing the smallfolk and the various lords who had not taken part in the war of their legitimacy.

"These brothers with me all represent different orders among the Faithful my lady, and we have come to bow to you. You may consider us the new Council of the Most Devout. For all intents and purposes King's Landing it is no longer a part of the equation, and the High Septon is not as well."

Daenerys leaned back in the chair she was sitting in, tapping her fingers together thoughtfully for a moment in her lap. "And who might I ask will be elected to be the new High Septon?"

Now the seven men in front of her exchanged glances. "We do not know as yet your Majesty." Said one of them stepping forward and bowing deeper than Septon Sparrow had. "To be perfectly blunt, the position of High Septon seems to carry with it an odor of corruption regardless of the purity of the man's faith who takes the office. We are in the process of trying to come up with another method of internal organization. Various signs have pointed to the need of this of late."

"Signs? You mean miracles don't you? There are certain rumors about the 'Stand of the Rose at Oldflowers' that piqued my interest." Daenerys asked.

The seven men in front of her looked at one another then nodded as one and Sparrow spoke again. "Such as that, yes. Miracles are occurring in groups of seven to aid the Faithful down in the Reach, not just the Lady Margaery but elsewhere. Though we only have confirmed a few such miracles. Other signs are more worrisome. Some of our brothers have fallen ill, ranting and raving about winter, winter not as a season, but as something stalking the land, rising in the far... north..."

He trailed off as Daenerys swiftly turned to the Northerners and Tytos the only Riverlords there who had been

informed of what might be occurring beyond the Wall. Jason had learned of it long since, but he wasn't there. They all looked back at her in but it was Greatjon who spoke up. "If the Seven have begun to warn their worshippers about it my lady, we should take it seriously."

"My husband had already declared that he wouldn't want to spend more than four more months dealing with our human enemies my Lord." Daenerys replied gravely. "Even so, we will discuss this when he arrives." She turned back to the seven worshippers who were looking at the Northerners in shocked speculation. "Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"Not tell you my lady, but there is one thing we wish to give you." Said Sparrow gesturing to the man who held a covered blade in his hands. "This is brother Maccabee, leader of the Silent Brothers. He has something of your family that was left in his order's keeping during the Dance of the Dragons."

Daenerys's breath caught in her throat and she leaned forward eagerly as the man stepped forward under Ser Barristan's still watchful gaze, slowly peeling away the cloth covering the sword he held. The blade thus shown was of Valyrian steel, anyone could have told that by the wavy lines in it, but it was the hilt and the shape of the blade that told Daenerys what it was. "Dark Sister!" she said reaching forward and taking the hilt.

The man backed away as she did, and Daenerys stood up, gesturing with her free hand for Ser Barristan to give her some space. Though she hadn't trained with them often, she had trained with the Wolfsworn on and off throughout this war and she was no stranger to a sword. She moved into one of the exercises that Ranma had taught her, the blade whistling in the air as her eyes lit up in delight.

It was several moments before she came back to herself, to the murmured appreciation of the watchers who had never seen her train before this. "A magnificent gift gentle Sers, one I will treasure."

It was also yet another sign of the legitimacy of her own personal claim over her brother's. *Two dragons, Dark Sister, a marriage to a powerful house, the Seven's backing and the Riverlands along with the North behind me. Maybe just maybe with all of that I'll be able to talk my brother out of any stupidity. Or at least his Dornish backers.*

She looked at Sparrow speculatively. "My husband and I have talked about the Grand Council that we wish to put together after the war ends. We want a permanent resident of the Seven on it. Would you recommend someone to fulfill that role Septon Sparrow, and to stay with the army now?" Given the large number of Riverlands men we've recently added, I feel certain that the addition of a septon to our ranks will not go amiss."

Sparrow nodded his head gravely. "We will discuss this a little together your Majesty and one of us will indeed join you. Thank you, having a voice on the actual council of the King will be a major step in the correct direction."

Just then Domic burst in, causing Ser Barristan to whirl towards the doorway, his sword out and ready before Domic got two steps in. "Your highness," he said gasping in air. Then he looked around, only now noticing Daenerys wasn't alone or the blade Barristan held ready in his hand. "Your pardon Lords and ladies, but some news has reached my ears, and I have just confirmed it. Things that we need to know **now** and things that will affect all of Westeros in the future."

"Began with what we need to know now Domic." said Daenerys calmly, gesturing towards Rickard who was sitting nearest a table set with wine. He quickly poured the bard a glass, and watched as he gulped it down quickly. "What is so important that you rush in like this?" With one hand she gestured the septons out of the room, though making a signal for one of them to stay just in case.

The seven older men all looked at one another. Then in some kind of communication Daenerys couldn't follow six of them moved towards the door, leaving one man who hadn't spoken up yet, a thin, middle-aged fellow who looks more like a hunter than a septon, behind.

Domic finished his drink and put the cup down, his hands visibly shaking. "First, I was finally able to find one of our scouts who had spotted the banners of one of the forces moving around down near the Crownlands border. Serret, and House Lannister banners are flying above one of them. For some reason the Serret banner is larger than the one Lannister banner that the scout saw, I don't have any idea why that is, but it doesn't matter really. That force is now making directly towards Harrenhal I think judging by the direction the scout reported them going."

"How many men did the scout report?" Greatjon asked leaned forward intently.

"I don't know my lord, the man can't count, though he says perhaps the size of the men from House Wayn, so a little above or below two thousand."

Daenerys frowned. "Send one of the pike regiments down to join the forces already gathered at Harrentown. With them as aid, that small force won't be able to break through the cordon around the castle, even if those in Harrenhal try to sortie."

"An excellent idea." Rickard said, showing approval for the queen's quick decision in a nod. "I'd send the Regiment from Cerwyn, but who should command it?"

"Timot." Daenerys replied quickly. "He did an excellent job here before Patrek arrived, and with Patrek here his presence is no longer necessary to continue with the Army's resupply. He will serve Jason well down there."

There was a murmur of approval from that from the Northerners, though Lord Ryger looked irritated at his and his sons not having been considered.

"There is something else about the force my lady, the scout I talked to got close enough to see what they were wearing. He saw several men in white enameled armor, and several people who could only have been Lannisters. I think coupled with what else I have to report, that these men are all that remains of the Lannister force from King's Landing. I don't know how they broke out, but I think they made a run for it from the plague and from the cordon."

"Then it makes it all the more important my lords that we set out down south as soon as possible. Send for some messengers, I'll want the army ready to march tomorrow morning early."

Ser Barristan moved towards the door, opening it and bellowing outside for pages to be gathered. Doing so he nearly deafened young Cley who was waiting by the doorway for just that order. He clapped the younger man apologetically on the shoulder, turning back inside as Domicer continued.

The Bard gulped a little, seeming ill at ease with what he was about to say. "My lords and ladies, the other bits and pieces of news that has so agitated the merchants here has also, I have to say been confirmed. Too many mouths are saying the same thing for it to be a lie. Though I desperately wish it was so."

"Just tell us my friend." Daenerys said reaching out and taking one of his hands in hers, squeezing it hard.

Domicer nodded squeezing back. "Your brother has arrived, my lady." Daenerys sat up abruptly, gripping his hand so hard he winced but went on quickly. "House Targaryen banners were seen flying from war galleys that sacked and burned several dozen royal galleys that Stannis had left there crewless. There were also reports that he took Dragonstone, though those are unconfirmed. He hasn't landed yet, but there is no doubt he will within the next month or so."

No one spoke after Domicer finished speaking, everyone else watching Daenerys for her response. She closed her eyes briefly, sighing long and loud before opening them, pinning the bard in place. "That is not all you have to share with us Domicer, spit it out."

Domicer gulped, licking his lips for a moment, not in fear at anyone's response, but perhaps fear of what he had to say. "Your Majesty, King's Landing is, is gone. The Red Witch that Stannis employed, she did something, created this massive fire that could be seen for dozens of leagues around! King's Landing is just, just gone, along with everyone who was still alive within its walls."

For a moment it simply didn't sink in, then Daenerys was on her feet shouting angrily along with all of the others clamoring saying it couldn't be so. Such a disaster in particular deliberately caused was impossible to contemplate!

Yet eventually the shouts ended, and Domicer went on. "All of the merchants who deal with Duskenale are saying it, smallfolk have been flooding into the city from further along the coast claiming to have seen the fire for leagues, green and red soaring high up into the sky. I don't know what the damage to the actual city might've been, but no one could have survived such a conflagration."

He sighed sadly. "That's why Alayaya isn't here. She's sobbing in her quarters, her mother and friends and everyone else she knew are gone."

To one side where she had been standing silently Myrcella began to cry softly. While she wouldn't have minded if Joffrey had died in such a manner, and she was happy to hear that her mother at least might have escaped, she doubted that the tutors she had known, the few friends among the children of courtiers, had been brought along in the breakout. That meant that they were all surely dead, and that **hurt**.

"Why!?" said Tristan his hands clenching and unclenching. "Why would anyone do that?"

Daenerys shook her head. "Plague. Remember my lords, we were told that there was plague in King's Landing. Stannis must not have wanted to devote the time and men to keep it boxed in, and so hit upon this solution. It's disgusting and abhorrent, but it does make a ruthless kind of sense."

She stood up, her grip on Dark Sister's hilt making her knuckles go white. "But it is not an honorable one! If he had kept forces in place, we would not have attacked them, we would in fact have supplied them with food if need be, or aid in defending the cordon! To do this, to do this not because it was the only solution, but because it was the most expedient one! It is yet another affront to all that is good and honorable to lay at Stannis's feet my lords, and his time of recompense is coming!"

OOOOOO

The day after she received Dark Sister, Daenerys and the army began to march south, while messengers went out before them down towards the portion of the army under Jason that was sitting outside Harrenhal. Even with the new forces from the Riverlands with them the army made good enough time that they were encamped around Darry once more that evening.

Of course, Lord Darry offered Daenerys and her lords rooms in his castle. Daenerys told him she would not be accepting that offer since the men of the army outside could not be housed in his castle, and she refused to sleep in a bed when her men could not. He had however asked that she come in and join him for dinner. To that, Daenerys could not say no without giving offense, and so she found herself, with her lords, Merry, and various others.

From his place a seat down from her at the head of the table (a place had been left open signifying her husband's place) Lord Darry looked askance at Dark Sister. It was strapped to Daenerys' side, and had yet to leave her presence since she had taken possession of it. Still he smiled equably, while Domic began to play one of his own ballads in the background from his position near the windows. "Might I ask what has caused the rush South Your Highness? Not bad news I hope?"

"Nothing of that nature my Lord." Daenerys replied smiling thinly at the man while Myrcella reached in quickly and took a bite from her plate grinning at her playfully though there was a serious reason for her antics.

This was after all one of the men who Ranma and she had talked about as not fully trusting. Indeed if Daenerys had been able to she would not have entered his Castle, but the offer of guest rights, and of breaking bread in particular, was something she could not turn down without showing that she distrusted him, which was an insult no lord could stand.

Myrcella had come up with a solution however, volunteering as taster for Daenerys during this meal. The new septon, Etric, was a middle-aged man, who had a surprising amount of knowledge about healing, which might have been why he had been chosen. With his aid and her own growing knowledge, Myrcella had dosed herself with several cure-all's against most poisons, so even if there was something in the meal Myrcella might be fine.

Subtly Myrcella nodded her head, indicating the meal was wasn't poisoned. In response Daenerys tried hard to keep a sigh of relief from passing her lips. Myrcella's courage had made Daenerys love her all the more, because she knew whether Myrcella did or not that sometimes the cure-all's didn't block everything. Even so, watching Merry take on that danger without making any overt sign had been one of the most nerve-wracking things she had ever done.

With that Daenerys began to eat, telling Lord Darry what they had learned, and their hopes for the upcoming battle.

Through it all he nodded his head, and as the meal went on he acted the perfect host with one subtle exception. He seemed a little irritated that none of his guests touched the wine. Even Greatjon, known as a heavy drinker, was staying away from the wine, having brought his own keg of ale to share with Tytos and Rickard, while Daenerys, Myrcella and the others were drinking from prepared camp water, following Daenerys stern injunction about not getting drunk this evening.

Whatever the reason for his irritation, Darry's face and body language was so controlled that only Myrcella, who had been trained by a mistress of the subtle art of social discourse, could see it. After several moments watching him from out of the corner of her eye she caught the flick of his own eyes toward Daenerys' untouched wine cup.

Reaching forward picked up her own wine glass and brought it up to her to sniff as she had seen her mother and father do so often. Then she made as if she was drinking, while staring at the color in the light of the torches set into the wall behind her for a moment. She couldn't tell anything from looking at it, but something in the man's eyes...

Deciding to act on her misgivings Merry subtly tapped Daenerys side, then when the queen's eyes flickered to her for

a second, tapped the wine glass still in her hand, crossing two fingers to make a brief X. While Daenerys tapped her thigh back making a circle there to indicate she understood, Eddard too had caught it. The septon sipped his wine briefly, then pushed it away.

As the evening went on, Darry kept on glancing at their wine cups, untouched thus far. His eyes flickered, growing cold when they latched onto Cley who stood behind his queen with a pitcher of camp water, almost empty now, then to Bess, who stood further down the table with another pitcher standing behind Tristan. Whatever was going on, his guest's use of camp water and their penchant for ale rather than wine had stymied it. Still, Merry and Daenerys were becoming more uneasy as the meal went on.

Finally the meal was finished, and Daenerys was about to make her excuses and leave when Lord Darry stood up. "May I propose a toast then? To your success your highness! May our enemies feel your fire!"

Daenerys actually winced a little which was not unnoticed by anyone. She was **not** her dragons, outside of their mental link, she got no pleasure from burning people, and indeed was scared of what she would feel the first time she had to use for dragons to their full effect against an army. "I will drink to my success my Lord, though I hope the method does not match the rest of your statement." she said, reaching for her water glass.

"It is customary to drink a toast with wine my lady, or is there something wrong with my cellars that you would shame me so?" Said Lord Darry coldly.

"There might not be aught wrong with your cellars, but there is something wrong with the wine." said the septon coldly getting up as well. "Do you take us for fools?"

At his tone Ser Barristan moved from his place by the doorway, his sword singing out of its sheath while next to him Gregor did the same. Rickard and Greatjon, who had been sitting together at the far end of the table rose to their feet, their own hands going to their weapons. Lord Darry had not been happy when Daenerys insisted that they could all carry weapons to this meal, saying it showed a sign of distrust, but she had reiterated her point: she had already dealt with one assassination attempt on her life in the Riverlands she was not going to tempt fate again.

"That is a serious accusation." said Lord Darry. "One even you should answer for!" The man blustered, but there was more than anger in his eyes. He rang a bell quickly, and suddenly a dozen men burst through the doorway.

"I wanted to do this the easy way." He said now in a conversational tone as Ser Barristan was forced to turn to engage the men by the door along with Rickard and Greatjon, the Rygers, Tytos and the other loyal lords. Behind the man his own servants moved forward, revealing along with daggers hidden under their robes as he also grabbed up his sword from where it had been hidden under the table. "But I am fully prepared to do it the hard way as well."

Cley dropped the jar of camp water, causing a crash against the stones as he pulled out his sword, while Bess reached forward quickly grabbing up a knife from the table. With that done she hurried to take up position behind him.

Domeric moved forward from where he had been playing beside one wall, his harp dropping to the floor as he wrenched out his sword, moving to stand with his queen as she drew Dark Sister with a surprising, at least to Lord Darry, amount of skill. Behind her Myrcella and Eddard moved back, knowing they didn't have much skill and war craft.

"Why?" said Daenerys coolly, pointing her blade at Lord Darry as more of his men burst in through the doorway, forcing the defenders there back, though paying for it with six dead men in as many moments. "Why? We asked nothing of you, only that you remain loyal and you couldn't do even that? Who bought you my Lord?"

"Your brother. My house is one of many that have long served the true rulers of Westeros, and while you may be a Targaryen, you are a traitor to its true heir! An heir who has promised me rulership of all of my family's original lands including Harroway and deep into House Whent lands as well! Whereas you promised me nothing, and only gave me stern and cold words? Foolish girl! Any Lord will follow the ones who promises him more profit."

"Only lords without honor do that." said Domeric coldly then moved to engage him sword to sword while the servants moved forward, showing themselves not to be servants at all but armymen in the disguise of servants. Yet even so they only had long knives that they had been able to hide under their coats, whereas Cley and Daenerys at least were armed with swords.

Daenerys smashed one knife to splinters with Dark Sister, her back sweep taking another man in the side before she dodged under a blow from another man, bringing Dark Sister up to thrust forward into the man's chest ending his life. At the same time Cley guarded her back killing two others and wounding a third. His skill with the blade wasn't up to Wolfsworn standards, but it was a little bit better than Eddard's when he first met Rhaegar.

It served him in good stead now, though he froze when he looked down at the men he had slain. It was only Bess darting forward to threaten another man with her purloined knife that saved his life in that moment of indecision.

"Cley snap out AHHH!" She went down with a cry, cradling a broken arm from the flat of the man's sword.

"Old gods damn you!" Cley roared, charging forward to engage that man, slaying him in two strokes before pulling Bess behind him again, while all around them the other's continued to cut down the armsmen of Darry.

Daenerys however knew that the numbers were against him no matter how good they were as individuals. Trading blows with four servants she reached inward, shouting down her link to her dragons. *Aid, danger, help!* While her two dragons, which had been hunting several leagues away, turned as one and flew towards the castle, she shouted aloud, "The window, someone hold something outside the window!"

The window in question was actually a murder hole cut into the outer wall of the keep which abutted the back of Darry, but Myrcella understood what she meant. Grabbing the tablecloth she pulled it out causing clanging and ringing sounds to abound as tableware was sent crashing to the floor. "Get me to the window." she ordered Cley.

Cley nodded, cutting another man down who had broken past the battle going on by the door. The man died looking astonished at the boy who had just slain him so quickly.

With the rest of the servants concentrating on Dmeric, Tristan and Daenerys Merry was able to rush to the murder hole. There she stuffed the blanket through and began to shake it while shouting out through it. "A rescue, a rescue!"

Outside the castle a few men whose tents were set up right against the outer wall of the castle looked up at the barely heard shout and saw the fluttering tablecloth. One of them was quite a bit faster on the uptake than most, and he nodded urgently. "Go get Lord Patrek, I think something's going on in there."

Patrek's own tent was situated directly in front of the gate into the castle. The gate itself was open, but Patrek was watching it closely even before someone had run up and told him about your tablecloth in the window. He looked up quickly at the top of the castle, and saw more guards up there than there should be. "Grab as many men as possible, get in there now!" he barked.

With that he grabbed up his own sword and raced out, followed by Eric Proudthenn and seven men nearby who'd heard his shout. Eric had been turned away from the dinner, his face and manners not up to even being a guard for such. The two men raced through the gate at the head of the men and into the gatehouse just as Darry armsmen there were beginning to bring the portcullis down. It fell, but Patrek took command of the gatehouse and soon it had risen again under the power of several of his men.

Outside archers along the wall began to fire out into the army frantically, and dozens of men began to attack Patrek's position in the gatehouse, trying to force their way through the doorway. Yet they could only come at Patrek one at a time there, and Patrek was easily able to best them under those circumstances.

Not a minute after Patrek barked his orders out hundreds of men from the army poured in, and if most of them were unarmored having taken off their armor for the evening, they were all armed, and greatly outnumbered the defenders. And they were utterly furious at this betrayal. "The Queen, the Queen! Save the Queen!"

Six more men joined Patrek in the gatehouse and he nodded at them grimly. "Hold the door, I need to see to the Queen's safety."

Inside the battle had begun to turn against Daenerys and her people. Lord Ryger was down, as was Ser Wode, both men dead. Ser Grell was holding a broken arm, and Tristan had taken a knife thrust to his side which had opened up a nasty gash there. The fact that the Riverlords hadn't come armored was now beginning to tell, and even Silas was forced to fall back leaving only Rickard, Barristan and Greatjon to continue to hold the doorway. All three of them were armored, and it served the men in good stead, though they all had wounds by this point.

Daenerys was wounded as well, a long gash on her forearm that was bleeding badly, but otherwise not slowing her down. She was still dueling with some of the servants, while more and more men were getting around the trio by the doorway.

Bess screamed out "Lord Dmeric, no!"

At those words Daenerys whipped her head around in time to see a guardsmen run Dmeric through his side. As Dmeric turned, his own sword lashing out and catching that man in the leg, Lord Darry brought his own sword around hacking into her friend's chest, sending him falling to the ground.



"No!" she shouted angrily, breaking off her assault on an arms man, kicking the man it hard in the leg putting them off balance enough for a head butt to come crashing into his nose breaking it and sending him backwards in a welter of blood.

Cley pounced on him then Daenerys froze, feeling her dragons arriving outside. With no further orders from her, Rhaegon began to rake the outer wall with fire, slaying dozens of men in his fiery fury, aiming for the men firing at the army which served his queen. He even showed a remarkable understanding of when to stop, pulling back and rising up to aim for the towers and top of the keep when other men began to force their way up onto the wall.

Sunfyre however was circling the keep trying to decide where to attack, and she reached out to his mind. *The fluttering thing, flame through it!*

She felt his response, felt him begin to actually cling to the outside of the keep, heard his intake of breath...  
**"Everyone down!"**

Her words came out with such a tone of command that even the men locked in combat by the doorway obeyed, dropping to their stomachs where they had stood. It was as well they had, because the door into the dining hall was directly across from the murder hole where Merry had pushed the tablecloth through.

A spear of bright fire roared out of the murder hole, searing across the dining hall and immolating a few servants who hadn't been fast enough on the uptake to obey Daenerys's command, along with more than a dozen men by the doorway. Here and there her own men grimaced in pain from the searing heat of the blast, but none of them had been caught in the flames.

Daenerys had remained standing, the flame of the fires not hurting her or Dark Sister where she stood in the center of it, blade having locked with another servant, who died screaming. Her clothes did not survive the flames, but she didn't care. Sending a thanks to Sunfyre and ordering him to start circling the castle took a bare second, while the men out in the corridor began to get their courage back from the sudden fiery assault. Those men knew they had only one chance to live through this, and that was to take the Dragon Queen hostage.

But she ignored that too, racing forward naked to engage Raymun Darry, where he had been out of the flame's range. He had been staring in horror at the mangled, burning wreckage that had been his men, including his son and cousin, but then turned, his eyes lighting up murderously as he saw Daenerys coming for him, racing across the bloody stones of the dining hall.

He met her charge just as furiously, but found himself overmatched in speed if not strength or skill, and Dark Sister flickered here there, everywhere, forcing him back. Raymun then found his back pressed against the wall. He desperately dodged to one side as Daenerys blade sought his face.

Dark Sister made sparks where it clanged against the wall, but Daenerys turned quickly, bringing up a foot kicking Raymun in the stomach before he could bring his sword around. He groaned in agony, losing his grip on the blade, then tried to scramble on the ground for it as Daenerys turned bringing Dark Sister around. "AGHH!" The sword bit deep into his back severing his spine and he screamed like a stuck pig before she wrenched it out then thrust down hard, impaling his head.

Before Daenerys could shout to order the remaining attackers to surrender, there was a sound behind her, a soft "Oh!" of shock.

She whirled, only to stare in horror as Myrcella fell to the ground her hands clutching a knife low down in her side. The man who had killed had been one of very few of the servants in the hall that had headed Daenerys order, and he had begun to sneak up on Daenerys from behind while she went for Raymun and his fellows began to fight with Cley and the others once more.

But Myrcella had seen him, and had thrown herself between the two. She hadn't spent nearly as much time training as even Daenerys had however, and her attempt to defend herself hadn't worked it all. She had lasted for a bare few seconds, allowing Daenerys time to finish Lord Darry off, before the man had run her through.

The man only had a brief second himself to look up as Dark Sister whirled in the air and Daenerys voice rose in a howl of anguish. **"No!"**

The man's head flew off like a shuttlecock, but Dark Sister clanged to the ground out of Daenerys's nervous grip while she instantly went to her knees beside her friend frantically trying to staunch the flow of blood. "Hang on Merry, just

hang on, please!"

Suddenly Ehric was there, smacking her hands aside and ripping off a bit of his own robe, tying it in place as a tourniquet while he examined the wound. "Tis bad, sore bad. I'll need needle, thread, clean wine, anything I can get my hands on!"

Daenerys stared down at Myrcella, her hands moving forward again to try and help to staunch the blood flowing out of Myrcella's stomach, weeping as she saw blood began to appear on those lips she had so loved kissing. "My lady!" said Ehric sharply, reaching forward to slap her cheek gently bringing her out of it. Get me everything get me the maester of the Castle, he'll have what I need!"

For a moment Daenerys looked at him, then, unmindful of her nakedness, she moved forward toward the doorway, where Patrek's voice and others had begun to be heard as the royal army surged through the traitor's castle.

OOOOOO

The death toll of Lord Darry's betrayal was heavy. Tristan would survive, but may never regain the use of one of his arms. The new Lord Wayn had a concussion, but thankfully would survive. Lord Ryger was dead, making Tristan Lord of House Ryger. Tytos was unwounded, but his heir Brynden had taken a blow to the side and would be laid up for weeks, and Lucas had a gash on his face that ruined his good looks. All the other lords had various nicks and wounds, and Greatjon had lost one of his ears. Grege, Merry's gentle giant of a guard, had lost his arm from the shoulder down, but would live.

Domeric was dead, and Myrcella was still being seen to by the maester of the Hall later that night. Daenerys waited outside his door, slumped against the wall of the corridor while Greatjon, at her orders, saw to the death or capture of the rest of the armymen in the castle. If they attempted to continue to fight they were slain instantly. If not, they would be sent to the Wall to take the black in recompense for their aiding their lord in this bit of treason. Darry had already lost his sons and nephew, his only family, because of his treason.

"My lady," said a soft voice and she stared up at Alayaya. Alayaya had not been invited to dinner, which she had been amused about at the time, saying she could've gone as one of the men's lady for the evening, but Daenerys had decided against it. But Alayaya was now staring down at Daenerys worriedly, noting that her queen hadn't dressed again, simply covering herself with a cloak so great was her worry for Merry. "Are you well?"

She went to one knee beside her friend, and then Daenerys flung her arms around the other woman. She began to sob brokenly, not just for the wounds Merry had taken, but for Domeric's death. He had meant so much to her, been the one who truly helped Daenerys gain her freedom, had helped teach her and guide her. They had been planning to name him Lord of Stone Hedge after the war or anything else he wanted. Now he was gone, and the world was suddenly a darker place.

Several hours later Daenerys had regained control herself, but had not moved from that position. With Ser Barristan looming like a grim shadow in blood streaked white armor nearby she stood up when the door to the healing room opened. The maester of the Castle stepped out shaking his head. "It's bad, sore bad. If not for the septon getting there so quickly, we would've already lost her."

"Will she pull through?" Daenerys asked sharply.

The maester hesitated. "I don't know my lady, were doing all he can but..."

Daenerys held up a hand interrupting the man. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear here maester." She said coldly. "Your Lord tried to betray me, your queen. Even if you don't wish to acknowledge that, I am the wife of the new Lord Paramount of the Riverlands. This was treason however you cut it, and he had **poison in his wine!** Where do you think he would come up with that?"

She watched as the maester paled. "Now, my friend will live. If she does not, you will not. I will have you executed as a traitor do you understand me?"

The maester nodded his head then turned and entered the room again. Daenerys slumped against the wall, then turned to Ser Barristan and Alayaya. "Come, I need to see to my little ones, I imagine they are quite anxious."

They certainly were. Indeed none of the men of the army was willing to get near them where they had landed in the castle's courtyard. Only Alayaya's words stopped her from stepping out of the keep still with only a cloak covering her. While the Summer Island girl dressed her, Daenerys concentrated on sending feelings of wellbeing and happiness to

her dragons. It worked, and by the time Daenerys actually stood before them, both dragons had calmed down significantly.

Yet even while she tended to them, touching them and scratching their scales to reassure them of her survival her mind was elsewhere. Inside Daenerys prayed, prayed in a way she had never done before not even when times were hardest for her, prayed as deeply and as powerfully as she could to any god that was listening for her friend's survival.

OOOOOO

Ranma and the Wolfsworn had met up with Meera and her scouts several leagues distant from the Army further south, hearing the news from them. Not all the news, since news of Lord Darry's betrayal hadn't spread that far, but the fact that the army was on the march down south to capture the Lannisters. As such Ranma left the rest of the Wolfsworn there, racing ahead with Fenris beside him, moving far faster than any of the others could go on horseback. He wanted time to talk to his wife before that battle, and maybe to spend time with her and Myrcella.

Those thoughts left his mind as he ran into outriders of the army the next day. The army had not moved from Darry just yet, and they informed him of what had occurred. They watched in awe as their king raced on even faster with his direwolf matching his speed, leaving their galloping horses to flounder in his wake.

The sun had barely moved in the sky above him before Ranma arrived at Darry, racing through it with Fenris a moving wall of fur behind. Inside Daenerys was once again sitting vigil outside the maester's room. She stood up quickly as she saw Ranma, and then was in his arms being held and nuzzling into his shoulder as he kissed her cheek and neck murmuring her name for a moment as the two hugged, simply reveling in the fact she was alive.

His euphoria at that however dampened quickly and he pulled back. "Myrcella?"

"They've been in there ever since she was injured. I didn't even let them look at Tristan or the others, I sent them out to the army's healers."

"Don't worry about that my lady." said Ser Barristan shaking his head behind the Queen. "Merry's helpers did a magnificent job, and all of our wounded will pull through easily, even Grege and Tristan. Myrcella was the worst hurt."

Ranma nodded, and leaned against the wall beside his wife holding her in his arms while they both stared at the doorway into the maester's room.

They were still there several hours later when the door opens to reveal the septon and the maester. Both of them looked incredibly weary, but jubilant. "She's alive, she'll pull through! She will wake up for a few days more I think, but she'll pull through now." Ehcric was personally ecstatic, having come to like Myrcella in the few days he had known her.

The maester however was much more cautious. "There was a problem however. While she will pull through, and do so entirely, the sword it, the wound it..."

"Spit it out man." Ranma barked.

The maester gulped. "My Lord, the sword tip sliced into her womb, and did irreparable damage. The princess will never be able to have children..."

OOOOOO

Later Ranma and Daenerys stood over Myrcella's sleeping body. "I need to get the army moving if we're going to pin the Lannisters between us and Jason's forces." he said, sighing faintly. "I don't want them to be able to escape. I'll leave half the army here, all of the pike regiments for certain and the Riverlands portions that are still being rearmed, along with Patrek and Greatjon to help you command that portion of the army."

Daenerys nodded. "We'll still be here. If she wakes up, and if the Maesters say we can start moving her, we'll meet you outside Harrentown."

"Good, there's something else I'll need to do down there anyway." He kissed his wife and leaned down and kissed Myrcella's sleeping lips gently. Then he moved to her ear whispering. "Get better Myrcella, I love you."

Beside him Fenris moved forward, laying out alongside the bed, staring up at Ranma. Fenris had come to care for 'she who smells like lilies and honey' and knew she was sorely wounded. Often in the wild, predators would go after

the weakest in a pack, but if they tried that here, Fenris would be there to protect her.

Ranma stared down at his bonded, and nodded his head. With that he moved over to his wife kissing her much more thoroughly, then with a final squeeze of her shoulder, left to go back to war.

OOOOOO

Ranma decided to leave the pike regiments along with the portions of the army from House Blackwood and the other Riverlands houses that had joined them since crossing the Trident since they were still being refitted with new armor and in many cases better weaponry. Instead he only took the Northerners in residence, though he also took all of the Riverlands houses horses with them, giving him enough horses to let his infantrymen to rest in shifts while also allowing him to push the pace even harder.

So three days later the army joined up with the scouts and the Wolfsworn who had stayed with the scouts just on this side of the border with the Crownlands. By then news of what had occurred in dairy had spread to the scouts and then from there to the Wolfsworn so the first word out of Dacey's mouth was "Myrcella?"

"She'll live." Ranma replied though his face became grim as he remembered how she had looked there on the bed, so small and frail, but not weak, never weak. "Daenerys is all right, though her arm will bear a scar for the rest of her life." He grit his teeth angrily at the betrayal that had come so close to claiming both his loves' lives despite the fact that they all feared something similar might be coming.

*But who would've thought that Darry would ignore guest rights? Or strike so blatantly when an army was camped around his castle!* Hearing he had intended to capture Daenerys and the others rather than kill made it a little more believable, and if he had, it might have even succeeded. "In other news, do we know anything more about who is moving down south?"

Meera, who had been standing silently nearby, nodded her head. She had been ordered by Jason to move out from Harrentown to take control of the scouts to the southeast, and had done so with alacrity. While she couldn't move quite as fast as the Wolfsworn could, she could still cover a lot of ground quickly, and was as much at home scouting here as she had been back in the neck. "We do. The two forces down there, they're coming close to where they'll intersect the Kingsroad before moving on towards Harrentown.

"Can you tell us anything more about them, Meera?"

In response she began to describe the banners she had seen before shrugging her shoulders. "The only one of those I recognize is House Lannister. "

"House Tyrell and Ashford in the second force." Ranma mused. "And House Serret and House Lannister in the first one. Whoever decided to put a peacock on a banner has almost as much to answer for as the man who thought a blue rooster was a good idea on one."

"The second one is also being led by a man, um..." Meera coughed a little. "It looks as if he's got a garden enameled on his armor. He's very handsome, but a little too Southern-soft for my tastes." Her flush gave her the lie, but none of the Wolfsworn were in the mood to call her on it.

"How far away are they?" asked Daryn thoughtfully.

"From our current position, about two day's hard march for the army I'd say. From each other, I just don't know. The second group is pushing themselves hard, too hard frankly. She gestured to six horses which were nibbling at the grass behind her. "I've used my remounts this to keep in touch with the scouts trailing them, and **our** horses are flagging, so both group's horses should be close to exhaustion."

Ranma nodded his head grimly. "Good. I think we'll rest here then, let them come to us a bit more."

There were firm nods all around and Ranma went on. "I'll want to enclose both forces with our own. But if the second force is chasing the first, it's to be treated as an ally until they prove differently."

Loras and Lord Ashford had indeed sent a messenger up the Kingsroad. But he and his party of four men had been ambushed by bandits, all former Westerlands men, and been slain. The bandits in turn had tried to jump Meera and some of her scouts a week or so ago, and been slain. Worse, the message had only been oral rather than written down.

So no one in the Stargaryen army knew anything about the incoming Reach forces. Because they were chasing the

Lannisters, Ranma was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt mostly thanks to Margaery's message, but that was all.

OOOOOO

Loras really didn't want to get out of the saddle, because he knew he'd just have to get back into it in a few hours, and right now that was more than his heart could bear. His horse and his remount were two of only about 20 animals in his entire force that looked as if they were more than a few steps away from dropping in exhaustion, but Loras himself was ready to collapse.

Once Loras and Lord Ashford had figured out where the Lannisters must be heading they had pushed the pace as hard as they could to try and catch up to the Lannisters and their allies. Unfortunately, the Lannisters had been doing the same thing, and the chase had become a long-drawn out thing, with both forces pushing themselves to exhaustion.

Before this, Loras had considered himself hardy, tough and durable as befitting a knight. Now after interminable days and nights in the saddle, all he wanted to do was curl up somewhere, preferably on his stomach to give his abused ass some rest. And Loras wasn't the only one. Every man in his army was feeling the same, and they were beginning to look it too.

Lord Ashford shook his head from where he was leaning against his own horse's flank, whose head was drooping wearily. "We can't keep this up. Our horses are close to being worn out, they'll be of no use in a charge! And our knights and infantry aren't much better."

Actually the infantry, who by and large did not wear plate armor were actually in far better condition than the knights. Thanks to the pace they had been forced to set the knights had been riding and even sleeping in their armor for the past week since chase began after the battle that had slain Lord Edgerton.

"Agreed." Loras said with a nod. He pulled out his map, which was not a very detailed one in this segment of Westeros admittedly, but it still had marks painted on it on the other side of the Kingsroad moving towards Harrentown indicating a forest. Not a large forest, but reportedly a decently overgrown one. "Here's what we'll do instead. We'll rest here, and we'll send another message further north instead and one around the Lannister army as well. No doubt the Starks have a holding force encamped around Harrentown, so if we can warn them, they can pincer this group from that side while we ride up their back."

"I'm worried we haven't heard from the last group we sent that way." Said Lord Ashford. "That's not good."

"We don't know what happened." Loras said with a shrug. "He might never have gotten there, we did only send four men remember, and I have no doubt that there are bandits roving the lands around here, former Westerlander armymen if nothing else." They had gotten some news from various smallfolk their scouts had run into about what it happened to the Westerlands army, which had both shocked and impressed both men.

"True enough." Ashford nodded. Then he pushed himself away from his horse wincing as his buttocks shifted as he moved. "I'll get the men caring for their horses, then we'll bed down for the evening."

Loras nodded, and turned to see to his horses.

OOOOOO

"Now we turn on them," said Lord Serret looking at Jaime who smiled coldly. Cersei and Joffrey looked at Rupert askance for a moment and he shrugged. "Your Majesty, I've been pushing the pace only **almost** as hard as we could, given the number of horses we have for the number of soldiers. Moreover, I've firmly fixed in the minds of the men be back there that we're running away. They won't even be able to think that we can turn on them, and once we wipe them out we can move on to Harrentown with impunity."

Cersei was not nearly as confident of that as Lord Serret was, as if she had been the Riverlanders, she would have assaulted Harrenhal already, wiping out the last of the invaders of her kingdom. That it would become a bloodbath wouldn't have mattered to her overmuch, in light of the atrocities that were being laid at the Westerlands army's feet.

Still she nodded her head. They were at least another four days travel out from the woods alongside the God's Eye, which would slow their progress even further before they made it to Harrenhal, even if they weren't crossing the full expanse of them. That would allow them to take a break from the hard pace of the march, and allow her personally some rest as well.

"I want to come too." said Joffrey angrily. He hadn't been able to find anyone to vent his frustrations on, and had taken to beating his horse again until he was stopped by a few of his Kingsguard. Horses were too precious at this point to allow the boy to waste his spleen on them like that.

Cersei shook her head quickly. "No. You are the king, you cannot be risked in a small skirmish like this. Kings fight only in important battles my son, I've said it before. This will not be a vital battle, in truth it will be barely a ambush. You should husband your strength until you need it most."

Joffrey sneered at her, which caused Cersei to actually recoil a little in shock. He had never looked at her like that before! "I need to show that I am a warrior as good as my father, and I have to show it now! Our plans from now on entail us forting up and not fighting much any longer after this. I have to do it now, to show our men that I am my father's son! Don't think I haven't heard those whispers!"

Despite their desperate flight the army's scouts had met up with smallfolk who had passed on rumors. One of them was that Ranma and Daenerys had formally declared that Joffrey was illegitimate while Myrcella was legitimate in their eyes along with the dead Tommen.

Worse in Joffrey's opinion was that according to what the scouts relayed the smallfolk practically worshiped the ground Myrcella walked on these days, even more than they did Margaery Tyrell down in the Reach. The Maiden of Healing they called her, and venerated Myrcella for her work in bringing medical attention among the smallfolk to the same level that the nobility could call upon.

*Why, why are my siblings so intent on stealing the attention of the people that should rightly be mine! I am king! And here I am, running like a rat, while my sister spreads her legs for our enemies and is heralded as a saint among the ignorant masses! I need to show them I'm strong, I need to show them that I am the real King here in Westeros!*

"The smallfolk all think that Myrcella seems to, to almost walk on water, but they know nothing of me, simply believing the lies our enemies spout! Until I do something, something to show I am my father's son, those rumors will spread!" He said aloud, his voice a thing of petulant wrath and darker emotions when he said his sister's name.

While Cersei tried to form words, still shocked by the way Joffrey glared at her Lord Serret frowned, staring at the youth. Despite his age, Rupert simply could not bring himself to call Joffrey a young man. Then he looked at Jaime who shrugged his shoulders, not wanting to get involved. That was all too often Jaime's issue, Serret thought. *If he had done his duty as an uncle maybe this brat would've amounted to something.*

Finally he sighed, and just as Cersei opened her mouth to reprimand her son for glaring at her so Rupert held up a hand. "I think his Majesty actually does have a point. There comes a time when a King must show that he can wield the sword. As such, all accede to that, you can be in part of the second charge."

While Joffrey puffed himself up importantly, Serret shook his head slightly at Cersei who subsided. The second charge would in fact be the reserves, which if Serret had gauged his opponent's exhaustion well enough would not be used at all.

He looked at the Kingsguard, gesturing to the men who seemed to cater more than they should to Joffrey's whims, Ser Edgerton, Ser Blount, Ser Gaunt, and Ser all nodded, understanding what he was set telling them, and Blount actually looked relieved for an excuse not to join the battle.

"Ser Swann, I leave you to guard the queen." Serret went on. "I'll leave about 15 men with you, but I don't think I can afford to leave any other men behind." *Not when I'll have to leave at least 200 with the brat to keep him happy.*

Ser Swann nodded his head, bowing from the waist to the queen. Cersei responded with a single nod of her head, then went back to staring at Joffrey, still shocked by the way he was acting so independently now. That and the way he looked at her, as if she was some kind of obstacle in his way. And there had been something in his voice when he spoke of Myrcella, not anger something deeper, darker, which her conscious mind refused to grasp.

Turning away and leaving Cersei to her thoughts, Serret began to organize the attack.

They rested themselves through the night before marching back down there trail for of time until his scouts, carefully husbanded up to this point, reported they had seen campfires in the distance. One of them smirked evilly. "Milord, they don't even have scouts out! A few guards here and there, mainly around der horses, and about, two hands wort still awake repairing their bridles or someat, but that's all!"

Serret smiled grimly. "You see." he said looking at where Joffrey had moved up to stand beside him and Jaime. "They

have the fact that we were running from them so thorough firmly fixed in their minds, they're not even thinking of any other option."

"When do we attack?" asked Joffrey eagerly.

"At dawn." Serret replied. "That'll allow us to rest our men some more, and we'll have daylight to tell friend from foe. In any battle like this that's a necessity." Joffrey scowled at needing to wait but nodded his head understandingly. "In that case, let's get some sleep."

None of them saw a young woman perched in the top of a pine tree nearby, listening avidly.

OOOOOOO

"It was tough to get away." Meera reported several hours later. "But I think that Lord Serret's forces are almost as exhausted as his pursuers. He might've waited a little too long frankly, those men are drooping with weariness. I mean most of them just fell down where they stood rather than getting out there bed rolls, if they had any, and none of them even bothered to check their weapons or gear."

Ranma shook his head. "Once they know they're winning the fight they'll gain more strength I think, humans are kind of like that at times. Will we be in position to attack them at dawn?"

"At dawn or a little after." Meera, replied trotting hard to keep up with the moving column. Now so close she hadn't needed any horses, which was why she had been up a tree enough in the first place, which had allowed her to sneak away far more easily than otherwise.

"You did good Meera." Ranma said, reaching out and ruffling her hair for a moment before turning to look up at where Ser Wendel Manderly was mounted on his horse nearby like a large armor-clad boulder. "Wendel, I believe you'll be going in first, try to flank them from the south if you can. The infantry will come in straight from the north and west." He looked over at the Wolfsworn. "We'll rest for about 20 minutes when Meera tells us we're near at enough, then we'll charge." He turned to Meera. "That means that our stopping is on you, if we get to the battle and our men or horses are too exhausted from charging to fight, it could be a disaster."

Meera gulped but nodded. "I know just the place, there's a large rock near where the Westerlanders camped today. That'll do for a landmark."

OOOOOOO

Dawn was just beginning to break when war cries suddenly shouted around the Reach encampment, wakening those within from deep slumber. "We have no rivals! Hear me roar!"

Loras pushed himself up off the ground, he had been too exhausted to actually unroll his sleep roll last night, and had simply been using it as a pillow as he bedded down beside his horse. Yet a single night's uninterrupted sleep wasn't enough to overcome his body's exhaustion, and he was groggy for a moment.

Nor was he alone in that. All around him his men were taken completely by surprise, the almost equally exhausted Westerlands men pressing in from the north and west. Dozens of men died in those first few moments before the Reach warriors truly realized what was going on and fumbled for their weapons.

Here the infantry responded much better than the knights, not being as exhausted as them. Here and there clumps of them formed actual lines of battle, or at least groups working together to defend themselves from their attackers. They held long enough for the knights to grab up their weapons and move to their aid, but hundreds of men died in the next few moments, though on both sides considering the attackers were nearly as exhausted as the defenders.

Loras found himself at the front of the battle, his mind engaged and sharp now with the scent of blood in the air and the cries of the dead and dying in his ears. He swung his sword left right and back again, blocking two men from attacking both him and a wounded infantryman next to him, before riposting quickly, thrusting his sword blade through the chain mail of one man while kicking out at the legs of the other, sending him crashing to the ground. The wounded infantryman finished him off, and Loras moved on, killing as he went.

He slew five more attackers before he found himself face-to-face with someone he had dearly wanted to cross swords with since this war began. "Jaime Kingslayer. A pleasure."

"Rose Knight, trust me the pleasure is all mine." Jaime grinned, not even wearing a helmet for the battle, his green eyes glinting with dark amusement.

The pleasantries over with, the two men moved together, their swords flashing as one seeking one another's bodies.

Loras was fast, constantly mobile, and thanks to Ranma having sparred with him a few times knew to use the rest of his body as a weapon just like his sword, though he wasn't nearly as skilled with feet or hand. Even so he landed a few hard punches and kicks to Jaime before the Kingslayer could compensate for his shift in style.

Where Loras jumped around and moved from side to side, Jaime moved with an economy of movement, each shift of his body calculated in a way that no one else but a true swordsman would've recognized, happening as it was on an instinctual level. Jaime was precise, controlled, in a battle like this he lost all of his normal flamboyant nature, concentrating his entire being on the conflict. He also had a shield, which he used to great effect until it began to fall apart under the repeated blows.

Jaime lost one of his Kingsguard white enameled pauldron from his shoulder. Loras' sword had sliced into his armor there at just the right point to pull out the rivet that was holding it in place when he had knocked Jaime's blade just off center. But Jaime had dodged at the same time, and Loras' blade didn't penetrate his armor beyond that.

In response Jaime had lashed out with a forearm that caught the Rose Knight in the temple, jarring loose several teeth and throwing him backwards. Jaime moved his shoulder for a moment lashing out with his blade into the side of Reach man who had been trying to charge at him with a spear. "I'd say sorry for ruining your pretty boy features, but someone already did that. Or is Stannis not the only Baratheon brother with a fetish for fire?"

He laughed, and that laugh was like a brand applied to Loras' still sore buttocks. He growled, charging forward angrily, his blows flashing with even greater speed and strength than before, but lacking any of his style or control.

Jaime laughed again, though internally this time watching the fool fall prey to his own passions. The two of them exchanged blows again, and Jaime took another slash, which opened up his armor along his side and produced a small cut there, but nothing fatal. His face also took a slash from just above his mouth to right below his right eye.

In response Loras was almost crippled when Jaime's blade caught him low in his leg, just missing his knee and biting slightly into the side of his thigh. That caused him to fall off balance just a little.

Jaime was on it in an instant, ducking underneath Loras' desperate defensive blow, and running the younger man through his chest. The Kingslayer's blade caught Loras point first right below his heart smashing through his plate armor and punching deep into his intestines, going so deep as to almost break out of his back. Blood began to immediately flow from the wound, as well as his mouth and when Jaime wrenched his sword back out that flow became a flood.

"Good fight." Jaime said conversationally while Loras went to his knees, none of the other Reach men near enough to be a threat to him just now. "You almost had me a time or two there."

Loras stared up at him from his knees, then both the dying man and Jaime turned their heads when suddenly a howl erupted beyond the melee. Not from a single throat, but from thousands. "The king, the Wolf King! Winter is coming!"

Jaime gaped in astonishment at the noise. Loras however smiled even as he fell forward, his eyes clouding over with death.

OOOOOO

About a league distant from the battle, the Queen and her guards had suddenly found themselves surrounded by men wearing northern colors. Ser Swann and his men try to fight back, but were slain or knocked unconscious quickly.

Ser Swann was the only one who really put up much of a fight. He slew one of the attackers and knocked another unconscious before a giant was upon him. Smalljon's greatsword slashed forward, smashing at the somewhat older man with both strength and skill that Swann could not match. Within a minute of exchanging blows he found his sword being forced down to the ground then Smalljon's fist came up under his chin. Smalljon laid him out with that one blow, the power of it lifting Balon off his feet and flinging him twenty feet into the air to land heavily several yards behind where he had stood.

Cersei had at first attempted to escape, only to find her path barred by a young wild looking woman, as well as another older looking woman that if anything looked even wilder. "Ah don't think so soft one." Said Osha, her sword pointed easily at Cersei. "You try to run, you die."

"Queen Cersei Lannister, you are under arrest." said Meera coldly. "The charge is treason with others to be added



later."

OOOOOO

Ranma led the charge from the north and west while Wendel had encircled the battle, coming up from the south with his cavalry. They slammed into the battle with all the force their charge could convey, spilling what few men were in the saddle at this point, killing even more of the Lannisters in those brief moments than they had slaughtered among the Reach men. Every unit commander began to bellow the same thing, "Lay down your arms and surrender or die!"

Ranma let them to it, carving his way through the battle knocking out those who were surrendering or weren't in any position to fight back as he forged his way towards the yellow head that could only be Jaime. Breaking through the melee he saw Jaime standing over the body of Loras and scowled angrily. Whatever his problems with Loras and Renly, he had been friends with the man once. With a roar he charged Ice in both of his hands. "Winter is Coming, Lannister!"

Jaime turned, his green eyes becoming vicious as he moved to engage Ranma. He knew if he could kill the Stark then the fight might go out of these northerners. He parried Ranma's first wild slash, but then had to block another blow as Ranma reversed his blade's course as easily as if the Valyrian blade was a Braavosi rapier rather than a greatsword. Jaime was barely able to get his own sword in between his body and Ice before he was flung to the side with the impetus of the blow.

Even so Jaime rolled with it, coming up and thrusting hard with all of his body's weight behind the blow hoping to catch Ranma with his sword out of position to defend. But Ranma leaped into the air, dodging the blow easily while bringing Ice around in a wide arc. Jaime ducked in turn and by the time he stood back up Ranma was back on the ground, Ice swinging again.

After blocking two more blows, Jaime tried to move inside Ranma's reach with the greatsword, his own longsword much more nimble in close quarters, but then had to fall back his head ringing from a blow from one of Ranma's fists that had nearly caved in the side of his face. Only the fact that he had moved with the blow and rolled away had saved him. But he was forced to sacrifice the remains of his shield to defend his body from Ranma's next blow.

In fact Jaime was quickly coming to realize that he was entirely overmatched for the first time since he had been ten or so. "Damn you Stark!" he shouted, rage and humiliation coloring his normally controlled voice. "How much were you holding back!?"

"I wanted you to underestimate me." Ranma said breaking his silence, his voice calm and measured. It was only then that Jaime realized the boy wasn't even breathing hard! "I want to humiliate you now. There's a big difference."

Jaime growled, attacking his opponent even more savagely while Ranma simply absorbed his blows waiting. When Jaime lunged again, he dodged one side, bringing Ice down so quickly Jaime couldn't pull his sword back or do anything. But instead of aiming for Jaime's body, Ranma aimed for his outstretched hand where it was clenched around his blade. Ice sheared through Jaime's dominant hand right below the elbow, cutting it off in a welter of blood.

For a moment Jaime stared down at his stump, not even registering what it happened. Then he screamed, loud and long like someone who had just lost everything in life, and indeed in Jaime's case that was true. He had defined himself his entire life as a swordsman. To lose his dominant hand like that was a blow to his world view beyond anything he had ever endured before.

It was almost a mercy when Ranma brought Ice around again the flat of it smashing into the side of Jaime's head with carefully calculated force. Jaime was unconscious before he hit the ground. With that done Ranma knelt, and began to put a tourniquet on the Kingslayer's hand.

OOOOOO

Considering that Lord Ashford had also been shouting for them to do so, most of the Reach forces that had survived until Ranma and his army arrived had surrendered quickly. The Westerlands portion had also started to surrender rapidly, though that had more to do with their fear and exhaustion than any shouted orders from their leaders.

Now Ashford stood in front of Ranma, explaining what had happened during the long chase from King's Landing. Ranma shook his head. "We never received any message, I assure you we'd have been here much sooner if we had. Still, that's disturbing news about Mace wishing to sell his daughter off again. I doubt Margaery is gonna stand for that." He smiled thinly. "In fact I know she won't."

He looked around as Daryn moved through the prisoners and the Reach men who were gradually being given their blades back, pushing the bound and gagged Joffrey before him. The Hornwood heir grinned viciously. "He had four Kingsguards with him, all of them are dead now. Dacey and I took them apart, almost literally, including a man you mentioned, Ser Blount? Dacey near sliced him in half."

From another direction came Roger, pushing Lord Serret in front of him. Roger had a cut on his arm, and was clenching and unclench one of his fists as if it pained him. "Ranma Stark, be known to Lord Rupert Serret, Hand of the little bastard boy that is trying to shout imprecations over there. He uses an axe rather well, though not quite up to my standard."

The older man rolled his eyes. "You're younger stronger and faster, what do you expect from me?" He nodded his head at Ranma. "My Lord Stark."

"Lord Serret." Ranma replied, smiling at the older man's poise. "You're remarkably cheerful for someone who's a prisoner."

Serret shrugged his shoulders. "I did my duty as per my oath to the Lannisters my Lord, no more no less and I have not done a single thing that I am ashamed of. Kill me now or later, that will remain the same and I will meet the Father with my head held high."

"Well said." Hathan replied while the other Wolfsworn simply nodded respecting the man's position.

"If that is the case, and if it is **proven** to be that case my Lord, then you'll only face either exile to the Silent Brothers or working hard labor for five years." The older man was hale and hearty, he'd be able to survive that where someone like Joffrey wouldn't have.

"I regret to inform you however that by my authority as King, by right of conquest of the Golden Tooth, the destruction of the Westerlands army and the execution of Lord Tywin Lannister, House Lannister is no longer the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands. Indeed, there might be no Westerlands any longer soon."

Rupert looked at him in astonishment. "What do you mean by that?"

"My wife had some interesting ideas, and it will be fascinating to see how the different families we've sent those ideas to take them, but I think you can say that the anger at how horribly the Westerlands were led in this war would have forced a change in power anyway."

Serret nodded thoughtfully, wondering what Ranma and his wife had outlined to the Westerlands. But Ranma wasn't about to tell him. "If you could take your place with the other prisoners my Lord, we should be on our way."

He turned to Ser Wendel and Hathan. "Stay behind with some of the light cavalry and burn the bodies." He ordered. Both men nodded soberly, not looking forward to the duty but understanding the necessity. With that Ranma began to reorganize his men for the march to Harrentown.

From her position near the front of the forming column Cersei glared at him angrily, then at the two men guarding her son who was still trying to shout through his gag. A sudden thought occurred to her and she looked around. "Where is my daughter Stark! You promised to protect her!"

There were some angry mutterings at the sheer effrontery of a prisoner and moreover an enemy queen shouting that at her captor, but Ranma merely smiled grimly. "She is with my wife at the moment. She's safe, though I won't say that she hasn't come through this war completely unscathed."

"What do you mean?" Cersei said her face now pinched with anxiety.

"Not my story to tell." Ranma replied with a shrug. "You'll see her soon enough. She'll be with the Army around Harrentown."

OOOOOO

That was the last time Ranma spoke for the next three days in Cersei's presence. He honestly wasn't certain how he felt about her. Ranma had liked her more than Robert, and there had been respect between them if not much trust. Then there was his relationship with Myrcella to consider and the fact this was her mother, balanced out by how the woman had treated her three children, and the fact that Joffrey had slain Tommen. He wondered who the brat's father was, but really it didn't matter and the least he could do for the woman was not to force her to air her dirty laundry in public.

Deep down Ranma didn't know if he could bring himself to execute Cersei as her treason to the crown deserved. *This is one execution I might have to hand over to someone else* he thought sadly. *If it happens at all. I hope it doesn't, I don't want to think what it would do to Myrcella knowing that she's in love with the man who executed or even ordered her mother's execution, and I really don't want her to come to resent me for it.*

Jaime on the other hand was a much easier case. He had put family loyalty above his oath to the king, but other than that and the fact it had forced him into treason against Robert, were the only two charges that they had any proof of. Therefore he would be stripped of his status as a Kingsguard, which should've happened after he killed Mad King Aerys. After that, Ranma would send him up north under guard to join his brother on the Wall. Some would say he deserved death, but Ranma had gotten his revenge on the man for his nearly killing Ranma's father when he took his sword hand.

Lord Serret too was a pretty cut and dried case. His House' territory of the Westerlands was the strongest in many ways now, since neither Lydden nor Serret had sent their full force to war, and indeed Lydden hadn't sent even a fifth of their forces. There were also two other minor Houses in the area that hadn't sent men, or at best a token force to war, since their job was to aid House Lydden in protecting the Golden Road. That road was actually a slightly better road for the invasion of the Westerlands than the River Road, and so they had been excused from the muster.

So Ranma couldn't politically afford to kill the man, which would mean he would be added to the growing penal forces and forced to work for five years.

*And as for Joffrey...* Ranma stared over at the youth who was glaring around at him angrily, his hands twitching occasionally on the pommel of the saddle that he had been roped to. He was also still gagged. Even when he was allowed to eat Joffrey had shouted imprecations with every other word. *As for Joffrey, his execution is long overdue.*

Soon after they ran into scouts in the woods near Harrentown Ranma and his men were escorted into Jason's camp where they met Jason himself quickly. "Your Majesty!" he said clasping Ranma's arm firmly and smiling at the younger man. "I see you bring prisoners."

"Jason." Ranma replied with a smile and nod of his own. "Is Harrenhal still holding out?"

"No, they surrendered when the queen and her dragons showed up. Many of those men were descended from people who remembered the last time dragons sacked Harrenhal, and they opened the doors despite the Westerlanders best efforts. It was a pure slaughter in there apparently, but the Whent men got control of the castle's gates long enough for me to ram an assault column in on it."

He grimaced angrily spitting to one side. "But it was no better than either side of that clash deserved. When they learned of my army's imminent arrival, they put Harrentown to the torch and I think they slaughtered several hundred of the smallfolk. Your lady wife heard of that, and ordered the execution of Lady Whent and the Westerlands leaders on the spot. With them dead we only took about 400 or so prisoners from both sides."

"Didn't lady Whent or her forces try protest the burning of their own damn town!?" Smalljon asked, aghast.

Around him the rest of the Wolfsworn also muttered angrily, while Ranma simply closed his eyes gritting his teeth as he tried to get control of himself. That kind of thing, that kind of gross defilement of what it meant to truly be a noble in his eyes, bypassed all of his self-control and smashed the button marked pure rage in his mind.

"A few, and those few that survived the infighting in the Castle were given clemency on the surviving townsfolk's words. Your lady wife heard the statements of the smallfolk who we ran into. A few of them were let off with only three years like the levy forces, the rest five years with no chance of parole."

"And where are Daenerys and Myrcella?" Ranma asked.

"In their tents Ranma, I'll show you."

Halfway there Ranma found himself engulfed by a hug that was fit to break a weaker man's ribs. He smiled happily lifting his wife into the air for a moment and kissing her thoroughly while all around him the army cheered and laughed or whistled as their personalities dictated.

He slowly pulled away, asking softly "Myrcella?"

"Standing up and walking around. She's recovered remarkably quickly. And..." Daenerys went on in a whisper against Ranma's ear. "Merry's remarkably upbeat about her inability to have children any longer. Said she didn't want any anyway. I'm not certain I believe her, but I don't want to push her on it just yet."

By that point Fenris had reached them, moving slowly because Myrcella was next to him, stroking his fur occasionally. She had initially needed Fenris's aide in simply walking, the giant direwolf standing in for a cane rather easily.

Ranma swooped down on her, lifting her into the air for a gentle kiss on the cheek and a hug, which under other circumstances might've raised some eyebrows, but considering what Myrcella had been dealing with none of the watching armymen thought it strange.

Myrcella smiled at him, laying her head against his shoulder for a moment before pulling back. "My family?" she asked softly.

"Captured. Jaime I'm going to send to the Wall. By the time he gets there he might be able to actually wield a sword with his offhand." At everyone's looks he shrugged. "I cut off his dominant hand during the battle. Cersei is alive, though I honestly have no idea what we'll do with her. And your brother is alive too."

"Oh really? Merry said one eyebrow raising. "Pity."

By that point the Wolfsworn had caught up with Ranma and they pushed the 'royal' prisoners ahead of them. Cersei's eyes lit up with joy at seeing her daughter, but Dacey held her shoulder firmly.

Myrcella curtsied to her mother, knowing the two of them had never been the kind to enjoy hugging one another especially in public, though Myrcella herself had since discovered that she rather liked cuddles. "Mother, I'm pleased to see you well."

"You as well my daughter." Cersei said, her voice one of intense relief, matching her face.

Merry nodded at her, but then turned her attention on her brother staring at him coldly while he stared back with rage in his eyes. She looked at Daryn, motioning to her mouth and Daryn grimaced, but removed the gag from around Joffrey's mouth. "Brother, you look well I suppose, for now anyway. I've long thought you were a young idiot ripe for hanging, maybe I should have said beheading instead."

Joffrey growled trying to escape the grip of the two Wolfsworn holding him back shouting, "I should've killed you when I had the chance!"

There was a gasp from practically everyone around, not just the Wolfsworn or the prisoners but the watching soldiers, Jason, the other Lords who had joined them and loudest of all Cersei. Joffrey didn't notice any of this simply continuing to shout vitriol at his sister. "It was you, you and Tommen! Always taking attention away from me, always trying to over shadow me with unimportant things, I should've killed you when I killed him! **I am the king!** All of you should be bowing before me and begging for forgiveness!"

"What you are is a kinslayer!" Myrcella shouted back, her own green eyes snapping with fury as she goaded Joffrey to confess openly. "You couldn't even take Tommy on in a fair fight! Instead you hired a damn poisoner to do your dirty work for you! And then you didn't even have the courage to come out into the open with your sadism, hiding under the name of the Vile One!"

"He deserved it!" Joffrey barked back. In his anger he completely forgot his audience if he ever had noticed them in the first place. He didn't even notice his mother's paling expression as she mouthed the word 'no' over and over again, shaking her head wildly. "Father and that traitor Stark would've named Tommen heir over me! I am the eldest I was the rightful heir!"

At that point Cersei had heard all she could take. Her mind simply shut down, and she slumped into unconsciousness, while Joffrey continued. "As for my sadism as you put it, who cares! They were only smallfolk, only traitors, like that bastard Tully! There are always more where they came from, and Edmure paid in fool for his treason against me! **I am king!** and you should all bow to me for forgiveness!"

Ranma looked over Cersei, shaking his head somewhat sadly. Regardless of anything else, he doubted that any woman really deserved to learn she had birthed a monster. "I think my Lords that we have heard enough from the bastard king." He said softly. "Does anyone wish to say anything in his defense?"

Not a person there did anything but shake their heads staring at Joffrey in disgust. Not even Lord Serret had realized how sadistic Joffrey had been or for how long. And that was without discounting the whole kinslaying bit. That was a crime against every known religion and law of the land, even if he hadn't done the actual deed.

"In that case my Lords, I see no reason to put off justice being done." He pulled Ice out from its sheath on his back and gestured to Daryn and Roger. They pushed Joffrey to his knees, pushing his body so that his head was leaning forward from the rest of his body. Even so Joffrey continued to shout angrily ordering them to release him that he was the king, that he would have them flayed alive for this effrontery. But no one was listening any longer.

It was only as Ranma stood next to him with Ice raised that Joffrey fell silent, staring up at Ranma, his face paling as he suddenly understood that nothing he said now mattered at all. "Joffrey Waters, by your own words you have proven guilty of the charges of treason and murder most foul in the guise of the Vile One of numerous smallfolk and my kinsman Edmure Tully, and of slaying your brother Tommen, the trueborn heir of Robert the First. The penalty is death."

With that he brought Ice down, and Joffrey Waters, would-be King of Westeros, the Vile One who had terrorized King's Landing before the plague hit, died.

OOOOOO

Later that same evening Ranma was staring out across the water of the gods Eye towards the Isle of one side Myrcella was shaking her head sadly. "She's catatonic. I don't know how long she will be so, but my mother can't do anything for herself now. I ordered one of my helpers to feed her, but honestly, I don't know if my mother's mind can recover from the strain of hearing about Joffrey's acts. She devoted so much of herself to him that hearing about how evil he had become, it broke something in her Ranma, and I don't know if she'll ever heal."

Daenerys stood beside the old younger girl, one arm over her shoulders. "I have no idea what justice would be in this case Ranma. All my old concerns and fears are telling me to execute the woman, but the queen in me says that wouldn't be justice now. How could it be justice when she can't even feel it, which can't even realize why she's being killed? "

"We'll send her to the Silent Sisters up in White Harbor. She'll get aid there I suppose, and that will put her far enough away from the Westerlands that no Lannister agent will be able to rescue her for whatever reason. If she ever regains her mind, we might have to rethink it, but until then I don't think there's anything we could do to Cersei now that her own mind is doing to her on its own." Ranma said with a note of finality his voice.

He looked up smiling slightly as Rhaegon flew above. Rhaegon would be carrying Daenerys to the island, while he rowed himself and Fenris out to it. The rest of the lords were busy reforming the army to march, or investing Harrenhal. But something told Ranma that he needed to be out there and getting the message tonight, when the moon was high in the sky and waning, when the skies were remarkably clear for an autumn day.

When she heard about it Daenerys had refused to let him go alone, saying she wished to see if she could hear the message as well. Myrcella had also wanted to come with them, but Ranma and Daenerys had put their feet down. Merry needed her rest, and there was no telling how long this might take. Myrcella had acceded to that, before curling up with Sunfyre, who had become almost as protective of her as they were of Daenerys. They wouldn't obey her commands of course, but they were protective of the girl-who-helped-to-groom-them.

Rhaegon landed with a splash on the shoreline of the large inland lake, grinning widely around a large fish that he had captured somehow. Daenerys laughed, rubbing her fingers over his eye ridges above his eyes causing him to croon a little before moving to get into the saddle. Ranma nodded at her, and said simply, "I'll see you over there. But don't land until I wave the torch all right? There might be other people over there for all we know."

Daenerys nodded, saying nothing. In actuality dragons could see in the dark almost as well as cats and Rhaegon had already scouted around the island, seeing no sign of any kind of habitation. *Still if it that makes Ranma feel better I'll agree to it.* She knew Ranma had beaten himself up inside several times since the treason of House Darry because he had not been there to defend her or Myrcella. It was foolish of him, after all who else could have led the attacks on the Golden Tooth or House Keith and accomplished both tasks so well. But it was still there.

Actually she and Rhaegon only had to circle the island twice before Ranma was there, the speed with which he was rowing himself through the water leaving a wide churning wake behind him. He jumped up over the side of the boat, then allowed Fenris to sniff the air for a moment before sending him deeper into the small forest that dominated the island. Standing there he stared at the trees he could see in the light of his torch. Each one of them had a face on them, and more than half he could see were the white of weirwood trees. *God, there must be more weirwood trees here than there are everywhere else South of the Neck combined! No wonder the old gods have enough strength to reach me here!*

After a moment Fenris came back, every inch of his body radiating happiness. This island was almost like being

home in the North, still too warm for his tastes but the feeling the air was almost the same. And there were no people here either.

After getting that message through their link Ranma waved the torch he had kept from the boat, and soon Rhaegon landed in the shallows by the island's shore. Daenerys jumped off, then sent Rhaegon off to hunt for more fish. They weren't quite as good as crab, but they were good, and hunting them from the air was tremendous fun.

Daenerys stared around at the faces in the trees her own face showing awe. "This is, this is incredible! I've read about this place, but to see it for myself, to feel it... Can you feel that?"

"The power of the Children of the Forest, and the Old Gods is very strong here." Ranma said with a nod. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply in the air as one hand found Fenris' neck and scratch there deeply. "Come on. I think we need to go further in."

Arm in arm the two of them moved through the forest, while Fenris padded the side them silent as a forest creature could be. Soon enough the three of them came to a gigantic weirwood tree, carved not with one face, but with several. A few of them were quite clearly not human, too elongated, too thin of face and with their ears too pointed and large to be that of a human. The other faces were humans, and one of them in particular called to Ranma. He moved forward, gently tracing its features. "This one, this one could be my ancestor I suppose. Same cheekbones, same general features, frankly it looks like the carving in the crypt I've seen of my great-grandfather."

"That would be correct Stark," said a voice, causing Ranma to whirl, Ice suddenly in his hands as if teleported there. Fenris growled as well and, Daenerys quickly pulled out Dark Sister.

From all around them through the trees came ten men dressed all in green. The leggings were green, their shirts were green, their hair, what could be seen in Ranma's torch, was green and the masks they wore were also green. Those masks were simple affairs, simply bunches of leaves and a wooden mask. They could've been comical, but somehow, maybe because of the way they had snuck up on the Fenris and Ranma or because of something else, they were not.

"We are the Green Men." Said one before Ranma could ask who the hell they were or how the hell they had snuck up on them. "We tend the trees and we keep away those who would harm them. We have known of your coming for months now Stark, though you arrive barely in time. The Old Gods have a message for you, one that we do not know, but one which is important enough for them to speak to a mortal in such a way that we have never heard of before."

Ranma was silent, not speaking of the few times he had already felt the touch of the old gods on his mind. He understood that they had been more proactive of late to stave off a disaster they could see coming, but it would probably come as a shock to these men. Something about them said they were no longer men to his senses. Not really, they felt almost like trees themselves, but not quite.

"Kneel Stark." said one of them, his features and voice indistinguishable from all the others. "Kneel and hear the voice of the Old Gods!"

Ranma growled, shaking his head. "When I pray to the old gods I bow, I don't kneel." He moved over to the massive tree with the many faces carved on it, and reached out with both hands gently touching the weirwood tree on either side of his ancestor's face. Then he closed his eyes, and began to send his own senses out into the tree. The response was immediate and almost overpowering. Suddenly his mind was taken over, deluged with images after images.

He saw a woman of impossible beauty, with too perfect features to be truly human, locked in an embrace with a man, whose features were obscured. A voice whispered in his ear. *An old trick used again.*

*Blood in the snow, hundreds men fighting in a snowstorm the likes of which Ranma had never dreamed. The dead walking, under a banner whose face he couldn't see raised in dead hands. Ice, mountains of ice moving slowly South. Creatures from out of nightmare, giant spiders, things that looked like polar-bears only with four heads and six arms wearing armor, undead dragons, massive undead mastodons with fell blue light gleaming in their eyes along with an inhuman intelligence.*

And he saw the Others themselves, clad in armor of blackest night, their swords glistening like ice in their hands as they moved. He saw the dragons in the sky, he saw the Wall standing, he saw the passing of two moons and somehow knew that he had to be back in the North in two months' time. He saw death, he saw destruction, he saw sieges, he saw winter coming alive and engulfing the land of men.

He saw, and he saw until he wrenched his hands away from the tree and collapsed gasping for air.

Daenerys was at Ranma's side instantly, dropping Dark Sister to the ground beneath them as Ranma cradled his head in his hands. Blood was streaming down his face from his nose and from his eyes, but already his healing ability was kicking in. "What did you see Ranma! What did they want to tell you?"

Ranma looked up at her shaking his head. "T, two months, we need to be back in the north in two months' time, or else we'll be too late to stop the White Walkers from gaining a foothold on this side of the Wall. We're running out of time."

### **End chapter**

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And with that, we will have a chapter of what is going on up north, FINALLY, as well as other people, and we finally see what has been going on in the Vale. I wanted to put in a Margaery portion here, but decided against it simply because I couldn't quite get her speech in that part right. As such, I am afraid it will be shown in a "Two week's before" sort of thing. Not a flashback, but still not a literary tool I liked to us

As always hope you enjoyed it, and please review.

## \*Chapter 17\*: Chapter 17

I do not own Ranma 1/2 or ASolaF, mores the pity. The second would be done, and the first would have had much more combat and romance father than slapstick comedy.

I would like at this time to recommend to my readers that you go and look for the light novel series called Heavy Object. Combat, comedy and character driven it is all there, and the translation over at Baka-Tsuki is one of the best I've ever seen on light novels. Some of the jokes man, so damn funny! I've even seen the anime it's based off of, and if it follows the light novel as much as possible, it could be the best new anime I've seen for a long time. Best giant robot anime in years no doubt, simply because the characters Heivia and Quenther, have to take out the giant robots with cunning and plans rather than strapping into one themselves. And their back and forth is freaking hilarious.

This chapter was a bit of an issue, simply because I am not as emotionally invested in most of the characters who I use as POV here. Unfortunately I couldn't just wave my hand and make the events in this chapter not happen, and I wanted to show rather than tell as many of these events as I could without becoming incredibly bogged down.

Thanks go to Anthony444 for his beta-work, but as always we are still dealing with missing space and DNS issues. The spellchecker on FF can't keep up with all the names, and stops working before halfway down the page, so checking it through is almost impossible.

Anyway, here we go.

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### Wild Wolf 17 Threats Abound

While Ranma was waging his Riverlands campaign against the Lannisters, the North had continued to prepare for the coming of winter and for the supernatural forces that every Lord in the North knew were on their way. It had been eight thousand years since the events of the Long Night, but the North still remembered. While only bits and pieces of knowledge of the great enemy had survived in story and song, with very few written records, what was needed to survive through a long winter was known by everyone.

"...And the mountain clansmen seconded to Lord Hornwood have reported they haven't seen any sign of further Ironborn, so I think we can assume that their aborted invasion has ended. In other news, House Moss sent a raven this morning. They report that their holdfast is prepared for winter, which means the last of bannermen have sent messages of their House's readiness. Of course just because the holdfasts are ready don't mean the people are or their larders, and I have my doubts about a few of them my Lord, so if you would..."

"Yes I know the ones you're speaking of, and I will send a force of my own men out on rounds to their holdfasts to make certain." Eddard said with a nod over his shoulder from where he was standing by the window. Yet it was obvious his mind was not on what Maester Luwin was saying.

He and his wife were staring down into Winterfell's courtyard, where Rickon was beginning to learn the ways of the sword. To one side Rickon's direwolf Shaggydog had begun its own training at the hands of the gentle giant Hodor. He was the only man in the Castle that was stronger than the direwolf at this point, and he was also utterly fearless around the large beast.

"That should've happened months ago." Catelyn said tartly from beside him holding their baby Hoster in her arms, jutting down at the direwolf with her chin. "Nor am I pleased with how fascinated Hoster is with the large creatures, every time he escapes me or his nurse he tries to find Shaggydog or Summer. Summer is a pure darling with him, but Shaggydog just doesn't have the same control over himself."

Presently Hoster was asleep, his lips still stained somewhat with mother's milk, and the sight of him there in Catelyn's arms made Eddard smile, his small but oh-so-warm smile that had made Catelyn fall for him years ago. While it was still too soon to tell what color the babe's hair would be, it looks to be as red as Sansa or Bran's, though his eyes were clear Stark, and he certainly seemed to have the same rambunctious nature as Arya, Rickon and Ranma.

"We'll have to train Shaggydog as much as we can, or let him out loose into the wild. And the direwolf would be a deadly threat to any band of hunters it came across."

"I know that, it's just I wish one of the others was here to help train him, that's all."

"You wish that for more than just the aid in training Shaggydog my love, as do I." Eddard said with a sigh. "Given the



threat bearing down on us, I could wish that the Queen had not started this whole war."

"I think this war was brewing the moment Robert and the Queen married. The Queen was always a haughty, prideful woman, and no woman would willingly put up with the way Robert treated her, dishonoring her as blatantly as he did." Catelyn mused.

To that Eddard simply nodded, unwilling at this date to try and defend his friend's memory. "True enough." Then Eddard sighed, leaning over to kiss Catelyn gently on the cheek.

Taking her cue Catelyn nodded. "I think it's time for this one to be taken away husband, I don't want yours or the good maester's voices to wake him up." Catelyn smirked, shaking her head. "I don't get enough sleep as it is with him around."

Luwin stood up from his chair in front of his Lord's desk to bow from the waist as Catelyn left, then turned back to Eddard who had moved over to sit down, his face far grimmer than it had been. "I've picked out five of my best men, each of them will lead 10 others, to head out on inspections of the holdfasts on House Stark lands then to every minor Lord beholden directly to us. I refuse to let any of our folk freeze or starve because one of their lords did not wish to put forth the effort to truly prepare for winter, whatever his reasons."

Luwin nodded, then marked off a list of names that Eddard spoke before his Lord moved on to the next subject. "Has there been further word from House Manderly?"

"Yes my Lord." Luwin smiled faintly. "Lord Manderly might not be the most martial character, but he has some of the neatest handwriting I have ever seen. He reports that White Harbor is almost prepared for winter, and that he has put out the word on his lands ordering as many families as possible to gather in the city. It's giving him a surprisingly large boost to his workforce, and several old projects have been taken up apparently to renovate the city."

"More importantly, one of his factors in Essos has reported in. They were able to retain the Windblown, though of course White Harbor will have to supply them with winter coats and clothes before they can arrive, which the factor has taken out of their pay, a canny move that. According to the report they are nearly at full strength, 2,000 men mostly infantry and horse."

"That is fine." Eddard said with a nod. "I received word from our workers on the White Knife that it is clear all the way from Long Lake down to White Harbor and even the tributary that heads into House Cerwyn's land is now prepared for large barge traffic. When it starts freezing we'll have problems, but I believe that my son wishes to speak to the two of us tonight about that very thing." He smiled proudly. "Bran the Builder come again!"

He frowned thoughtfully then, leaning back in his chair as he stared at the ceiling. Word had reached them of the string of initial victories that Ranma and his forces had won, the fall of the Twins being the most major one. There had been news from White Harbor a few weeks back of another victory down near Fairmarket, but the further south the army went, the worse the line of communication up to the North became.

Eddard was worried for his oldest sons and Arya, worried about his daughter-in-law, worried about what might be happening down south, very worried. So was only with an effort of will that he was able to turn back to matters he could actually control. *Leave the war in Ranma's capable hands, he's proven time and time again that he is up to that task. Deal with what you can here, so that he has a home to come back to when it's over.*

"I note," he said coming back to the here and now. "That you did not mention Barrowton or House Dustin."

"No, my Lord." Luwin said coughing somewhat delicately. "Lady Dustin has not sent any word. And given the distances, I'm afraid I haven't been able to hear of any rumors about anything from there, but it worries me. On the other hand, Torren's Square has reported they are well along their own preparations."

"I'll write out a message to Lord Ryswell." Eddard said with a sigh. "As the woman's father, I suppose he can be relied upon to make certain that she is doing her duty there, old gods know if I write the woman myself she'll just dig in her heels further. I'll have it for you later tonight. Is there anything else we need to work on before I turned to Winterfell's own paperwork?" He allowed his lips to twitch and smile, and a slight, hopeful edge enter his voice for a moment.

There wasn't, and Luwin left his lord to his work. Despite having technically stepped down as Lord of Winterfell with Ranma elsewhere, all the duties of the Lord Paramount had once again settled on Eddard's shoulders. By rights he should have been making Bran help him, since for now Bran was his older brother's heir. But Luwin and Eddard had spoken about it along with Catelyn, and had decided that Bran's abilities were best spent elsewhere.

Later that evening Bran proved that allowing him to work on his own projects was indeed the best use of his time. He sat across from his parents at the head table, while all around them the meal continued while the youth gestured excitedly to several sketches he had made on precious pieces of parchment. "Skates I call them, they'll have to be heavy, and of iron, and putting them on and off will be a massive chore. But with this, and with some method of moving the ships down the river, we should be able to continue to use the White Knife for traffic once it's frozen over entirely."

Looking at the drawings Eddard pursed his lips. "How exactly would these skate barges move my son?"

"Pulled by teams of reindeer, father. That's one way anyway. Reindeer and moose can pull surprisingly large loads, not as much as oxen, but quite a bit."

"Will these barges be able to transport as heavy loads as you could if the river was not frozen?" Catelyn asked.

Bran shook his head. "No, if we tried the same size loads we'd have to use triple teams, and it would still be incredibly slow." The river barges could carry up to twenty times the amount of a wagon cart, possibly as much as seven thousand stone. "I thought about using wind power, but I don't think that would work really, since if the river-men were slow about responding they could find themselves skidding off the river and I don't think the skates would respond well to that. I'd like to set up some experiments father, if you don't mind? But I don't think that's the way to go. Smaller barges during the winter will have to be necessary."

"Building such will be another expense..." Luwin murmured.

"We are good for it, my friend." Eddard said with a smile. "Besides, I am almost positive that House Umber and House Manderly would be willing to pay for half the construction costs for some of these barges, and if we pay for half of them, then we get half the profits down the line that the families working them receive. Even in winter the economy must move."

Catelyn nodded firmly, and Luwin smiled slightly. That was one area where Eddard was totally unlike most lords. He understood the fact that the economy, the movement of goods and the exchange of said, made everything go around.

The designs in question were simple affairs, a barge with a large roofed portion in the front, where Bran said that the workers for the barge would be housed, simple cots shown on another sketch, along with a small kitchenette. Water of course would be no issue, and heating up the frozen water would remove any poisons from it.

"The work will be difficult." Luwin murmured, still playing the part of the Stranger's advocate, seeing the down side in all things as was his role in these meetings.

"True enough, but I believe that we can incite people to sign up to join these barge crews even in the midst of winter with incentives in the way of food or drink, or if whole families then they could be given a percentage of the profits from every load they deliver. Say 5 or 10%, unless they work on the actual creation of the barges as well, which of course would bump that up to 30 or 40. All of us would still make a tidy profit even so." Eddard replied thoughtfully.

That was true, and not just because of the iron deposits on the newly created House Shieldarm's lands. Those were even larger than Luwin's initial estimates had shown, though eventually the ease with which it was being mined would fade of course. House Umber however had massive reserves of coal. That coal could be the difference between life and death once the full winter chill closed in for many. And in return, the other houses would pay through the nose for that coal, either in goods such as from White Harbor, Winterfell, or House Locke, or in silver and gold such as in the case of the others.

"The profit point will be especially true when winter starts moving south of the Neck. The Riverlands might have coal deposits closer to home, but transportation would still be an issue as would the workforce in the dead of winter. I have no idea how prepared the Lords in the South are for this winter, even if the Council of Maesters announced autumn months ago." Catelyn said shaking her head, before going on.

"Worse, with the war raging down there I don't think any Lord will have enough time or energy to devote preparing his lands for winter, and while I have extreme respect for the common sense of the smallfolk, no doubt even among them there will be those who do not believe that this winter will be any worse than the last one. And coal was never mined as heavily south of the neck as it is here in the North."

"True enough." Eddard sighed, before smiling at his son. "You're fidgeting Bran. That means you have something else to show us, yes?"

Bran nodded, grinning at his father and then his mother who smiled proudly at him. Bran would never be a warrior, would never be a leader of men in the field of combat. But his mind and energy had done more for Winterfell and for the North in general than any hundred such men.

"Yes father I do." He replied, reaching down into a small pouch. What he pulled out looked like a large hand and a half sized cage of thing iron shaped in a ball, but inside was a small glowing piece of coal. The heat could be felt coming off a thing as Bran gingerly set it down on the table, holding it by a small chain that was about the length of his father's hand. "This is a new design father, it's nothing incredibly inventive, but..." He shrugged uncomfortably, never really happy about putting himself forward like this.

"But, it can be held hanging at someone's belt buckle." Said Eddard thoughtfully, tapping the end of the chain with a finger. "And held under a cloak?"

"Yes! That's what I thought anyway. It would keep a person's body warm, and so long as they had gloves and a cloak, it would, I think, be just enough to keep them warm enough to survive in a winter's night." Weeks later Bran had moved on from those projects, leaving them in the hands of skilled carpenters and blacksmiths pulled from all around House Stark's land, so that he could work with training up the first few groups of reindeer and Moose from the mountains. They had been brought down by the mountain clans, who are now investing Wintertown. This was part of their eons old agreement with House Stark. Wintertown was always open to the mountain clans in times of winter.

"Your lad's a wonder with the animals." Said the Wull, standing on the wall of Winterfell as he stared down into the courtyard, then over the wall out into Wintertown. "And I can't thank you enough for this Stark."

Eddard shrugged. "My family has always held Wintertown open for you and yours my friend, the length of the winter is immaterial to that."

"Aye, but we've been feeling it sore these past few weeks up in the mountains. Every man knows it's going to be a bad one, and a long one."

"True enough on many levels." Eddard said with a sigh. The two men exchanged a worried glance, turning their gazes northward. "That is the direction the real threat will come." Eddard murmured. "We have a few months, then winter will truly be upon us here in the North, **and** what comes with it." He shook his head. "I could hope my son has finished up in the south, but with all of the damned politics down there, that's doubtful."

The Wull grunted irritably, not saying anything about that. "It'll be worse on the Wall."

"Oh yes." Eddard said shaking his head. "I have no doubt it will be much worse on the Wall."

OOOOOO

At the same time that his family was being hammered by Ranma and Winterfell was keeping busy, Tyrion Brightwall, Lord Commander of the Order of the Ardent Defender, was leaning back in a comfortable chair reflecting on the past few months. The luxury was something unusual here on the Wall, and had been bought by Tyrion's quickly dwindling funds, but it and the bed that occupied a portion of his corridors here in Sable Hall, was well worth it. As were the services of the whore who was sleeping in his bed at the present moment, though her affections for a week cost him far less than paying for the transportation of the bed she was sleeping on.

It had taken his ship a month to get up from White Harbor to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, and another two weeks to travel along the wall back the Castle Black. The going was far harder on the ocean at this point, and bits and pieces of ice had begun to appear when they rounded the cape into the Bay of Seals, some of which would tear the bottom of a ship out as easily as any rock.

Still, the ship had made its way through, and he had eventually returned to Castle Black with the remit of his new knightly order in hand. Jeor Mormont had looked at the idea askance at first, but when Tyrion explained the king and queen's reasoning, as well as what it would mean for the Wall, he acquiesced with good grace.

But since then Tyrion gotten to work organizing his new order, seconding several men into it immediately. Most of these men came from the mercenaries who'd been hired in ones and twos from Essos or elsewhere, the least worse of them was Bronn. A decent swordsman and tactician whose loyalty stayed true to whoever bought it, Bronn had become Tyrion's second-in-command of the Order, and had already picked out land for it in The Gift.

Tyrion smirked a little. *I doubt any of the Northerners really know why we've chosen that particular bit of land, and I'm certainly not going to point it out to them.* It had originally been part of Brandon's Gift, and it was about three days

back of the Wall straight down from Rimegate and Sable Hall. It contained an old mine. In the past it had apparently been for coal, but had been abandoned years ago for some reason. And according to Bronn it also contained what might prove to be a seam of diamonds.

*At least that's what Bronn says, but since he and his men were brave enough to go into that mine to look around, it behooves me to believe him. Especially since the man said his father was a miner and his family miners as far back as anyone can remember. It will take time and a lot of hard work, but eventually my knightly order is not going to be totally dependent on the crown for its income.*

Yet strangely enough for anyone who knew the Lannisters, Tyrion wasn't thinking about that fact with the idea of betraying Ranma and Daenerys. No, he had made a home for himself here on the Wall, he was respected here not as a Lannister but as Tyrion Brightwall, and that was worth more to him than he would have been prepared to admit given how many dreams he'd had of being Lord Lannister.

Indeed, he'd been so busy of late that he'd had no time to spare worrying about his family, not that he had any inclination to do so for most of them, an aunt or cousin here and there, and of course his brother was about all actually. No, that money wouldn't be used to foment any kind of rebellion, instead it would be used to make his life up here as comfortable as possible, well, him and his order in its entirety. That and the work being done here in Sable Hall was making it almost homely already.

*Pretty good work, considering that I was only able to use fifteen men to clear the castle out. Six of the ten floors of the Castle have already been cleared out, and the last of my so-called recruits have been sworn in. I could wish that I had some input on the oath they had sworn, but frankly it makes sense and it's certainly softer than the Night's Watch oath.*

The oath in question, which Daenerys and Ranma had come up with, was much like that of most knightly orders but made a special point to emphasize two areas: one, its mission of guarding the Wall, and two, maintaining the siege equipment along the Wall. This would allow the order to have a far larger segment of its numbers devoted to logistics than any normal Knightly Order would have been able to. Indeed, actual combat skills with anything but bows weren't necessary for the Order of the Ardent Defender.

The other bit was that one of the royals had realized that whatever they could do, life on the Wall would always be harsh, and forcing someone to remain there forever, especially someone who volunteered for it, would make recruitment far harder. So the order had three levels of commitment. Only one level, those men who had joined the order from the Night's Watch or like Tyrion himself who was here due to political reasons, had to remain on the wall the rest of their lives.

The other two levels were based on time spent on the Wall. The first was for raw recruits, an oath to remain on the Wall for a year, to see if they could handle it, named Novitiates. If they couldn't they could leave at the end of the year with no dishonor, but nothing to show for it save free transportation down to White Harbor, not even their weapons.

Named Cavaliers, a Braavosi term, the second group would be served for eight years. If they left at the end rather than signing up for another hitch the cavaliers would be paid handsomely for their time. Enough for any of man to set a man and his family up in a trade or with land and be very well off. Dozens of young men from White Harbor and House Flint had already signed up for this commitment level, and Tyrion had welcomed the additions to his work force.

His thoughts were interrupted by his door banging open abruptly. Tyrion looked up one eyebrow raised as Bronn stepped through leering for a moment at the whore on the bed who quickly covered herself up, scowling irritably at the other man. "Another new girl Little Lion?"

"Ah well, I have to do my part to live up to our orders name of the Ardent Defender you know." Tyrion laughed then asked, "So what brings you to my room Bronn?"

"A messenger has arrived from Castle Black oh ardent one, the Old Bear has called for a meeting apparently."

Tyrion groaned aloud, uncaring that both Bronn and the northern wench in his bed were smirking at him now. "Have mercy on these Westerlands bones of mine. Please don't say I have to go back out onto that Wall!"

"Life is hard and then you die." Bronn said with a grim yet amused smile. He moved over to a pile of clothing by the bed, smirking at the woman who chuckled a little curling up in the bed under the covers while Bronn turned back to Tyrion tossing the clothing at him. "Bundle up warm now yer Lordship, we wouldn't want anything important to freeze off would we?"

"Next you'll tell me that the sky is blue, or that water is wet." Tyrion groaned, but began to pull on a heavy cloak over his normal clothing. He then pulled on a warm set of excellent gloves, which he had made to fit before leaving White Harbor, since none of the ones sent up to the Wall or already here for the Night's Watch had come in his size. And they had been almost as expensive as the bed he'd ordered at the same time, minus its transportation costs of course.

Still they were more than worth the money, something he was forced to once more admit after leaving heading up onto the Wall. It was cold down below but up here it was far worse. Frostbite had claimed several lives already, and it was going to get worse. He and Bronn stood there for a moment, checking over one another to make certain that every bit and piece of skin was covered, a necessity for anyone working on the Wall at this point for an extended length of their eyes were covered by thin strips of cloth. "Let's get this over with." Tyrion said his words muffled by the heavy scarf he wore woven around his head.

Bronn nodded, and they both moved up on across the Wall briskly. The journey took several hours but thanks to their warm clothing, the trip wasn't nearly as arduous as Tyrion made it out to be.

Tyrion spent a brief moment looking over the Wall out into the distance of the North beyond it, wondering how the wildlings were getting on with this cold. *Of course, they have a lot of experience with it just like these northern louts do. Though I don't think they'll have handled it as well, and of course we have the castles as well as all of the other preparations on the Wall.*

It had astonished Tyrion how methodically and easily the Northerners had taken to the drop in temperature. It pained him to admit that most of the casualties were among the Night's Watchmen who had come from south of the Neck or the mercenaries. It had hammered his new Order quite a bit, but it had tapered off quickly as men began to learn the necessary skills to survive. Of course Tyrion's own ideas for the small signal towers and their braziers had helped tremendously.

When they reached the lift down to Castle Black all of the men nodded at Tyrion familiarly, causing him to grin and spend a few moments joking with them before getting on the large device. It was a sense of camaraderie, a sense of belonging and respect that he had never truly felt with anyone but Jaime and a few others from his own family who are willing to ignore his father's example before.

Soon enough Tyrion was ensconced in Jeor's room by the fire, while Bronn and his other men went off to find their own fires or other ways of getting warm. He was not the only one there. Benjen Stark was there as well, along with representatives from Eastwatch, Shadow Tower, and all of the other forces on the Wall. They all nodded respectfully to Tyrion, then turned their attention back to Jeor Mormont, who was sitting in his own chair in the circle, while before them all the map of the Wall was stretched out from one end of the table to the other.

After Tyrion had taken his seat Jeor turned his attention back to Harrion Karstark, while Tyrion idly wondered how he and the commander of Eastwatch had arrived before him. "So you executed them?"

"They might have been Night's Watch, but being in the Night's Watch only absolves you of crimes before you join. Both men were guilty of rape and murder, as well to try and cover up their rape. Moreover, the woman wasn't a whore from the Wall, she was one of the drovers wives from the Gift. If I hadn't executed both of them we might have had a riot on our hands. I did it cleanly, I doubt house Umber would've done the same."

"Aye, we would've made them howl for mercy first." Said Mors, scowling fiercely. "We can't let that kind of lack of discipline stand, especially when it c'd impact our supplies."

Tyrion remained silent, understanding that this talk was not the real reason why he was here, just something that had been going on before he arrived.

The old Night's Watch commander nodded slowly, like the bear on his old family crest, ponderous but with the certain weight to it. "True enough. But it isn't an isolated incident, those two made the, what, twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth men of the Night's Watch to be executed for crimes since the reinforcements on the Wall began?"

Another Night's Watchmen whose name Tyrion didn't know nodded from where he stood behind his Lord. "Some men just aren't willing to learn from examples my Lord, but for the most part the men realize what they can and can't get away with. I don't think it's a big issue just yet but once we face a large-scale battle it might be, especially if we take prisoners but..." He shrugged. "Those will be wildlings anyway."

"Sooner put my cock in a meat grinder then fuck a spearwife," said Harrion exchanging a laugh of agreement with a few of the others, including Tyrion. "Still, rights of war and all that."

To one side sipping at his own mug of warm ale Benjen grimaced. He knew all too well how his oldest nephew would reply to a statement like that and hoped that the boy never learned of it. But without Ranma here, there was no one who cared enough to stand up for such women after the battle ended. Yes, many of the men who were present would refuse to take part, but that was a long way from actively fighting their fellows to stop it from occurring in the first place.

"Let's move onto another topic." said Jeor turning to Tyrion. "Your requisition from King's Landing has finally arrived Little Lion. It had to be transported overland from White Harbor. Apparently the seas have become too rough to transport the wildfire safely. It and the alchemists are here now. We'll talk to them later, after Kyle, Denys and Bowen arrive from Shadow Tower and Westwatch-by-the-Bridge. For now, tell me about the latest work on the catapults."

Tyrion nodded agreeably, and went over what everyone there already probably knew before Kyle Condon and Bowen Marsh arrived a few hours later. Bowen Marsh was a short, fat faced man, with wide shoulders and a face made uglier by years and a nose that looked squashed and misshapen. He was not the most welcoming of men to the reinforcements, and had been sent to command Westwatch-By-the-Bridge after it had been reopened and repaired more to get him out of the way than anything else.

Ostensibly he should have been under command of Denys Mallister, commander of Shadow Tower. Slightly older than even Jeor, he'd been known as a stern, unflappable man who had joined the Night's Watch because he thought their calling an honorable one rather than because he was forced to. His death in his sleep had been a blow to all who knew him, and put a not insignificant hole in the Wall's command structure.

By the point Kyle and Bowen arrived it was night out, not that it mattered here in Jeor's study. After Kyle sat, and had a few moments to sip at the warm ale prepared for him and warm his feet by the fire Jeor began without further preamble. "Benjen, you have the floor."

Benjen nodded, setting his own mug down and looking around the circle grimly. "I've pulled back all of my scouts." He said bluntly. "The wildlings have pushed up almost to the edge of the Haunted Forest and their numbers are tremendous. I wouldn't have believed that anyone could move that many wildlings in one direction, but Mance seems to have figured out the tune to make them all dance the way he wants them to. My best estimate, and I hasten to point out this is only an estimate, is that the outriders of the horde number at least 12,000 straight north of Castle Black. A few of my scouts were able to get past them further to the east and west, and judging from how wildly they report seeing camps, all told the wildlings might number around 200,000."

Into the thoughtful silence that started Benjen went on in a softer tone. "Of course it's spread out, I would estimate that none of the wildling forces have more than six or eight thousand in anyone camp. But they're all coming south as quickly as they can."

"Did any of your scouts report anything... unusual?" Jeor asked, looking at him. The two of them had already gone over this, but a few of the commanders had evinced some skepticism about what the Lords from Winterfell had shared by raven weeks ago. He didn't, nor did Benjen.

Tyrion did somewhat despite his discussion with Ranma and his queen, but then again that was simply Tyrion's nature coming out. He never believed much of anything until he could examine it for himself.

"Several things." Benjen replied with a nod. "Many of them report seeing odd blue lights occasionally in the distance at night. Obviously none of them were wishful to come any closer than they had to such as that. And the wildlings don't go around at night in parties smaller than a hundred."

"They're not even attacking us in smaller groups than that." Said Kyle with a nod, his handsome face grim. He had been a skeptic at first, but the actions of the wildlings were beginning to worry him, lending credence to the idea of what might be out there. He then glanced at Jeor. "I understand that you tried to send an official parlay out?"

"I had hoped that the wildlings would be willing to talk at least." Replied Jeor. "But they don't. Their hatred for us, for the crows as they call us, is too powerful, let alone their disdain for 'kneelers' in general."

"My men would not be willing to go along with any kind of treaty with those savages." Mors Umber stated flatly nodding to a man behind him, who nodded back angrily. "Our memories are as long as the Norrey. They've raided our lands too often, carrying off our womenfolk and killing too many of our folk. If they want to come ahead, even if they're bein' pressed from behind by the White Walkers, I won't shed a single tear for the entire fucking horde."

"You would not be alone in that alas." Said Jeor. "But I have to look beyond the wildlings to the White Walkers and wonder what kind of force they have prepared. Not since the Night's King have they been seen, and even then it was

more rumor than fact. Nor am I happy about how few of our men really believe the true threat coming."

Admittedly that was more a problem for Tyrion and Jeor than it was for the pure northern or clan forces. Southerners simply didn't believe in anything to do with the White Walkers until they stared at it in the face, and the fact that the only Maester on the Wall that did believe was the ancient Targaryen Aemon was not helping matters there. Every other maester on the Wall refused to even consider their existence seriously, some even calling into doubt the original stories about them.

"We could use their numbers holding the Wall, but if they don't talk to us..." Jeor shrugged philosophically. "There's nothing more that we can do. But I do want to make it very clear that if they begin to talk to us, we will be open to it. You don't have to like it Mors, but we might need those men, aye and women, on the Wall."

For a moment tension gripped the room as the two old men stared at one another their gazes unflinching and hard. But then Tyrion spoke up philosophically. "That is a bridge we can cross when or rather if we get to it. For now, are there any more preparations we need to make?"

"Two points. I am ordering the sealing of Stonedoor, Queensgate, and Rimegate's tunnels. I want them frozen all the way through as quickly as possible, which will leave the one here at Castle Black, we'll see if we can possibly trick them into attacking us here."

There were four tunnels through the wall, named for the castles they were part of. Defended by dozens of murder holes around and above them, several heavy oaken doors, and portcullises, they were the only technically weaknesses in the Wall's defenses. But they could be made as solid as the rest of the wall by stuffing them with stone and water, which would freeze and make the tunnels just another part of the Wall.

"Second, I think it's time we open the old armory in every other castle as we have here in Castle Black." Jeor went on. "I'm pulling off men from the continued work on the siege weapons to do those things."

Tyrion nodded, making a note to head down there himself. He'd heard rumors about the old armories, and the fact they housed weapons that had been used against the White Walkers eons ago, but what those weapons were he couldn't discern. Sable Hall had an armory, but it didn't have anything special in it.

Worse, Tyrion couldn't read any of the records that might pertain to it. They were so badly faded no one could make out anything but a word here and there, not enough to give them any true solid information outside what Jon Stark had found in Winterfell, which was far too little.

"I also want every Castle to have half of their men ready to reinforce the guards on the Wall day and night. Just because we have the Wall and the siege weapons and everything else is no reason we can overlook the threat the wildlings pose."

After that Jeor called in the alchemists, giving them their marching orders, and formally turning over Oakenshield, the castle directly east of Castle Black which had already been opened and cleaned, to them. "Whatever you need to make more wildfire you'll get. I want to give the wildlings and anything else coming south a warm reception."

Soon after, Tyrion excused himself. He and Bronn made their way down into the depths of the castle, where the armory here had already been opened.

Inside they found the room packed with old suits of armor, mostly bronze and iron, with a few bits and pieces of rusted rune-encrusted armor here and there standing out from the crowd, their surfaces mangled and scarred. There were also old casks of arrowheads, though when Bronn opened one up he laughed. He reached in, pulling out an arrow head and holding it up to the torchlight. "Dragonglass? Who would make an arrow out of Dragonglass, it's too brittle! The edge is wicked sharp but it won't get through any kind of armor."

Tyrion was silent, moving around him with his own torch holding it up to the far wall where row upon row of small Dragonglass daggers had been hung. Below them several dozen had shattered when they had dropped after the ropes tying them to the wall had rotted away, yet there were still more here than he had thought there would be. "Dragonglass..." Tyrion murmured to himself, his analytical brain going to work. "The White Walkers are supposed to be a force of ice and death, and Dragonglass is made from volcanoes, fire against ice."

Bronn stopped laughing staring at him incredulously. "I thought you were just going along with this northern madness, don't tell me you're actually beginning to believe it?"

"Magic has returned to the world, the dragons that the Stormborn showed me that. And if you need more, look at

this." Tyrion moved past the wall of Dragonglass daggers deeper into the armory pushing through a mangled doorway at the far end to stand in another room.

What had caught his attention was a few plates of armor, the light of them glimmering for a moment with something other than the light of the torch. Bronn pushed in after Tyrion, having to kneel to go through the whole Tyrion had hacked in the doorway. Once within he stood, staring at the 12 bronze suits of full plate armor, much like the ones in the outer room, except these...

All of them looked almost as if they had been finished a few days ago, the runes on them, possibly of a better variety than the ones in the first room, having kept them in pristine condition. And those same runes were glimmering faintly not from the light of the torch, but from an inner fire, yellow and white.

"Seeing this, I think I'm beginning to believe, truly believe my friend." Tyrion said thoughtfully reaching out to tap one of the suits so that it rang. "Yes, I am really beginning to believe, and to be worried."

OOOOOO

"Ware, ice on the port bow!"

Theon Greyjoy and the captain of his current flagship, the *White Walls* looked at one another, then hurried forward. Both of them were heavily bundled up, though unlike on the wall it hadn't become quite cold enough here in the Bay of Seals to force people to go around with all of their skin covered for fear of frostbite.

The two men stood at the prow the boat for a moment staring at the rather large chunk of ice floating past. The ocean was so clear at the moment they could see slightly into it below the ice floating on the surface, so they knew that there was more ice below the surface.

The captain, a middle-aged man who looked as if he had been mauled by a bear or something similar in the past shook his head tugging at a beard that you could hide a small animal in. "That's what, the tenth we've seen since entering the Bay of Seals?"

"I think it might be more than that." Theo said shaking his head. "The Bay of Seals is getting more and more dangerous, but at least we haven't lost any ships just yet."

"Yes, but you hit the nail on the head when you said yet, lad." The captain said shaking his head. "It's only a matter of time before we start losing people. And once that starts happenin', no sailor's gonna want to attempt the Bay again. Ya'll have to switch entirely over to River and land travel ta send supplies up to the Wall." He whistled suddenly pointing off to the side. "Look at that one!"

The ice that the man had noticed off in the distance made the one that the ship had sailed by look small in comparison. It towered above the ships sides by a few meters, though thankfully it wasn't as tall as the masts.

For a moment both men were silent then the captain shook his head. "I'm going to order round-the-clock watch not only from the crow's nest but from fore and aft as well, and periodic soundings too."

"A good idea," Theo replied, shaking his head in too. "I could wish that this mission wasn't necessary, the Wall could probably use more men but..." he shrugged.

The captain laughed. "Funny thing is, if we just waited until the ice became too dangerous to sail in the Bay of Seals, that would probably stop the Raiders out from Skagos and Skane."

"Maybe, or then again maybe they'd be willing to attempt it anyway. Four ships have been attacked, and one totally destroyed in the past month and a half, and until the day completely freezes, sending supplies up by ocean still makes more sense than by land."

The captain grunted, then moved off bellowing orders to his crew. Theon remained at the gun walls, staring south now. *I wonder how Ranma and the others are getting on down south? Half as well as I did I hope.*

The Three Sisters had fallen relatively quickly, though the smallfolk living on them were still a surly lot. Each so-called Lord of the Sisters had tried to fight the invaders alone, and even knowing the waters around the small islands better than the men from White Harbor, their ships had proven completely ineffective against the larger war galleys.

The seas themselves had proven a more formidable obstacle than the small trading boats of the defenders, and several ships had to turn back with damage below decks from running across hidden shoals. One ship had been



sunk, but its men and had been rescued by the others quickly enough that only five of them had died from the freezing waters.

Once they had secured a beachhead on each of the Sisters however, the battles were pretty much over. Wylis and the men of Manderly and Flint were simply better trained, better led and equipped than the Islanders. They lost men in the initial landings on each island, but after they had taken control of the docks, actually besieging the small holdfasts that the rulers of the islands called keeps had been relatively easy. Especially since two of them had been within range of scorpions on a few of the war galleys.

Those so-called Lords were dead now, along with most of the men that had tried to fight back. 80 of the locals have been sent to the work gangs for attempting to attack the invaders, including six women who had attempted to poison some of the men. Theon had heard about that, though he had not been a part of the landing forces. Instead he had commanded the naval side of things, and acquitted himself very well. Another 25 men had been sent to the wall after the last of the Three Sisters had fallen, including six men of house Manderly, guilty of crimes during the sack of the final holdfast.

Wylis and Theon both were very well aware of Ranma's policy towards rapists and murderers, and if they had actually gone through with the rape that they had attempted, all six of them would've been executed by Wylis. Older than the Wolfsworn and rather portly, there was nothing soft about Wylis when it came to making certain that his men acted honorably.

Theon smiled remembering those islands, which would be his soon enough. Word from Winterfell had come through, and Eddard, in his son's name, had formally recognized that Theon would be given lordship over two of the Isles rather than Skane in the Bay of Seals further north. That was a major boost, and Theon could already see that in the future his family, once he got around to actually starting one, would become very wealthy and powerful.

Not because the Three Sisters themselves were any real prizes. There was enough land on the three to put under plow and feed the inhabitants, but no secret mines or anything of that nature. No, the resources of the Three Sisters were in their harbors. Those harbors were small, only able to handle one or at best two full-sized war galleys, but there were nine of them spread out over the islands. Workers from White Harbor were already in the process of enlarging the first few of them, and once that was done all three of the Sisters would become an extremely dangerous naval base.

With those, and the growing port that the locals had begun to call Cranogtown the Bite was not only secure from any kind of sea-based invasion but also the sight of a growing economy thanks in no small part to Lord Manderly and his canny use of the large coffers that his family had built up. Indeed, it was actually bustling a little when Theon sailed north.

*And as Lord of Three Sisters, I'll turn a tidy profit on any shipping that comes through. Now if only I could figure out what I want the last name of my house to be? With all the news we've hear, I agree with Lord Eddard that I can't remain a Greyjoy.*

That thought was a grim one. He had long ago abandoned the idea that the Ironborn way of life was anything more than what Ranma had set it was, a very thin reason to allow rapine and pillaging. But to hear of the aborted invasion of the North, one without any provocation at all, that was hard. Which didn't even consider the bits and pieces of what had happened further south which had reached White Harbor.

"Still can't believe that we're going to that accursed island." Said a voice close by, causing Theon to break out of his musings. "They say those barbarians are all cannibals! And that they worship not the old gods but something else, something darker."

Theon turned, moving over to where a few of the armsmen, all House Locke men, were talking. All of them were working with their armor or weapons, redoing the leather on their hilts, or making certain that their armor fit properly, while one of them was working on restringing a bow rather inexpertly.

"Give me that!" Theon scoffed, reaching over the man's shoulder and pulling the string and bow away from down on a barrel he looked at the man who had been talking. "Do you have anything solid about Skagos to share, or is it all rumor?"

"No my Lord, but well, **everyone** knows! Animals that have never been seen in the North since the Age of Heroes still reside on that island, the men there're all cannibals, and they file their teeth to points. Like sharks!"

Another man spoke up hesitantly. "I wouldn't mind going hunting there. I hear that unicorns and other beasts,

including aurochs and snow tigers still exist on Skagos."

"snow tigers?" asked Theon.

"Like tigers in appearance my lord only larger, with bone armor in places and huge, massive fangs. They are also supposed to be intelligent, like direwolves."

"Sounds like old wives tales to me." Theon scoffed, already finishing up with the bow he pulled at it, frowning a little then shrugged before handing it over to the man. "Try that."

The man did, and barely was able to pull back the string an inch. "Whoops." Theon smirked, sardonically, taking it back from him and loosening the string somewhat so that the pull was far less. "Sometimes forget my own strength."

Then he looked around at the men. "Rumors are one thing, will be seeing truth soon enough. Unless the Skagosi have somehow tamed those legendary beasts of yours they don't matter. Besides, I've met a few so-called legendary animals, and they're flesh and blood. So if it bleeds we can kill it boys."

That won him some laughter, though he noticed that a few of the men still looked nervous, and Theon sighed. Skagos was the island they were sailing towards, not Skane, because several of the raiders had been followed back to the larger island rather than its much smaller neighbor. Whatever the legends about it, the men there had struck out against the rest of the North, and would pay for it. Food and supplies were far too precious to those on the Wall for any other response to be considered.

"As for the men themselves on that island," he said now in a far more lighthearted tone. "Unless they have weapons that can cut through steel chain mail or shields, or tactics that can make our superior weapons useless, there's nothing to fear. Trust in yourself, trust in your weapons, and trust in your commanders, and those Islanders won't know what hit them."

The journey continued for several days, going slower and slower as more and more ice was seen floating in the oceans. Eventually however one of the lookouts shouted, "Land Ho!"

Theon and the captain along with several other men moved forward, staring at the island in the distance. They were coming at it from the southwest, and it began to grow quickly as they made towards it. Eventually it loomed in front of them from horizon to horizon a mountainous island with green and white showing interspersed everywhere, and they began to sail around the southern edge of had to search for a landing spot.

They found one, a decent bit of beach with the forest that seemed to dominate the entire island just out of bow range inland from the edge of the shore. It also didn't seem to have any hidden rocks or shoals. It was extremely shallow as well, but they had brought along enough rowboats to put the men ashore, if slowly. Indeed it looked as if it already been used as such, with several trees hacked down by the shoreline and marks in the sand as if longboats had been pulled through at those points.

The war galleys anchored offshore turning in such a way that they could bring their scorpions to bear on the shoreline. While scorpions were not meant to be used against infantry they could possibly be deadly at breaking up a charge. The archers, about 400 men all told, also lined the sides of the galleys facing into the shoreline, their bows at the ready. Theon was the only one not with them, he was in the first boat ready to go ashore.

The first two boats landed easily enough, and the men began to spread out along the beach while behind them their fellows continued to disembark. However that process was interrupted by a shout from the edge of the forest. Hundreds of men suddenly appeared there, charging forward. They spoke in the old tongue, shouting imprecations but mainly along the themes of "This is our land!" "Death to the cowards!" "Death to those who bowed to the Andals!"

Upon even an initial glance these men had more in common with the wildlings than the Northerners. Their weapons tended to be large hatchets, broadswords and a few greatswords here and there. Most of them were of bronze, with only one weapon of iron that Theon could see. What armor they wore, and it wasn't very prevalent among them, was mainly bronze, with some bone and boiled leather here and there.

Mainly however they seemed to go bare-chested, even here in the cold. Whirls of blood red and yellow adorned them here and there signifying Theon didn't know what. All of them bore scars, and Theon would later realize that every man there was marked in particular by a scar running from one ear down to their mouths on the left side of their face.

There were a few bows among them, and those archers began to fire on the men already on the shoreline. But two of them fell as Theon fired back quickly, his hands moving rapidly. "Form shield wall! Get the next two boats ashore!"

His next arrow took the man who wielded an iron sword through the throat with such ferocity that the arrow actually punched all the way through his throat so that only feathers on the end were visible, hurling the man backwards with the force imparted by the arrow. His body crashed into two men behind them, and all three went down in a jumble.

Theon didn't care having moved onto the next targets. Behind him the next boat beached itself and the men on it hastily jumped out into the shallows forming up with their fellows.

Behind them the war galleys and the archers began to fire. The scorpions slammed into the ground along the tree line, startling a dozen more men from charging forward, slaying several of them while the archers took the initial force under fire.

But by that point the fastest of the men from the trees had hit the shield wall. And despite being bronze, their weapons could still kill you just as well as steel. Here and there men began to go down, and the melee became general.

Theon dropped his bow into the shallows, pulling out his dirk and a small shield from his back, using it to block a blow from a heavy axe which astonished the man wielding it. That astonishment didn't last long, because Theon's blade took the man in the eye, carving through it and into the brain behind it before a kick sent the body sprawling away. Then he whirled around, bringing his dirk down to hack at a man's thigh on his other side, his shield, its edge sharpened, slicing into the man's throat at the same time.

A second later Theon was forced to block several blows at once, redirecting them with dirk and shield rather than trying to block them, lashing out as he could and killing several more men. With their bodies waste or knee-deep in the waters most of his men couldn't move as freely as he could, but then again once the attackers got to grips with them neither could they. Worse for both sides if someone went down with an injury, they had to get themselves back out of the water because none of their fellows had any time to spare to pull them upright again, so they faced drowning quickly.

The battle teetered in the balance for a moment, then the next group of ships arrived, beaching themselves on either side of the melee. There men, all Flint men jumped out and charged, joining the melee. They began to forge up from the shoreline, forcing their way out of the water to where they could move more freely over the hacked bodies of their friends and attackers both. More and more of the attackers turned to flee, only to be hacked down from behind.

Theon's blade took a man in the stomach, ducking him easily while Theon mentally shook his head at the idea of going into any battle without armor if you could help it. He then hurled his battered buckler into another man's face, sending him flying backwards with a broken jaw and nose. A stomp lashed out, crushing a man's neck where he was feebly trying to haul himself out of the water below Theon.

That cleared the area around Theon, and he stood back for a moment, surveying the battle before barking out orders. "Form shield wall halfway towards the forest! Get those boats back out there bringing more men in!"

The difference in the armor of the two sides had proved telling. Theon and his men only lost a little above 200, and most of them had drowned having fallen into the water along the shore and been unable to lift themselves back out of it. The attackers had lost upwards of 600 men, though that was just a guess, since most of their bodies had been pulled away out to sea by the current.

Theon called his four commanders together, a man from House Flint named Calis, Terrell Locke, a cousin of that family, and Sigmund, an armsmen from House Karstark. "We just won a major victory. I was always worried about our initial landing."

"If they had brought more men to the party we'd been in trouble." said Sigmund, nodding his head.

"Do you think those were the same raiders that have been attacking our shipping? If I remember my history, there were several 'clans' on Skagos, not just one."

"No idea, but we're supposed to secure a beachhead here so let's start building a fort, that might force the locals to come out and talk to us. If they keep on attacking us, we'll keep on killing them but I hope they'll see reason quickly."

"If we kill enough of them maybe." Said Calis, having knelt down to turn one of the dead bodies over and opening its mouth. After a moment Calis smiled. "At least the bit about them sharpening their teeth ain't true. Still have to wonder 'bout the animals though. I wouldn't mind me a unicorn horn to take home to the missus."

That elicited some ribald comments from the other men around him, but Theon had already turned away staring into

the Woodlands. Now that he was coming down from the rush of combat, he was becoming, becoming bothered about something. This island, it was giving him the shivers, though he couldn't pinpoint why.

He still couldn't a few days later, after the men had finished making a makeshift fort out of cut logs from the forest a bare day's march in from the shore. Not once had they seen any of the locals, save a few skirmishers who tried to ambush his men. And none of the wild animals that supposedly made this place their home.

Standing on top of one of the long houses, he stared out over the forest all around them, scowling angrily. "If they aren't going to come to us, we'll have to go in search of them. We'll leave a force of 400 here, mixed swordsman and archers, while the rest of us march further inland. And I'm damn glad I didn't bring along any cavalry."

Calis nodded somewhat chagrined. It had been his suggestion to bring along cavalry, despite the fact that it would cut down on the number of men they could take since horses needed more fodder and space aboard a ship than men. Thankfully he'd been overruled. "The forest is too dense, we couldn't get a formed force of cavalry through it for all the gold in the Rock. And it's too steep and too rocky in most places too."

"None of our scouts have reported any sign of anything like a farm yet, so it's possible they live just on hunting, which means we can't find any real target." said Sigmund. "But I think we missed a problem when we were planning this. This island is actually larger than any other island around Westeros. That, with and the denseness of the forest and the nature of the land, we could be here for weeks!"

"Doesn't matter." Theon replied, shaking his head. "We've got a job to do, and we're going to do it, no matter how long it takes."

"And if they're not willing to talk?"

"Then we kill them all." Theon replied grimly. "If we wipe out all of their warriors, I assume the survivors will get the hint."

"Tall order if this place has as many men as a Noble House can call upon." Terrell said, shaking his head. "But you're right."

With that the small meeting broke up, but Theon remained there staring out into the distance. All around them the sloped of the land led up to large mountain in the distance, and he wondered really how many people were on this island. *Still, if I need them I can call up more men from Flint and Locke, even Manderly if I have to.*

Turning away he made towards the latter leading down the side of the long house, smiling faintly as he smelled dinner. He never saw the points of blue light staring at him out of the dark of the forest.

OOOOOO

It had taken a messenger from the new Baratheon-Tyrell army around King's Landing almost 2 and 1/2 weeks to make the journey to Highgarden. It was a perilous journey, both because of the weather and because of various bandit groups that had sprung up here and there, taking advantage of how many lords and their men had gone to war. Though in all honesty they were bandits in name only, since most of them were levy deserters from the Reach army.

Worse they ran into problems with their horses, and only being knights rather than lords could not demand remounts from the castles and keeps they stopped at on the way south. Even the army under Lord Bryce Caron had no supplies or horses to lend them. How much of this was real and how much Lord Bryce's own thoughts on the arrangement Mace had reached, none of the men Mace had sent to deliver his message could say.

So by the time the knight turned errand-boy and his guards had reached Highgarden, their numbers had fallen from 15 to 5, including the knight. He was named Brodrick Westbrook and while he was relieved to finally arrive, he was more hopeful that he could stay a few days in Highgarden before turning around, not at all eager to hit the road once more.

The mere sight of mud was enough to drive Brodrick to distraction by the time he had handed the reins of his horse to the grooms. Unfortunately, it was only the start of his problems. Kneeling before the Lady Margaery, he quailed at the expression on her face. It wasn't anger, it wasn't even rage. It was sheer frothing fury.

Indeed, it took all of Margaery's considerable self-control not to loose her tongue on Brodrick. It would've been impolite, not to mention useless while she read the missive from her father.

'Daughter, you know that I was angered by you and your grandmother's connivance to halt your immediate marriage Renly, but it seems as if you were correct to be wary of tying us irrevocably to him. Not only did he not possess Robert's spine, he didn't possess his military acumen either. The young fool led us into a disastrous battle against Stannis, one that has cost us ruinously. Indeed, I myself had to take part in the battle, and while I dealt with my portion of it exceedingly well punishing a band of traitors amongst our lords, the main battle was lost.

But fear not, for I have brokered a deal with Stannis that will still tie our family into the royal house! Selyse Florent is barren! Because of this King Stannis has agreed to set her aside in favor of your hand and our allegiance to his cause. I know he is older than Renly, at least there is proof that he will be able to do his husbandly duty. Whereas there have been rumors all along about Renly that I should've taken more seriously. Nonetheless, You will still be Queen of all Westeros my dear!

As such, I require you, and a band of guards of course, to present yourself to Stannis as soon as possible. Given the state of even the Rose Road, I know it won't be easy, but the profit will be well worth it.

I hope that Garlan has already begun to take the Ironborn to task for their idiocy, and that the lords we allowed to go on their way will do their proper job under Lord Bryce once they arrive to retake the lands along the Mander. Still if not, Garlan will be able to see to that after he has retaken the Shield Islands behind them. I have also heard that Willas is leading a force into the Westerlands, that is excellent news! The time of the Lannisters has passed, it is the time for House Tyrell to rise!

Yours Affectionately, Mace Tyrell, Lord of Highgarden, Defender of the Marches, Warden of the South, High Marshall of The Reach.'

She crumbled the note, making an effort of will that astonished her to not throw it at the man in front of her. *That fool. That idiotic, arrogant, crown-besotted **moron!** Yes, Stannis can set aside his wife if she is proven barren, the precedent is there but this, so quickly exchanging one Baratheon for another! Using me as a pawn that blatantly, and to the one that the smallfolk are already calling the Stannis the Burner!*

Actually most of the smallfolk seemed to call Stannis the Flame Fucker, but Margaery wasn't supposed to have heard that particular appellation. Needless to say, rumors of King's Landing reached here long before this message did. *Does he think that the smallfolk and the Lords will simply forget, or understand that Stannis had no choice?*

*Intellectually that might be true, but emotionally? The Lords **might** be willing to understand that he had no choice but to burn out the capital if he wanted to be able to use his army as a mobile force. But the smallfolk? They'll only see the fact that he just burned the largest city in Westeros to save himself some time and effort.*

"My lady?" Said one of the maids, hesitantly moving forward to touch her shoulder. Margaery smiled at the woman, then waved her hands at the Brodrick. "I will have an appropriate response for this soon enough ser. For now, one of the servants will show you too your room."

After the man left she looked at the maid who had touched her shoulder, speaking in a controlled yet pleasant tone. "Could you please go find my grandmother, and show her this?" She held out the ball up of parchment, her tone turning sardonic. "It should still be legible, or as legible as it ever was."

The maid nodded, and later that evening Margaery met with her grandmother. Olenna's mind had recovered from her heart attack after hearing of the assault on the Arbor, though her body had not. She could barely walk unaided now, and her fingers lacked what little strength they had before her heart attack.

Her tongue alas had recovered just as much as her mind had. "Stupid idiotic incompetent, why did we let the buffoon out without a minder!? The perfect time to back off and declare our open neutrality, where we could see to our own affairs then bow to whoever won out, and what does he do? Hitches us right back to a stag hell bent on dragging us into yet another war!"

"That was your decision and his, not mine." Margaery retorted coldly. She had not come back to Highgarden to put herself under her grandmother thumb once more and had worked since arriving back here to retain her independence while also putting the city on a winter and wartime footing. The men who had come back from Oldflowers and her standing among the smallfolk had allowed her to act as she saw fit here in Highgarden, despite Garth, the castle's seneschal, still being more of a follower of her father and Olenna than Margaery. Yet she knew she needed her grandmother, whose spy network was relatively extensive.

"Yes, yes, let loose your spleen on the defenseless old woman. Once you've done that to your satisfaction granddaughter, perhaps we could speak about what are we going to do about this message of my idiot son's?" the

old woman replied tartly.

Margaery smiled thinly. "It isn't what we're going to do it's what I've already done. You might have forgotten the fact that I was friends with Ranma Stark, but I did not. Despite his marriage to the Dragon Queen, Ranma will never forget his friends. And I think that all of Westeros could do a lot worse than having Ranma Stark as king. The rumors from the smallfolk about the Daenerys Stormborn are promising as well."

She scowled internally. *I could wish that they weren't married, but that seems to be a done deal as grandmother's spies reported months back, and such a man as Ranma will never set his wife aside regardless of reasons. And I will never be any man's second choice, no matter how magnificent he is.*

"And what did you promise the Stark boy?" Olenna asked skeptically.

"Since he's crushed the Westerlands army and executed Tywin Lannister I think you can dispense with the 'boy' grandmother! And I promised House Tyrell's loyalty and resources, so long as they agreed that Willas would be the new Lord Paramount. I vowed to place myself in their hands entire, as surfeit of that loyalty."

The old woman reared back in her chair in shock. While those words changed meanings from case to case, what it meant in essence was that Margaery had placed herself completely at the mercy of the Ranma and this Daenerys Stormborn. They could decide to do anything they wanted to her, remove her from House Tyrell, take her as a maid or even as a war-whore. And even if they didn't do anything so unpleasant, they would control when and who she would marry. "How, how long ago?"

"Right after the Ironborn began to attack. I've been planning this for a while. I've also sent a message to Willas after this latest bit of provocation. If he agrees with me, we can remove our father on grounds of madness."

"That's well and good, but it won't matter. He's with the army remember? Whatever we do here, it won't matter a damn to Mace where he is. He'll still have his own power base, one that can take control of ours if it decided to see this as a rebellion."

Olenna paused before going on thoughtfully. "Then again, the power of Highgarden has never truly been with its army, but with its resources here. And if you can get the smallfolk on your side, I suppose it could work even once he returns."

"If he returns." Margaery said shaking her head.

She did not mention that she had ordered every smith in the city to start making armor, spearheads, swords, and anything else they could which would aid in the war effort. Margaery had also doubled the pay scale for men of able body and mind that came forward to receive training from the armsmen, archers and knights Garlan had sent back with her and the survivors of the battle at Oldflowers. They were five hundred good men who were already training ten times their number from men raised from the city. They wouldn't be a field force by any means for months, but they would be able to hold the walls.

But Margaery didn't mention any of that because she had no doubt Olenna already knew. But her grandmother was more concerned with familial issues than military ones. "And Alerie?" Olenna asked softly.

Margaery winced. "Mother doesn't take part in politics, and I am not exactly going to go out of my way to inform her of the message that father sent me. So long as she stays out of the way it, it will be fine. He is there, we are here. It's that simple."

"Only if he loses it will be that simple to her." Olenna replied coldly. "If they win, it becomes very confusing."

Margaery shook her head, a faint smile on her face. "I have faith in Ranma Stark. And as I said earlier, after the complete destruction of the Westerlands' military power, I think you should too."

Several days later two different ravens arrived. One was from Garlan, saying that he had arrived at Oldtown. The remnants of the Redwyne fleet had gathered there, and he was already in the process of planning the campaign to reclaim the Arbor and the Shield Islands from the Ironborn. Even better, he wrote that Lady Desmera Redwyne had escaped in a small fishing boat thanks to a fisherman who owed her family a favor.

That had nearly made Margaery break out in tears of thanks to the Maiden, knowing what horrors her cousin would have faced in Ironborn hands. Desmera was Lady Redwyne now, head of that house, and Olenna was already looking around for a proper marriage to the girl.

The other was from Riverrun. This contained a short summary of the events in the Riverlands, ending with Lord Tywin's execution and the response from Ranma and Daenerys. Margaery smiled thinly, and leaned back in her chair at the head of the family table. "And that I believe is that. With this very favorable response, I will send Ser Brodrick back with our response to my father's idiocy."

"I can't agree to this!" Said Alerie from her place nearby. She had somehow learned of Margaery's plans that morning, and was not happy for its implications. "This is your father you're talking about! While his actions of late might not be... be the most intelligent, you still owe him your loyalty as head of the household, daughter!"

"No, no I don't." Margaery replied coldly. "Where was he when the Ironborn invaded? Where was he when the Lannisters invaded from the west? Where is he now, when we are beginning to get reports from House Meadows, that the Viper of Dorne has turned his ruinous march into the Reach? My father has failed as Lord Paramount on practically every level mother! I cannot, **we** as House Tyrell cannot afford to continue to follow him into madness upon madness."

"Moreover, this is a most admirable document on a political level, both what is said and what is implied." Olenna put in thoughtfully, tapping the message. "The Stark youth and Daenerys are already acting as King and Queen already, something Stannis has not done yet, nor Viserys, if my agent's reports about his return are accurate. They're acting as if it is a certainty that they will win the war, and are laying the framework for what happens after. Excellent. I truly did underestimate Stark daughter, and I formally apologize to you for ending your engagement to the boy, to Ranma. If this is how he acts with the Dragon Queen beside him, I would have loved to see how he would act with you beside him."

"I would have too." Margaery replied tartly. "And don't think I'm going to forget that you and father agreed with that bit of idiocy anytime soon."

"But even so..." Alerie began, looking between them.

"Mother." Margaery said interrupting the older woman and reaching across take her hands flinching slightly when the older woman pulled back sharply. "I know you love father, but you can't let that love blind you to the mistakes he's made. Willas will make a far better Lord Paramount than father ever was and, when this is all over and dealt with, father can remain here in comfort."

*If he survives which is doubtful*, she thought, far more coldly than her words. It shocked her to the core to realize that she wouldn't miss the man overmuch. As a daughter he hadn't really had much in rearing Margaery other than doting on her occasionally. And as she grew older and more independent, Margaery felt Mace had stifled her, never listening to her as well as he did Olenna unless the two agreed, and even then not often.

"No," Margaery said aloud. "We need to start thinking about the future now."

OOOOOO

Others too were thinking about the future. Doing something about it however was a little more difficult.

"What do you mean she won't meet with us? Her turning away our messengers away is one thing, but here we, the lords of the Vale, her husband's primary vassals, are personally come to speak to her. What does that bitch think she's playing at?!" Lord Redfort of the castle of the same name glared at the messenger from the Eyrie.

He wasn't the only one. Many of the Lords of the Vale were in the tent, and practically every one of them was staring at the man. It was not a comfortable experience for the young man bearing the bad news.

The messenger was Alber Royce, son of Lord Nestor Royce of the Gates of the Moon, the castle set at the entrance to the Giant's Lance, the mountain that held the Eyrie. The army in question was currently camped just out of bow range of the castle's defenders.

He was also a distant relation of Lord Royce, who was in fact the only Lord not staring at him at the moment. Yohn Royce was looking down at his hands, his face thoughtful. He was also not wearing his armor for some reason, which was unusual enough to have normally caused comment, and would have if Yohn hadn't arrived on the heels of the messenger that was the source of the current issue.

"P-Permission to speak freely my lords?" Albar asked hesitantly. When Lord Redfort, acting as their speaker nodded he went on. "Lady Lysa refuses to come out of her rooms in the Eyrie. Only a scant handful of her servants are allowed in her presence. She, my lords, Lysa is **mad!** She is gripped by some kind of, of paranoid **delusion** that

anyone and everyone is plotting against her and her son! She refuses to let the boy out of her sight, and is coddling Robert even more than she had before."

There were some growls of disgust at that and several of the Lords actually spat to one side in contempt. The knowledge that the boy was dimwitted, frail and still being weaned on mother's milk had spread far and wide. Indeed, more than one man there wondered truly if the boy really was John Arryn's son, whatever the age of the father had been upon his conception.

"Does she say anything about the events mentioned in our messages to her?" asked Lord Templeton. "There are great events happening elsewhere, a war for the throne, and here the Vale sits, stewing in our own juices!"

Albar gulped again. This part was not going to go over well, he knew it. "Could I have your words of honor that you won't kill the messenger my lords?" He said only half-jokingly.

That actually won him some chuckles, but it also aroused Lord Royce out of his introspection and he smiled faintly at his distant kinsman. "Speak plainly Albar. None of us will harm you for what you say."

"The lady Lysa keeps on insisting that the Lannisters were at fault for Lord Arryn's death, that they are still sending spies and murderers after her and her boy. Yet at the same time, she also says that Petyr, Littlefinger I mean, should've been in communication with her for months now! When she was told about the rumors of a siege cutting off King's Landing, she seemed lost, and became even more paranoid if that was possible. Now she is simply waiting for word of Petyr surviving before she does anything. She won't move from the Eyrie until he does arrive nor will she give any orders until he is here for her to, to consult with."

For a moment the Lords were silent simply staring at the young man. Then Lord Tollett spoke as if biting off each word. "Are you telling me that a minor Lord is going to be in position to order us around? Stranger's hells, House Baelish doesn't even have more than what, 40 men to its name! Hell's its not even three generations old yet! And judging by the rumors over the past half a year, Petyr has not exactly covered himself in glory!"

Lord Belmore was a younger man wide of shoulders and unfortunately wide of mouth as well. "You know whenever I saw them together I thought that Petyr and Lysa were close and he did ward at Riverrun when she was younger. You don't think..."

"Enough!" Said Lord Redfort cutting the man off with a chop of the hand. "We'll leave that kind of tale-telling to maids. We have more important things to mind at the moment. What you're saying, is that not only will she not meet with this, she plans to simply sit up there and do nothing. I don't know about the rest of you my lords, but that is not enough!"

"Leave us Albar." Said Lord Royce, nodding his head at in Redfort's direction. The two of them were the nominal leaders of this delegation, which consisted of a little under half of the houses of Vale. The other half were content to sit and remain neutral for now, not having any clear idea of the true events that had started this present war. *Or rather, Yohn thought to himself as Albar left, not seeing any profit in them choosing a side at this point. It is a sad thing, but gold and profit matter more to many lords than honor and duty. Still so long as they do not oppose us openly, that is enough for me.*

"Frankly my lords, so long as Lysa stays up there, the amount of damage she can do is minimal. I'm not happy with leaving the Eyrie and the Giant's Lance under her command, but judging by Albar's tone it sounds as if Lysa will turn her own men against her soon enough."

"What about your kinsman, Nestor?" Asked Lord Templeton.

"He stands with us." Yohn replied, nodding his head. He had been estranged a bit from his kinsman for several years now, but recently the two of them had opened dialog again. Yohn wasn't going to say it aloud, but something down King's Landing, either the latest rumor of the plague and the siege or something before it had changed Nestor's attitude.

Redfort gestured all the Lords back into their seats, which most of them had left jumping to their feet angrily when Albar had reported that lady Lysa would not see them. "Some wine my fellow lords, I think we need cool heads for this."

Yohn nodded, smiling at his ally and sitting down. "With Lysa drowning in her own madness, and no clear line of succession, it behooves us my lords to consider how we should act. Not only for the good of our Houses but the Vale as a whole."



"You're talking about the other messenger the one that the Stark youth sent to us yes?" Said Lord Tollett. "That man's journey must've been harrowing, especially with the mountain clans acting up at this point."

Yohn nodded, his eyes for a moment turning towards the North. *I wonder how the others will react to my own bit of news?*

"A large stain on the Vale's honor it might have been, but I myself cannot say I was unhappy to hear that the North annexed the Three Sisters. Lord Manderly is a shrewd fellow, and I have no doubt that the day of those be-cursed islands being used as bases for smuggling and piracy is over." Said Lord Pryor. "My House and House Elesham have been stung by them more than often enough. But neither of us have ever had a powerful navy to do anything about it."

"Some reparation will no doubt be made towards the Vale for that. Most of you met Eddard Stark during Robert's Rebellion my lords or before when he warded here in the Eyrie with Robert under Lord Arryn. Can any of you say that such a move was done capriciously, or with malice aforethought?" Asked Lord Templeton looking around the camp table shrewdly.

None of them could. Frankly most of them had already made up their minds about that and further what must've happened in the capital. The Lannisters had never been really favored in the Vale, save perhaps in Gulltown where their gold spoke the loudest. But nor were they willing to follow the Starks against House Baratheon, either of them.

As they were away with their armies, and lady Lysa was not sharing anything she received by raven, none of the Lords here knew about more recent events. This included the now utter defeat of the Lannisters in the Riverlands, the destruction of King's Landing, or Renly's death. The only one they had a hint of was the Lannister's defeat, which had begun to spread through the Bloody Gate by way of the Vale Road after the battle at the Ruby Ford.

"We will see about the language of this message that the so-called Dragon Queen and Young Wolf have sent us." said Lord Redfort, voicing most of their thoughts allowed.

Ser Breakstone was a knight of that House sworn to the service of House Ryger, and of an age with Tristan and Vincent. At Lord Ryger's suggestion he had been chosen by Ranma and Daenerys to lead the twelve men detachment that they had sent from Harroway to Gulltown and then from there to Runestone. Upon his arrival there Ser Breakstone had been told that Lord Royce was not in residence, and so had continued his journey until finding the army gathered outside the Gates of the Moon.

He was bedraggled, worn, and stained with the mud of several week's hard travel. But Breakstones' eyes were sharp, and the message that he handed over to Lord Royce was pristine in its carrying case.

Yohn nodded at the youngster then tore off the seal, staring at it thoughtfully for a moment with a faint smile on his face before handing it over to Lord Redfort who grunted as he looked at the image on it, smiling a bit at the artistry of it. Reading the message took Lord Royce only a few moments, and he handed it off quickly. "They are offering to compensate for the loss of the Three Sisters by three Crown remits to be used on three towns, to allow them to grow into cities. An interesting idea, and more than enough compensation."

Redfort grunted again, before handing the message on. "I note that it doesn't say anything about demanding that we raise our armies and march for them, or that we even simply stay neutral. It mentions Lysa by name and declares her unfit to rule of course, but what particularly interests me is that bit about deciding upon the future leadership of the Vale 'when time allows'."

"Yes that is interesting isn't it?" said Royce musingly while the message was passed around his fellow lords.

"You are both overlooking the evidence that they share about Joffrey's illegitimacy." said Lord Templeton staring at the other two thoughtfully. "To my mind that is the most important bit about this message."

The message from Daenerys and Ranma laid out their position in terms of the crown, Joffrey's illegitimacy and their reasons for enmity with Stannis and Renly. Renly running away from the capital was mentioned, which both Ranma and Daenerys had seen as a betrayal of both Renly's loyalty to his brother, and to the friendship of his family to the Starks. Stannis's attack on the ship was mentioned as well, though not the method of that attack.

They also detailed their plans to destroy the Westerlands army which added at that point had not been accomplished just yet. Simply mentioning the battle at the Ruby Ford wouldn't have been enough giving Tywin's reputation going into this war, so neither of them had mentioned it.

Then there was the message about the annexation of the Three Sisters and the reasoning behind it followed by what amounted to an offer of payment, one which all of the Lords there were eager to use in the future. The Vale had few towns, but many of them were in excellent positions to become cities if allowed to be so. Along the coast of the Vale, that growth would be fueled by trade with Essos and with the rest of Westeros by sea or river.

There were no demands, no call to arms, not yet. But the hint was there that such things would be coming, with the phrase for 'future military actions should such be required'. In many ways it was an understatedly arrogant message. It said subtly that the Vale so long as it remained neutral really didn't matter to their plans. That victory was almost assured whatever the Vale did.

Redfort and Royce both let the other Lords question Ser Breakstone closely about the events he'd personally seen, about what he had heard, about the state of the army that Ranma Stark was leading. They had heard of the fall of the Twins, but not that it occurred so easily, or by using the old Frey bastard's attitude against him. There was more than one Lord chuckling at that, saying the man had been hoisted on his own banner. The battle of the Ruby Ford was also mentioned, the total victory it had been, along with the portion of the campaign leading up to it, as well as the news that Stone Hedge and Wayfarer's Rest both fallen to Stark forces.

But that was the military side of things. The other side of things interested the Lords just as much. The obvious friendship between Myrcella Baratheon and Ranma along with Daenerys was particularly mentioned, as was Myrcella's command of the hospitals, though where that would odd name came from none of them understood. That she had kept the Army from being plagued by disease and contagion was also marked upon, and more than one messenger was sent for in order to start the organization of their own army camp along similar lines.

Yet even more than all that, the fact that Daenerys was in such control of her dragons was astonishing to anyone who had studied their lineage. The direwolves of the Starks brought some mutters, though Lord Redfort noticed that Lord Royce's eyes narrowed at that, and he stopped speaking at that point, simply watching the events around him.

After the messenger had been questioned closely about everything to do with the army and what he had personally seen however Lord Royce held up a hand. After a moment the other Lords paused in their discussion, and he stared at the messenger hard. "We have heard about their deeds, about how they acted upon this campaign, we've even heard about some of their long-term plans, all of which I find good. But tell me about the people Breakstone, what are your impressions of Ranma Stark and Daenerys Targaryen. Speak as a Valeman now lad, not as a knight sworn to House Ryger."

The young man winced a little at that, but after a moment nodded. "My lords, not since the Age of Heroes has there been a group such as this. Ranma Stark might only be a bare twenty, but he is the finest military commander I have seen or even read about, even comparing him to King Robert! The Stormborn, Daenerys Stormborn might lack military knowledge, but in the realm of politics I have never seen the like. She is ruthless yet honorable, determined and just, and personally courageous. Even Princess Myrcella is becoming her own legend among the army and the smallfolk my lords as the Maiden of Healing. I am proud that the house I am sworn to has sworn itself to their service."

There was a moment of silence as all of the men looked at the youngster who had before that speech simply answered their questions calmly and matter-of-factly. But with that speech there had been real passion in his voice, and Yohn nodded internally. *Such a king I could follow, such a queen I could bow to.* "Leave us, you'll know our response soon enough. There should be a guard outside the tent, send him in."

The Lords were silent as the guard came in. After Yohn motioning him near, he whispered into his ear for a moment. The man then bowed and left the tent quickly.

After that man had left, Lord Templeton was the first to speak, putting all of their thoughts into words. "The dragons conquered the Vale once, they can do so again. Whatever the latest rumors from the fisher-folk say, this Daenerys has two dragons to her brother's one. That is a potent threat, even or perhaps especially to us here in the Vale."

That was the way the Vale had been conquered the first time. The Bloody Gate had turned aside an entire army, the slaughter had been magnificent. And then a single dragon had flown over the Bloody Gate to the Eyrie, landed on the top of it and demanded House Arryn's surrender. Something similar could happen again, to each of their castles in turn, none of which were in the same league as the Eyrie in terms of a defensive position.

"What do we want out of the future my lords?" asked Lord Redford. "For my part, I want a strong and united Vale, a Lord Paramount House that is powerful and numerous."

"The destruction of the mountain clans." said Ser Belmore, entirely serious.

The mountain clans of the Vale while each individually smaller than the mountain clans of the North actually had more military strength combined than those clans did. However while the northern mountain clans were firm allies of House Stark and had been for thousands of years, the mountain clans of the Vale had never bowed to House Arryn or the Mountain Kings that preceded the Vale as a united kingdom.

The mountain clans were inherently warlike, warring upon one another and the lowlanders as they could. And unfortunately with the Vale leadership in turmoil, they had begun to raid the lowlands heavily. The army had dealt with several such attacks on its outriders by massacring the groups while they marched into the Vale of Arryn, but all of them had felt the stings of raids in their own lands. That was why the Army they had gathered to, if need be, besiege the Eyrie numbered a bare 9000. None of them could afford to pull more men out of their own lands.

"Rather an unreasonable request, my friend." said Lord Elesham. "One I would love to see, but one which is unfortunately out of our reach."

"Perhaps." said Lord Royce thoughtfully. "But this Stark youth might have some ideas in that direction."

"You're talking about more than just remaining neutral as they have asked." said Lord Redfort leaning forward intently and staring at his old friend, his normally mild eyes sharp. "Why?"

"You'll all see the answer in a moment." Yohn replied, his tone actually tired as he leaned back in his chair rubbing at his bald pate for a moment. Not a moment later, the guard entered carrying what looked like a piece of armor covered by a cloth. "Remove the cloth and put my armor on the table."

The guard did so, and once the cloth was removed gasps of astonishment spread among the Lords. The armor in question was bronze, etched with runes. It was the armor that had given Lord Royce his nickname, Bronze Yohn. Normally the sight of it would not incur any interest, practically every Lord in the Vale had seen Lord Royce and it at one point or another.

What they had not seen before was the runes on it glowing as they were now. Normally they were simply odd letters etched into the metal, though they evidently did something since the bronze armor did work just as well as normal suit of steel plate. But now, now they were glowing with a dim yellow light, and it was certainly not the reflection of the torches in each of the corners of the tent or the light from the open tent flap.

Yohn spoke in the silence the site invoked. "Magic has come back into the world and old powers stir. I know not why the Masters in the Citadel have ignored their age-old duty and not informed us of the black candles having been lit, but I know they have been. You know my family keeps to the Old Ways my lords. We Remember." That was his families motto, and it encompassed their attitude as much as House Stark's did its grim purpose. "We have done so since time immemorial, my family was among the First Men, and I've always been proud of that. Now that old blood is singing. When I last stood in front of my castle's weirwood tree, I sensed a call."

He stood up, staring around him with hard eyes. "A call to the North. I think it is there my lords that the new king and queen of Westeros will have need of us. Let our fellow lords stew in their neutrality, and indeed I will not raise my blade against any Baratheon, be it Renly or Stannis. But my lords I will still do my duty as a Lord of house Royce not just to my men and to my smallfolk, but to Westeros as a whole."

The Vale lords had always been more superstitious than those of the Westerlands, the Reach or elsewhere. And the old gods held sway here in more than just Lord Royce. A few lords objected, but with the proof in front of them that magic was returning, they couldn't argue. And all of them knew what threat might be coming from the North, and that it was the duty of every knight and lord to meet it.

In the end, they decided to leave about 3000 of their men here outside the gates of the Moon under Lord Belmore just in case Lysa tried to do anything, or more importantly to take over the running of the Eyrie in conjunction with Lord Nestor after Lysa had finally worn her man's patience down enough for them to do away with the woman themselves. Benedar Belmore was also an old man, older by 22 years than Lord Royce, and his body was frail liable to fail him on the march. His mind was still shrewd, and he was a veteran of the Ninepenny Kings war as well as the internal war that the Vale had fought during Robert's Rebellion.

The rest of the men, some 6000 strong would pick up another thousand or so more men from House Royce of the Gates, as they marched toward the Bloody Gate and beyond, making their way to the Kings Road to either meet up with Ranma and his army as it marched northward, or march north itself. Behind them Ser Breakstone turned around, heading back to Gulltown and the ship that would take him and his men to Harroway with glad tidings.

OOOOOO

But Gulltown would not be the safe harbor that Ser Breakstone and his men had left. Despite many of the Vale lords wishing to remain neutral, war had come to the Vale. It came on dragon wings. It came with fire.

Ser Damon Shett was a barely middle-aged man, and marked as one of the better knights of the Vale. But he was untried in the role of leadership, and in the past few hours that had been rubbed into his face. Now he stood on the streets of Gulltown, while around him and his men fought the men of House Grafton, hacking and slashing at one another.

He ducked under a blow from a mace from one man, slamming the pommel of his longsword into the man's stomach with enough force to knock the breath out of him despite his chain mail, before a punch to the man's head flung him to the side. But Damon didn't have enough time to capitalize on his opponent going down, because another man pushed through the scrum all around them to go sword to sword with Damon. But Damon proved the stronger, pushing the other man back with a single heave onto his heels, opening his defense up enough for an overhead slash to catch them right at the juncture of the neck in the shoulder.

Damon stomped hard on the back of a downed man then had to dodge as someone wielding a spear came at him. His sword thrust took the man in the chest, but he gasped in agony as someone from behind him cut into his shoulder. With that arm now hanging loose at his side Damon backed away, taking a moment to notice that his younger brother, a boy of only 16 or so, was dead at his feet.

In the distance Damon could see Gull Tower burning, and he yelled aloud. "Damn you Grafton, damn you!" He barely had a moment to notice that all of the attackers had suddenly pulled back, as a shadow fell upon him. He looked up staring for one wide-eyed moment before a tongue of flame took him from above.

OOOOOO

Pulling back on the reins and urging Balerion back into the sky Viserys laughed triumphantly. This, **this** was what it meant to be *Targaryen!* To fly, to have the very winds under your control, to go where you will and burn your enemies to ash! What mortal could stand against a dragon, what House could stand against his?

He flew wide allowing Balerion to torch a few of the scorpions under control of men who wore House Shett colors as they tried to tilt upwards in an attempt to attack him. There weren't many, and it seemed as if resistance in the town had broken. *Good, they never should have stood against me in the first place. Still, judging by the way House Grafton attacked House Shett's troops from behind, it seems as if Littlefinger was telling the truth about being able to raise support here in the Vale. How much support however is still in question.*

For a moment he banked Balerion around, staring towards the mountains that loomed in the distance, beyond which was the Eyrie. For just a second, he dreamed of following in his ancestor's footsteps, of taking his Balerion and flying from here to the Eyrie to demand its surrender. *But I don't know enough about what's been going on in the Vale since I left Dorne. Is it still in stasis, each house trying to decide alone what to do or have they already chosen a side?*

About an hour later while the men of the town were desperately try to put out the fires with the aid of several thousand of the Dornish army Lord Grafton wined and dined Petyr and his new King. The man was a bit of a weasel, even in comparison to Littlefinger, but he had up-to-date information about the Vale, and the events in it.

He told them that the Vale had basically sundered along into two groups. One, composed of some of the most powerful Houses, wanted to do something, though as far as Lord Grafton knew there was no real consensus of what that could be, other than removing Lysa Arryn from position of regent for the Lord Paramount. Then there those who wanted to remain neutral, made of more numerous houses, but generally speaking less powerful ones. The only thing apparently every Lord agreed on was that they were not willing to follow Lysa's orders any longer, whatever those orders were, even those who didn't want to remove her weren't willing to go to her aid.

This troubled Petyr greatly as he confided to Viserys once he and the king were back aboard ship. Petyr decided to come clean entirely, it might be the only way to appease the mad youth across from him. "Lysa Arryn was my puppet my Lord, a fool girl who believed I love her." *As if she could hold a candle to dearest Catelyn, or that unsullied and so beautiful young Sansa.*

For a moment Petyr fell silent thinking of the two of them, of Sansa in particular considering how happy Catelyn seemed to be too rut with wolves. *I'll keep that bit of news from Riverrun to myself I think, if I have to cut and run, I might be able to steal at least something precious for myself down the road.*

Then Petyr shook his head and went on. "But she apparently has gone mad in her isolation far faster than I anticipated. The mountain clans are raiding heavily, and several houses are, as Lord Grafton said, in open revolt.

Even with Lysa listening to me, the amount of support I could raise for you would be limited now, and without her, that alas becomes even less. As such I'm afraid that only four or so Vale houses will side with you, your highness."

"This does not please me Littlefinger." said Viserys with a lot of understatement. "You promised me that you could raise the Vale to support my campaign to reclaim my families throne. Now you tell me that this is impossible? What is to stop me from taking Balerion to each and every single castle in the Vale and burning them to the ground!?" I ask..." he went on, his tone of voice one that Oberyn would've recognized. "Only in the spirit of inquiry, you understand."

"Time, Your Majesty." Petyr said, yet again showing a cool head in front of Viserys' threats. He took them more seriously now than he had before of course, having seen how Viserys dealt with Lady Selyse Baratheon, and his sheer enjoyment in that act and others since.

But even so, he was well used to danger. "It will take months to bring the Vale to heel in that manner, unless you mean to simply kill all of the Lords in which case it would take only a few weeks if you go alone on Balerion, and could come to ground and hunt for food for the two of you without facing a bow around every tree. You would have to come down sometime to teach my Lord and you would be vulnerable."

"I say this not to anger you Your Majesty." Petyr said holding up his hand pacifically. "Or to point out any weakness. I say this out of concern. Balerion represents much of your military might, and you should use him as you see fit. But would it be a good idea to take the time here to conquer the Vales one after another using conventional means? Even if you can use Balerion on every castle to save us time and lives. With autumn upon us, that will be a hard, torturous campaign, one that will cost us men in the field, far more men than we would gain."

"He is right My King." said Arianne from where she was lounging on a bed of pillows near the brazier. This was not for preference, but need. Her clothing was from Dorne, and the rain and cold had begun to sap her energy. "If Lysa still commanded the loyalty of at least a few Vale Houses rather than their contempt, you could simply threaten her alone and gained the Vales compliance if not loyalty, but as it is..." she shrugged.

Nymeria, the Sand Snake in charge of meeting with Doran's local spies also spoke up. "I've only had a bare few hours to meet with the local factors here, which were limited to say the least, but they have brought rumors of fell deeds elsewhere to my ears, Your Majesty. Some which demand a response."

Viserys broke off staring into Petyr's face to glare at Nymeria. "What events?"

"King's Landing has been destroyed." said Nymeria bluntly. "Not just sacked, not just taken, destroyed! Burned from one end to the other along with practically every living soul within it." That had horrified her when she had heard of it, a Martell she might be, but even she would not have gone that far for their vengeance, not simply wiped out the entire population of the largest city in Westeros like that.

Viserys stared at her then sat down abruptly, his legs giving out from under him. "How?" he asked in a hollow voice. "Who?"

"Magic my Lord, and apparently the Red Witch we heard about long before this did it at Stannis's instigation. We knew of the plague of course, but Stannis seems to have decided that there was no point in trying to save the city. It was an utterly ruthless act, and I think he is actually more hated among the smallfolk now than any king has ever been in all of Westeros' history. But it is a fearful sort of hate, none of the smallfolk will room rise against him, but neither will they aid him, I think."

That was more than Viserys had asked for, but he didn't remonstrate with the woman. He sat there staring straight ahead blankly, his mind nearly shut down with shock. King's Landing, the city his family had made, the throne, the Dragon Pits, everything that his family had created, gone. His teeth clenched, as did his hands in his lap. "Where is Stannis now?" He hissed out.

"Marching north along the Kingsroad apparently, along with the remnants of the Reach forces, which he has somehow convinced to ally with him. None of my family's agents remain in the army and the rumor of how that came to be hasn't spread among the smallfolk yet, so I don't know what he promised them. But it is known he's heading to battle your sister and her Stark husband." Nymeria replied, letting some of her contempt for House Stark into her voice.

It wasn't that she had anything against Ranma, Nymeria simply looked down on the Starks as over-honorable fools. There were other messages left with her uncles agents here in Gulltown of course, but most of those messages were not for Viserys' ears.

Arianne hadn't heard about the destruction of King's Landing, and she too was shocked at it, but she was getting over it quickly. "That act cannot go unanswered my King. We must strike at him, at Stannis. Even more than your sister, he has made himself an enemy of our house, truly following in his brother's footsteps!" She added, knowing precisely what buttons to use to goad Viserys into action. Arianne did not want to get bogged down here in the Vale with one battle after another, with her Dornish countrymen bleeding out for little return.

"As always you speak directly to the heart of the matter my dear." Said Viserys, his eyes filled with fell fires promising retribution. "What Houses can you bring to our command Petyr, and how quickly?"

"I concentrated my personal influence here in the Bay of Crabs and around my own house's lands Your Highness, which will serve us moderately well now. House Grafton has already proven its loyalty to our cause, and House Moore can be added to our forces quickly enough, their keep is overlooking a small inlet further into the Bay, about a half days journey for a single ship. I believe that the two of them could raise somewhere along 3600 men for our cause. Possibly we could raise another 4,000 from the city if we simply conscript men at sword point, though we might have problems arming them."

"Unless my memory is serving me false, your House's lands are far further north, near to the plight then to the Bay of Crabs, yes?" Viserys mused.

"Yes my Lord, and unfortunately even if we could get there in any kind of time we would be bogged down in a small campaign there. House Corbray and House Lynderly would be willing to follow any messages I send, but at present they are in a three-way war with House Coldwater and the mountain clans. Both are powerful Houses, but distance, that conflict and the lay of the land means that they are out of reach."

Viserys scratched at his chin for a moment thoughtfully. "This does not please me. 3600 men trained men will barely add a few hundred men to the total number we left Planky Town with, though your suggestion with a conscript force has some merit..."

"Indeed my love but consider. These are Vale lords, their men will be a full infantry, like the swordsman who broke the pikes my family sent against the Usurper in his unjust war against your house. In many ways they might serve us better than our own infantry forces, which are made for the most part for quick skirmishes. For certain they will be better armored than most of ours."

The pikemen of Dorne were **not** like the pike regiments Ranma and Jon had devised. They were individual infantry given pikes, trained in their usage as warriors rather than soldiers, their lines and movements nowhere near as sharp or dense. Nor was their armor anything special. Indeed, it was common for most of them to wear simple boiled leather armor much like most archers, which amounted to nothing at all against swords or other cutting weapons and barely protected against arrows.

"And, because they are not of our nation, we have no requirements to try to husband their strength now do we?" She smiled a little as she knew that would please her husband.

"Once again you make an excellent point my dear, and as there is this too. Maidenpool and House Mooton will follow the rightful king. We will be able to land our troops there easily, and then march to where Stannis and my dear sister will no doubt soon be battling one another. I wonder if her little dog has another miracle campaign, I'd like it if they at least weaken Stannis for the kill."

"Possibly not so soon my Lord." said the last Sand Snake, Elia, who'd remained silent up to this point. "Armies travel far slower on land than at sea, especially those with heavy horse, despite what many might think. Foraging can only go so far, his supply train will be slow, and he'll have to stay close to it. I doubt that Stannis is even halfway up the Kingsroad. If your sister doesn't march out to meet him, we have possibly three possibly four more weeks before they start to clash in earnest."

"It will take a bare five days to get here from Maidenpool by sea. It would take far less in a straight line, but the waters in the Bay of Crabs are treacherous, and we'll have to take it slowly, unless we can find enough locals we can trust to lead us right, which is doubtful." Said Petyr, piling on while the piling on was good. "But once we land, we will be attacking them from a direction they will not be expected. Neither Stannis nor the Starks have any kind of spy network, though possibly in the Riverlands, the Starks could use House Tully's rather mediocre network. We could possibly take them entirely by surprise."

"Very well." Said Viserys standing up and his smile became vicious again. "Petyr, you will liaise with Lord Grafton, I want his men to aid my own in conscripting at least 4,000 levy troops from the city. I'll also order two ships to head to House Moore with a letter from you Petyr, to get that house ready. I want us ready to leave in two days for

Maidenpool. For now however, I believe our guest needs to pay for her father's perfidy!"

"Not all my king." said Arianne, standing up quickly as did the two Sand Snakes. Since they left Dragonstone the three of them had made certain that Shireen was out of sight of Viserys, and therefore out of mind. It was nothing personal the girl was pleasant enough but rather ugly and unrefined to them. But Shireen was a powerful political tool, one that had to be protected.

Something that Arianne was quick to point out now. "Once you slay her father, the lady Shireen becomes heir to House Baratheon. Storm's End, despite not ruling over a land known for its riches, has always been the House of the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. With her under our thumb and her father dead, we will be able to make whatever deal we need with her, before placing her as a puppet there, which may aid in settling the Stormlands down after their defeat at our hands. We don't want to have to put down another rebellion a few years down the line after all."

Viserys glared at her angrily but after a moment nodded jerkily. "Yet again you raise a good point my love. However I need to do something to get this anger out of me. I will go flying on Balerion, but I was serious. Be ready to depart in two days, along with those levy forces. We will sail to join the two ships already sent to House Moore, then for Maidenpool. For vengeance, for justice, and for my throne!"

OOOOOO

The castle of House Clegane was a small one, but extremely well-made, with very high and thick walls. In point of fact as Willas looked at it he knew that the land of House Clegane could never have paid for such a magnificent castle. *I wonder how much gold the Lannisters sunk into this place.* He smirked a little as his army moved forward. *I wonder how much will still be here. I think my troops deserve some remuneration.*

All around him the majority of his command marched forward, shouting and clamoring, but moving somewhat slower than they could have considering that all of his light cavalry was missing. *All war is deception, one way or another.* Willas knew that too much time had passed since the destruction of the marauders sent into the Reach. House Clegane had no doubt been warned by smallfolk if not their own scouts when he crossed the borders and so would be ready for him. Willas had no wish to be bogged down here in a common siege, so he had to use subterfuge.

Beside him Ser Graceford was grumbling irritably as he walked his horse beside Willas. He and Toulev had become Willas' main commanders. There was an actually brain underneath that knightly armor, once certain noble ideals had been smacked out of it anyway. In some ways however Ser Graceford had not changed and one of those ways was in his desire to rush ahead and get to grips with the enemy. "If we had been able to get here fast enough, we could've gone with our first idea."

That had been to dress up some of the men in House Clegane colors and send them ahead with a few volunteers among the smallfolk women to add to the disguise. Willas had not been in favor of it, considering that it would no doubt be people among the servants of the castle that knew most of the men who had gone off, and the reputation of House Clegane's castle was such that he had no wish to be a part of sending women into it. Still, it might've worked to open the gates for them.

"There was nothing we could do about it, the distances involved for just a little too great for that even if we used river travel."

"Are you worried about what's going on down south?" Ser Graceford asked quietly, making certain the men could not overhear. "I know I am. My family's castle might be better positioned than most, but it's still vulnerable from the river."

House Graceford's land was slightly past the fork in the Mander along what became the River Ash. It was small, as befitted a knightly house, but it was well maintained and had a moat along three-quarters of its walls while the fourth abutted the river itself. It wasn't unassailable, but it was a good defensive position.

"Judging by the latest rumors about my sister, I don't think your family has much to worry about. The Houses beyond Oldflowers along the Mander however will have. The Ironborn will have much to answer for after this war. But we personally can only deal with the problems in front of us."

"Is that why you decided to only destroy House Clegane and House Swyft?"

"Yes, I want to finish this campaign and head home as soon as possible. Unless I miss my guess Swyft will be the tougher fight, I doubt Ser Swyft will have taken entire leave of his senses, he'll have left a somewhat strong force behind. But that's also why I sent Toulev and a force of the infantry ahead on the remounts." Toulev and Willas himself were the only two men among his army that knew much about siege weaponry, and by the time the rest of the

army arrived Willas wanted a few siege weapons, in particular catapults, to already be built or at least nearing completion.

"That leaves us woefully understrength for a conventional siege you know." Graceford's voice was merely thoughtful, rather than condemning. Your pinning a lot on our little ruse working."

"Not just that." Willas said with a slight smile. "I'm also betting that Clegane Hall emptied itself to provide those marauders that led the assault into the Reach. They might have something like a hundred men, but that is all."

"Still enough to turn us aside if they know what they're doing."

"We shall see." Willas replied complacently.

By midday they arrived within bow range of the castle and without any preamble or shouted demands to leave their lands the defenders began to fire on the front of Willas's column. He barked out orders forcing his men backwards for a moment, then spreading out to either side along the route slowly but surely encircling half the Castle.

He didn't have enough men for a full enclosure, but what he did have were infantry and archers, and the archers began to lay down a blistering counter-fire forcing many of the defenders along the wall to duck and cover. He lost several men from the archer's fire however, but he had a solution for that as well.

Pulling back most of his men he sent several knights and infantrymen off to a nearby copse of trees where they began to cut down a few trees to prepare barricades. The work was quickly done, and an hour later the barricades were ready and moved forward to defend the archers from the defender's arrows. It would be lifted periodically to allow the archers to fire back, but at this point they were basically just to keep the fire from the defenders on them.

They were mostly successful in this, and his infantry moved forward again this time wielding shovels and preparing ditches for themselves. More men moved into the copse. There they began to chop down more trees within sight of the castle's walls, but not close enough to allow the defenders to fire upon them.

This sporadic battle continued throughout the day and deep into the night, where his army began to use fire arrows, always concentrating on the wall. Of course the defenders also used fire arrows, and more than one band of archers was forced to retreat quickly once their barricades were set alight. The army didn't have enough water among their supplies to waste on putting out fires, and there was no nearby source of it either.

However, Willas was not unhappy with the day's work. After all, all this was merely a sideshow.

On the other side of the castle stood the castle's gates, and if the master of the castle was any kind of military man, he would've wondered why the attackers were not trying to attack from that side. Ander Clegane wasn't however, and he had seen the work going on in the copse, where several siege towers looked to be under construction. That was enough for what little curiosity Ander had to be satisfied that he saw everything the invaders were up to.

Willas had split off his light cavalry at the same time he had split off the force of infantry under Toulev. While Toulev swiftly made his way across House Clegane's land towards Cornfield, the light cavalry circled around the known position of the Clegane castle at a wide angle, well out of sight of any watcher from its towers. With them they had four valuable oxen, donated by House Crane. They slowed the light cavalry up more than a bit, but oxen were much more powerful beasts than horses.

Now the oxen were hidden in another copse of trees to the northwest of the castle, hooked up to a siege weapon that was mainly a large winch wrapped around with heavy, thick ropes on the end of which were grapnels. It was much like the siege weapon that the Lannisters and their allies tried to use against the Wolfsworn at Stone Hedge, only much better built, and there was no direwolf to terrify the oxen here.

The man in charge of the light cavalry detachment, Ser Bruster Flowers stared out from under the cover of a bush, looking up at the wall where he could no longer make out the shape of any watcher. "All right boys, Alec, Myrk, Laster, with me." He whispered.

The four men made their way forward, creeping along through the night towards the castle until they were right outside the walls. No alarm had been raised, no arrows fired, and most especially no burning pitch dropped down upon them. *All in all this was an excellent start to the operation*, thought Bruster. He nodded at his fellows, and one after another they all latched their grapnels onto the portcullis, which defended the wooden gate behind it.

When that was done Bruster nodded. "Myrk, you'll stay with me. We'll have to replace them if they don't grip proper."



Myrk nodded resignedly and the others returned to their fellows to take word but they needed to start the oxen moving. Moments later the two men who had remained behind watched as the ropes were dragged slowly taut, smiling at one another in the dark of the night as the grapnels all remained where they had been placed. The ropes began to strain, and there was a creaking groaning sound from the brittle metal.

Shouts of alarm began from one of the towers of the Castle above them. "Something is going on at the gate, get some defenders over here!"

"Time for us to go too," Bruster shouted, smacking Myrk on the shoulder.

The two of them raced away, and were nearly to the tree line when Bruster looked back at a grunt from behind him. It must've been a lucky shot in the dark, there was no way someone up there could've been able to see that well with no torches down here to illuminate them and with torches moving along the wall as men tried to see what was going on with the gate. But even so, an arrow had caught Myrk in the back.

Bruster raced back, putting his arm around the man and pulling him away from the castle and into the trees. He put Myrk down against one of the trees sideways, trying to pull the arrow out. But it had gone too deep, and he couldn't stop the blood gushing out of the wound after he pulled the shaft out. He remained there with Myrk for a moment, as a loud groaning sound reverberated through the night from the castle before shaking his head and pushing to his feet.

By the time dawn broke the oxen had literally pulled the portcullis out its trails and Willas quickly sent a force of infantry around the castle with the battering ram that had been prepared behind what the defenders had thought were siege towers. It was very well made, with a roof overhead to defend the man wielding it from overhead fire.

With the night spent using fire arrows on the gate to weaken it, and force the defenders to use water to put it out the gate fell before midday the next day. Once the battering ram was out of the way, Willas and the heavy and light cavalry charged through, not stopping as they ran into the small defensive line that been created directly in back of the gate, going over the rubble that had been placed there in a storm of steel and blood.

Several hours later Willas leaned against his forces side, one hand resting directly behind his faithful comrades as he stared up into the sky which was remarkably blue and clear for an autumn day. *Such a magnificent day to see such horror.* Willas had seen the horror that an uncontrolled army could do to smallfolk women and men, but this went beyond even that.

The dungeon of Clegane Hall was a place of horror. Several men had been tortured there, literally hacked to pieces and possibly brought in for that purpose, to give Gregor an outlet for his rages. Women too had been kept there, though thankfully most of them had died before his army arrived. A few had to be given mercy, evidently having been kept alive for the pleasure of the acting Lord of the castle. Toulev and a few volunteers from the lands the raiders had passed through had seen to them, their faces grave, and pitying.

Ser Graceford moved up towards him, his armor practically crimson with blood and when he pulled off his helm underneath his short-cropped dirty brown hair his brown eyes were grave. "We found the treasury my Lord. Two large chests of gold and several examples of expensive gold jewelry and other items were there. I've ordered one broken open and distributed among the men. The other, that is your portion and my own."

"Take what you wish from it," Willas replied, still not looking at the man. "The rest, I'll donate to the smallfolk of the Goldengrove. With their land the way it is now, they'll need money to get through the next few months. Anything else?"

"The last of the defenders have been put to death." Graceford said flatly. "By the time the sun moves in the sky we should have the riches of this place moved out, and have ready for burning. Though with winter coming on, are you certain that's a good idea? The local smallfolk might make use of it."

"No, I doubt any smallfolk will ever wish to use this place, not given the horrors that occurred here. The Mountain that Rode cast a long shadow." Willas shook his head. "I don't even want us to remain here for a single night, we'll bivouac outside in the camp we made already. Make certain that the man boil enough water to fill up their skins from the well and leave it as is, that at least will help the smallfolk around here."

Graceford nodded and moved off again leaving Willas to stare once again up into the sky.

It was a subdued and grimly satisfied army that moved off the next day despite the riches it had won itself. They marched deeper into the Westerlands while behind them Clegane Hall burned, the wood inside its stone walls succumbing quickly, the supports of the keep failing and collapsing under the weight of the stone.

It took them over a week to reach House Swyft. Once they arrived, they found that Toulev had prepared several catapults, which had begun to pound the walls.

He bowed formally to Willas and Ser Graceford as they rode up reporting in crisp, concise terms. "They don't 'ave enough men inside to sortie out my Lord, but they got more than enough to make any kind of assault deadly for us. I estimate 600 maybe 620 men all told, most of them not very well-trained, but in a siege you don't need to be very well-trained to thrust a spear down at someone trying to climb up a siege ladder, or hurl torches on siege towers. I've got the catapults banging away, but it'll take some time."

"What is the response of the local smallfolk to our invasion?" asked Willas cut as he dismounted.

Around them his archers moved forward into the prepared positions that Toulev's men had made, dragging their barricades into place in front of them as they began to exchange fire with the defenders. More men moved forward to shore up the siege lines around the castle, though Toulev had done his usual thorough job of it already, and had completed dug out trenches along two sides of the Castle despite not having as many men as Willas had in attacking House Clegane.

"Ambivalence my Lord. The rumors of what the marauders did in the Reach have spread backwards of course, and most of them seem to be happy enough that we're not paying them back and like in the same coin."

"Good, that's probably the best we could hope for. However I don't think that catapults are going to smash those walls down anytime soon." Catapults could only throw stones around 25 to 50 pounds. Stone walls could stand up to that pounding for weeks if not months, and Cornfield, while not having as high walls as Clegane Hall was still a well-made castle and the defenders were surely working on their own siege weapon to target his.

"Get our tents set up with the men here, and look at the water situation." Willas ordered as he began to pull off his armor. They were so far back from the front lines it was safe enough. "I'll go and join the workers working on the siege equipment. It'll take some time, but it'll be faster to build a trebuchet and use that rather than the smaller catapults." A trebuchet could hurl a rock upwards of 300 pounds faster and farther than a catapult, but they were harder to make and much more time and material consuming.

Still the time and resources issue could be solved by hurling men at the problem, and so Willas did for the next five days and nights. He was working at correctly pairing down some of the joints with a few of the men who had been carpenters before volunteering to join his army when Toulev found him. "My Lord, there's a messenger here from deeper within the Westerlands, wearing the colors of House Serret."

Willas frowned but nodded. "Lead him to my tent would you? I'll be there presently."

The messenger was indeed a man of the House Serret, one that Willas recognized, a cousin of Lord Serret who had been at several tournaments in the Reach in years prior, though his first name eluded Willas. "Ser Serret, I would bid you welcome, but since I believe that the Westerlands and the Reach are at war, I will instead ask why you are here under a flag of truce?"

The man smiled thinly, shaking his head. "Actually, I'm not here as a part of any kind of unified Westerlands force, in fact the Westerlands have for all intents and purposes ceased to exist. I am here in the name of the 'Duchy' of Silverden, and I am here on the word of my own House and that of Lydden and our allies to ask you what your intentions are towards our lands."

"Duchy?" Willas asked. "I'm afraid I don't know that term."

"I didn't know it either, until a missive from Ranma and Daenerys Stargaryen arrived, detailing what had occurred to the Westerlands army and marched into the Riverlands, as well as offers of what they were willing to give us in return for our loyalty going forward. As the Lannisters have led us to the brink of disaster, a meeting between the heads of Houses decided to go along with their proposals."

"I've heard rumors that the Lannisters had been pushed to the brink of defeat, am I to understand that is a done thing?"

"You might say that yes." The Westerlands' knight was dust dry as he replied, shaking his head. "Not only that, but the messages came from ravens trained at the Golden Tooth. That too has fallen, and will be incorporated into the Riverlands from now on."

He waited until the exclamations of shock and surprise passed, before going on. "The list of lords that they claim to

have killed in battle is far larger than those that remain alive either in the Westerlands, or on the list of those sent into exile or put to work like common smallfolk." There had been some anger at that, but when the alternative was either exile or death, none of the lords could argue that it had been anything but merciful.

"The list of dead is of course topped by one name in particular. Lord Tywin Lannister was executed for his crimes against the crown and the people of the Riverlands." Ser Serret laughed, but there was more than a hint of fear in it rather than simple humor. "We've already begun to hear a song from the bards detailing the campaign in the Riverlands, the March of the Wolf King they are calling it."

Ser Graceford, Toulev and Bruster all twitched in shock, while Willas simply narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Interesting. But are you at liberty to explain what you mean when you say the Westerlands has ceased to exist?"

"I am at liberty my Lord, if only to make certain you are aware of our position regarding your actions against Houses Swyft and Clegane. We will take no action against you so long as you remain on House Swyft land. House Serret land however will be defended most vigorously." House Serret land abutted that of House Swyft to the north and northeast as a traveler went towards the mountains that separated the Westerlands from the Crown and Riverlands.

"Essentially what the new royal houses ordered is the dissolution of the Westerlands into various smaller 'duchies', each of which will be controlled by powerful houses and beholden to the crown alone rather than a Lord Paramount and through said Lord Paramount to the crown. The Lannisters will no doubt be the first among equals still, their control of Lannisport makes that certain even if you discount the Rock itself. They sent along a copy of the new taxation laws were going to be putting in place, but also a royal warrant to allow Copper Lake to grow into a city!"

Copper Lake was a town on the edge of House Serret land abutting that of House Lydden, and was owned jointly by both houses. Indeed, it had been the reason why the two houses had recently intermarried in the form of the heir to house Lydden and lady Serret, Lord Serret's second-born daughter. Situated on a small lake it had several nearby copper mines which gave the town its name, a thriving fishing industry, and was the home of more than a few gifted artisans.

They had been pushing Lord Tywin to go to the crown and ask for a warrant to allow the town to grow into a city. But neither Tywin, nor his admittedly weak father, had never truly wished any other cities to grow in the Westerlands to rival Lannisport, which gave the Lannisters a near monopoly on blacksmith, artisans and other laborers of that nature.

"Do you know if you're the only one to get such a warrant?" asked Willas intently. *This is a shrewd move by Lord Stark, I approve, deeply approve! Time and past time more cities were allowed to grow in Westeros. But...*

"We are not. We have had ravens from several other houses, many of whom received see similar warrants. So long as we agree to follow the taxation laws for the cities and raise men to serve in the Royal Army we will be granted the warrants for the cities, and be able to govern our lands as we see fit, answerable only to the crown."

"And of course you'll have to swear new oaths to that effect, yes?" Asked Ser Graceford frowning thoughtfully. He didn't understand much of the economic implications of what was being talked about, but the military ones he understood well enough. *No single duchy, I wonder where they got that term from, will be able to raise enough man to threaten the royal house.* "And how complete was their victory, you mentioned dead lords, but what about the rest of the army?"

"Demolished." Said Ser Serret flatly. "I don't think there's been a victory as complete as this one in centuries, the only one that possibly comes close is Lord Stannis' victory against the Iron Fleet during the first Greyjoy rebellion. As to the oath we'll have to swear, they sent along a copy of that as well. It's simple enough, but also very inclusive and..."

The man paused for a moment smiling faintly as he looked off into the distance. "It's about their duties to us as much as it is about our duties to the crown, my lords. There is definitely more reciprocity in that oath than in any other I've seen. We'll have to formally appear before them to take those vows, but that's a mere formality even with autumn upon us."

He recited the oath off aloud then. "I, heh, 'fill in name here', do vow on my name and sacred honor to be the king and queen's man, to follow and keep the laws of Westeros in both my house and my land, to be their true man 'or woman' in times of turmoil and plenty. To follow the Royal Family's lawful orders for now and for all time. Then in return they swear to act honorably toward us, to aid us if need, to treat us honorably and fairly, to match loyalty with dignity, honor and aid in times of war or trouble, and punishment for oath-breaking."

Willas and Ser Graceford both looked at one another then Ser Graceford spoke up looking at the other knight intensely. "That sounds somewhat like a knightly oath more than any oath of fealty."

"Indeed, that was my thought as well Ser. They expect honor and loyalty from their lords, and will reward such. But if you act in a treasonous fashion..." he shook his head. "They will not be taking any action against the Westerlands houses further unless those Houses take action against them, but the message also listed those houses from the Riverlands that had taken up arms on Joffrey the Bastard's behalf. All of them have been wiped out, defrocked and with their lands added to those of loyal neighbors."

"Frankly all told I think more houses have been wiped out or brought low in this war than any five previous! Lord Ranma and his wife apparently believe in making the Lords pay the price for going to war."

Ser Graceford smiled widely. "I like it, I like that a lot."

Willas stayed silent frowning thoughtfully. *The Royal army is the key*, he thought to himself. At first when he realized what was meant by the term 'duchy' he had feared a return to the time of Many Kings with constant wars between them. *But if the royal house retains control of a royal army, one whose equipment and training not to mention numbers are better than any single noble house can match, they'd be able to keep the peace easily enough.*

*Epecially with the examples already set in this war that going against them will see your House not just brought low but possibly wiped out. What Lord would risk that? The Lannisters might be prideful enough to attempt it if Tywin was still alive and possibly even force the rest of the Westerlands to march with them again.* Kevan was intelligent and charismatic in his own way but not someone the rest of the Westerlands would follow, not after so many of their fellows had been slaughtered doing so. *The Westerlands as a united nation is truly gone.*

That thought was a terrifying one considering his family's position backing Renly, and he hoped that the young idiot would sue for peace. Of course I'm assuming he'll beat Stannis, who I know won't sue for peace. *Seven-damn it what a fucking stupid situation! I wish I was there rather than dealing with this little problem here.*

That thought was a sobering one, and he frowned again. "This is all very interesting Ser, and you've given me more than enough food for thought. Will you require my written word that we will not extend our campaign into your houses' lands, or will my verbal word be enough?"

"For my part it would be enough my Lord, but Lord Lydden is a rather suspicious fellow. But if you could put it in writing I think that will be more than enough."

"Very well." Willas nodded at a page nearby. "Fetch my writing case please." Within moments the knight of house Serret had the message in hand, and was ushered out of the tent. He would be given a tent for the night, but Willas and his lords had other things on their minds.

"What are you thinking of my Lord?" asked Toulev.

"I think that the work on the trebuchet will be done in another three days. Once that is done and this castle taken, we will turn around quickly. We've retained a few ravens trained to reach House Crane. Once House Swyft falls, the Westerlands will have been paid back for their atrocities upon our people. Then will be able to turn our eyes to the Ironborn." Those ravens and the maester to look after them had been among Lord Crane's contribution to Willas' army.

"Not to the events happening in Crownlands my Lord?" Asked Ser Graceford. Rumors had begun to fly about something happening between the two Baratheon brothers, but the events after that battle had not yet reached this far. "We might not yet know what really occurred, but it's certain that the future of all Westeros will be decided there."

"Let my father play the kingmaker." Willas said, allowing a hint of scorn to enter his voice for the first time when talking about the man. Normally he was careful to keep his opinion about Mace in check, but now he let it out for a brief moment. "My duty to my house and to the land of the Reach. As such we will expel these invaders, no matter who they are or where they come from! We're nearly done with our duty here gentlemen, but more awaits us elsewhere. Let the larger politics and the events elsewhere happen, our duty is to our people."

Ser Graceford nodded firmly and after a moment Bruster nodded as well. Toulev simply nodded sharply, then left the tent quickly.

"We've gotten word that Garlan is going to take the battle to the Ironborn, but that leaves the Mander for us to retake. I'll want us back down on the river quickly, so the ravens will need to carry some orders to House Crane and Goldengrove..."

OOOOOO

The fleet flew the three-headed dragon banner of House Targaryen, along with the golden skulls on a spear of the Golden Company as they disembarked their troops on Massey's Hook. The ships would then move around the Hook entering Blackwater Bay to pick up the men once they were done here.

"It's a pity that House Massey and House Bar Emmon didn't respond favorably to our overtures my lords, but it will do to wet the men's appetites for further war." Said a young man, known to his friends as Griff, though he sometimes went by the name of Aegon, and had been using that name more and more as the trip went on.

"True enough." said one of the Golden Company commanders, smiling thinly. "You realize however that if my company takes this castle, we'll get the lion's share of the spoil?"

"That was never in doubt." said Aegon before either of the other two mercenary commanders could comment. The Long Lances and Company of the Rose were smaller companies and far less reputable than the Golden Company, but they added a light cavalry and scouting element to the Golden Company. The Golden Company had those of course, but the added numbers were welcome.

*If only I was as certain that their loyalty was to my cause rather than to the purse of the Iron Bank, the young man mused, exchanging a glance with his father, who was not his father really. Still that was the way he thought of Jon Connington and still would, even though his real father was now known to him.*

"But do remember that I will be taking a share for myself, yes? We might need it later on after all. So long as your dragon can get us within range to charge the wall with one of our shield squares, that will work well enough." So the Golden commander. "I doubt that the elephants will be needed for this, alas."

"In that case, I should be off." Said the young man, moving over towards his dragon who was being unlatched from its chains as he approached snapping and snarling at the men around it halfheartedly. It had been fed recently after all.

Moments later Aegon and his Calixares, which was what he had named his dragon, were in the air, high up and moving over the army where it was continuing to offload the infantry and more importantly the cavalry. The horses needed to be worked to get over their sea legs. *We were lucky not to meet with any ships of the so-called Royal Navy, we can't assume we'll be able to move along Blackwater Bay from now on, and if we have to march inland, those horses will be needed.*

His dragon bucked slightly underneath him, and Aegon scowled, pulling at the heavy bridle slapping the side of the dragon's neck while barking out an order in High Valyrian. "Still, Calixares! Climb the Sky!"

Aegon was not happy with the training he'd been able to give Calixares since they had taken to sea. He had thought that the bonding between rider and beast would take at some point now that Calixares was large enough to carry him, but it hadn't happened yet. That bond, which was something all the books he'd seen about dragon riding mentioned, was supposed to make the beast respond to his voice more quickly.

*But the catalyst, time in the saddle, differed widely from dragon to dragon. Well, it will happen eventually, and Calixares responds well enough for now. I wouldn't want to put the two of us against any other dragon/rider pair, let alone the massive beast that Viserys is supposed to have, but for merely earthbound threats, our present style of partnership will do.*

A few seconds later Aegon and his dragon were moving forward of the army and towards Stonedance, staying as high as he could go for now so as to take the castle from surprise. *After all, House Massey doesn't know about Calixares.*

It was a rugged castle, its walls thick and sturdy yet uncut, seeming to be hewn from the rock where it stood on a small hill, three sided for some reason, with a single heavy keep set into the center of it two, perhaps three stories taller than the walls. Each corner had a tower with a balustrade upon it, which held catapults, as did the keep's protected roof.

*They might well have been deadly against any invading army, but the castle had no scorpions. And only scorpions properly prepared are a threat to dragons, so it looks like I can be of more use than a mere distraction! Arrows might be in enough numbers as well, but with shock on my side...*

Calixares came out of the western sky above the castleland attacked without warning. Like Aegon had said before he left the army camp, House Massey and House Bar Emmon had both followed House Baratheon willingly into Rebellion, now they would feel the might of the true House Targaryen.

"DRAGON!" came the shout from one man, staring almost straight up in horror. Men on patrol or standing guard on the keep's roof of the balustrade of the towers craned their necks to stare, but only a few had the presence of mind to raise their bows.

It wasn't enough. Calixares' flame struck with the force of a battering ram of heat, flame and force. Men screamed and died where they stood, or fell as still living pyres to the ground of the castle. Each catapult was set alight, and fires began here and there along the outer walls and the keep's roof as anything flammable was ignited by the dragon's fire.

More and more arrows however were now crisscrossing the sky in an attempt to strike Calixares and Aegon, and he shouted, "Climb the Sky!" in high Valyrian. The dragon surged forward, pumping its wings hard and turning upwards and away from the keep. Arrows fell behind him as more men on the wall tried to shoot at him, but he was now too high up for their arrows to reach. Aegon and his dragon flew there, circling the keep and keeping the blasted and demoralized defenders attention on him.

Then from the southeast came the Golden Company, their infantry formed up into squares with shields before and above them. If they were facing a an army in the field, those ranks might have spears thrust out in front, but now instead the front squares carried siege ladders on their sides, hidden by the large shields top and front.

Ranks of more shield bearers moved forward, their heavy shields angled to block any arrows coming their way, while two ranks of archers knelt down behind them. So protected, the archers let fly. Watching the beginning of the battle from above Aegon winced. *Now that number of arrows would have been much tougher to handle.*

The arrow storm fell like deadly rain upon the archers on the wall. If they had been under cover or less than utterly panicked by Aegon's attack, they might have fought back. They would not have won, not with the professional way the Golden Company was going about its assault, but they would have at least spent their lives dearly.

As it was after a few of them died from the arrows, the rest broke and ran, leaving the wall around the castle's gates devoid of men. The infantry squares charged forward, reaching the castle's walls before reinforcements from the other two walls could get there. The squares opened somewhat, and the men pushed the ladders up and against the wall.

They lost several men from the arrows of the men inside the towers, and then more from the keep when they got onto the wall, but after that, the battle was won, and Aegon knew it. He circled lower and lower as the battle went on, then turned away, moving back toward the camp and the chain which would hold Calixares against the cruel ground, while Aegon joined the rest of the battle.

He ignored Griff's shout to stay back, to remain at the back, shouldering his way in among the men forcing their way through the now open utter gate. Aegon was eager to whet his blade in blood, and would see it happen no matter his father's words.

Thanks to his crown and his voice Aegon soon found himself at the front of the tide smashing through the now open keep, the gate to it shattered behind them. He hacked at a man who came out of a room to one side, killing him before he could notice the man had just been a servant, panicked and scared. Aegon might not have cared of course, but knowing that his first kill was a mere servant rather than a fighting man might have been galling.

Several moments later Aegon lay in one of the beds in the lords apartment. Lord Massey was dead, already slain by the last doorway into this area of the keep's upper floor. His Lady had already been taken by the commanders of the Golden Company to share between them. But the two of them had a daughter of fourteen, a comely lass with lustrous brown hair, doe-like eyes, and a budding figure.

She was tied up along his side now, crying softly. Part of Aegon was guilty about what he had just done, but the pleasure of the moment and the sheer power he felt even now after the act he couldn't bring himself to care. *To the conqueror, go the spoils.* With that thought and the memory of her clenching around him Aegon felt himself rise once more, and with a grin he turned, pressing the sobbing girl back down into her blood stained sheets.

The next day, the army was on its way once more with Massey burning behind them. They couldn't stay here for long, and they had Bar Emmon to deal with.

That castle fell just as easily, but it was also richer, making the mercenaries happy indeed. Aegon however had mixed feelings about it most particularly because of the news that his newest advisor brought. "What do you mean King's Landing is gone Eunuch?"

Varys, for it was indeed the master of whispers, smiled thinly. A master of disguise and subterfuge, he had made his way across Blackwater Bay easily enough by fishing boat, having easily escaped from the Lannister/Serret camp. "I am afraid that my admittedly blunt statement is wholly accurate Your Majesty. Stannis employs a Witch of R'hllor, who burned out the city from one end to the other."

*With, admittedly, the aid of wildfire packets buried throughout the city, the number and strength of which even I had no idea about!* That thought was galling to Varys, who prided himself on being able to ferret out such things, but he was well used to failing in that endeavor.

A thought that brought him to his next bit of news, which he gave quickly, before Aegon, Griff or his commanders could sink further into shock. "And your uncle is sailing in the Bay of Crabs. One of my agents, alas one of very few and far between in that area of Westeros, has spotted his ships there."

*And Littlefinger as well, I wonder how that utter bastard managed that? Still, he picked the wrong dragon to back, hah! Fleeing from one sadist to another Petyr, how... fitting for one such as you.*

"I have no idea at the moment about his long term plans but Lord Stannis is marching up into the Riverlands to battle your aunt. Now I am not a military man but we might, just might have an opportunity, if we sail for Duskenale as soon as possible..."

OOOOOO

It had only been luck that had allowed Asha to survive her fall into the mad ocean, and reflexes honed by years of fighting and sailing that sea. She had grabbed at an overturned rowboat that had somehow gone over the side of one of the greenlander ships, possibly from one of the ships that had been smashed open on the reefs. She hadn't seen it, but judging from the bodies that had still been in the process of sinking around the rowboat, they might have been survivors trying to escape a sinking ship. Stupid of them, but good for her.

While the man who had been going to kill her went to the Drowned God behind her, Asha had desperately clung with one hand to its side, while pulling off her armor, unable to pull herself up out of the water with its weight pulling her down. The pain of pulling the chain mail off had been agonizing, the wounds along her side and back screaming from her contortions and the seawater in the wound.

Somehow however Asha was able to pull herself up and into the rowboat. She lay there, gasping and utterly out of energy for a few moments. After a moment however, Asha forced herself up trying to get her bearings. But the waves had already carried her away from where she had fallen into the ocean, and the storm's fury completely obscured the battle going on now. She could see the ships, even make out a few clumps of combat when lightning slashed across the sky, but that was all.

With the aid of the lightning, Asha was able to see well enough to steer her little rowboat away from the battle. She couldn't figure out where she was going, but Asha knew where she didn't want to be. It was hard going, her wounds and the ocean itself literally trying to kill her now. Ironically the lightning allowed her enough light to work with, enough to rig up the small sail and head on her way. Several times she was nearly capsized, more than once Asha had to throw her body around to keep from being thrown over the side.

But at last Asha was away from the shoals, and with lightning still racking the sky she began to move towards Fair Isle. As weak as she was Asha still smashed her hand onto the ocean over the side of the rowboat, shouting aloud. "Fuck you Drowned God, you're not going to get me just yet!"

That was a little over four days ago, and Asha was now almost delirious with pain, fever, and hunger. She had no idea how, but at some point she had lost her way, heading straight out to sea. Now Asha had no idea where she was, and she knew that she was going to die here. Or Asha did, until she saw a small blot of brown in the distance.

With the last vestiges of her strength, she rowed in that direction. At last Asha reached what was a small strip of mountain jutting out of the ocean. Asha still had no idea where she was, but she was on land, something Asha would never have imagined she'd be happy for.

Standing up on woozy feet Asha more fell than stepped over the side of the rowboat. However that was a secondary concern. A few feet away she saw a berry bush ripe with berries, and another bush she recognized as one used to create soothing balms. Crawling forward Asha stuffed handfuls of the berries into her mouth gorging herself until her stomach began to rumble at her.

With that done, Asha began to do what she could for her wounds. They had healed somewhat, her clothing having

been put to good use as makeshift bandages, though the one in her side was beginning to grow gray and smell when Asha pulled off her shirt. She crushed the leaves of the plant as much as she could, then screamed aloud when she rubbed them against the wound. "GAAAAAHHHHH! Damn me, well, pain is just nature saying that you're alive..."

She grit her teeth while her fingers worked, slowly but surely. These weren't the first wound's Asha had taken, nor the first she'd have to see to alone. That served Asha well now, but it was still intensely painful, and she would have two nasty scars for the rest of her life. They would be much less if she had a healer to look at them, but even in the best of times healers among the Ironborn were as rare as a virgin in a whorehouse.

Asha didn't know how long it took, but eventually she was satisfied. Out to sea Asha saw another storm coming, and she scowled angrily, looking around. "I need some fucking shelter, and some wood. Best to start exploring now." Wood was hard to come by, so she broke one of the paddles from the boat, and used one end to skewer some kind of furry animal that clung to a rock. Asha had never seen it's like before, but she got a feeling of overpowering laziness from the creature.

After that Asha moved up the small mountain and found a cave, or what Asha had thought was a cave at first. But several feet into it, the walls began to smooth and small paintings began to dot it here and there. Paintings of battle on the high ocean against creatures larger than men but scaled and wielding long tridents, with the symbols of lightning and thunder in every picture. Sometimes it would be accompanied by a hand wielding the lightning against the scaly creatures. "What... what is this place...?"

OOOOOO

The Old Gods and the Seven were not the only ones sending prophetic dreams to their worshipers. R'hllor was doing the same thing, trying to influence its worshipers not only in Westeros, but in Essos as well. Several dozen R'hllor priests and priestesses the world over had visions of the encroaching darkness, the coming of endless winter. More than one of them decided to book passage to White Harbor from wherever they were in the world.

Most of them knew that they would be looked at askance by the Northerners, but what did that matter in the face of a threat to all humanity? None of them would arrive quickly, and several wouldn't arrive at all with the sea becoming more and more treacherous as autumn continued, but they would do their part.

Out of all of R'hllor's worshipers Melisandre was one of the most powerful. While she was from a darker sect than the main line of R'hllor worshipers, that did not impact the power of her faith or the strength of the visions that R'hllor could send her.

The Red Witch came out of another trance, teeth clenched around a shriek while she fell to the side from where she had been sitting in the lotus position before the fire she had been using as a medium. For a moment it was all Melisandre could do to keep her body breathing, keep her heart going.

Because unlike the vision of the Old Gods, her vision was centered on the White Walkers themselves rather than the war and their pawns, and when it did, the White Walkers had felt it. They attempted in turn to both block and attack her through the visions. Melisandre thought it was the protection of her God that saved her mind, but it wasn't, her life had been saved by the magics built into the Wall.

Blocking a vision from seeing anything was easy, a defensive action. Following the magic of the visions back to Melisandre was an offensive action, and they couldn't get past the Wall. Yet their attack still stopped the visions, with an abruptness that Melisandre felt as if someone had dumped her mind into acid.

It was several moments before she was able to move past the pain, and Melisandre wearily allowed her acolytes to help her into bed. Melisandre knew that Stannis would be sending someone to fetch her soon, since he knew that she was going to be scrying that day. But right now Melisandre simply did not have the energy to meet with the man. "When one of the Fire Guard come for me, tell them to come back in a few hours." She murmured closing her eyes again.

Melisandre had thought to rest and think about the visions she had seen, but instead she fell into a deep dreamless slumber for several hours until one of her acolytes woke her up by shaking her shoulder. She opened her eyes angrily, but saw Stannis himself standing beside the woman. "Your scrying did not go well, I take it?"

"I..."Melisandre croaked,then gestured at one of her acolytes to bring her some wine.

The acolyte did so, handing a glass to Stannis who took it but did not drink from it, staring at the woman on the bed intently. "What happened? Did something go wrong with your spell, or has someone else begun to employ magic?"



"If by someone you mean the Great Enemy, then yes." Melisandre replied tartly, angry at being questioned like this, especially when she still felt so weak. "No one else has been able to block my visions, though I am unable to interpret the ones I see now even as well as I could before King's Landing burned. My visions are centering more and more on the Great Other, my Lord. They are gathering strength, and the Wall will not stop them! We must finish here in the South and march north as quickly as possible! Remember my Lord, you are the Azor Ahai, it is not your destiny merely to unite Westeros once more, but to defeat the Great Other!"

Melisandre was still interpreting much of her visions through the lens of her religion and what she had discovered of what she called the Great Enemy or the Great Other. While she had been able to discover or discern many of the towers the White Walkers possessed, she still thought of them as some kind of monarchy, with a king leading them which she termed the Great Other. In reality the White Walkers had no such single leader, they had no need of such things.

"I understand that, and I have always said I will march north to deal with this other enemy, but I will not leave enemies behind me!" Stannis growled. "Such would be madness, I would be deposed, the land and the lords turned against me all too easily." That his own actions had something to do with that didn't even occur to Stannis.

"Unless we can win this war in two months my Lord, we will have no choice. That is something my visions were clear upon. In two months, **something** will happen in the North. Something that will segue disaster." She went on to describe many of the things she had seen among the army which matched what Rannar had seen in the main though somewhat less detailed. Melisandre hadn't been able to discern anything about their strategies, except the time which they had still to act.

"Two months!?" Stannis said incredulously. He glared at the woman then stared over and away from her for a moment thinking hard. They were about three weeks or so away from the ruins of King's Landing now, and he estimated they had at least two weeks before they entered the Riverlands.

*Depending on Stark's actions, that campaign could take months. And that doesn't even consider were Viserys is, or the second fleet, which I very much fear is the Golden Company, or the bloody Viper in the south. In the long run, the Viper is immaterial, he doesn't have a large enough army to conquer, and he has made no friends. And Viserys' army is a small threat if we can neutralize or kill his dragon. But the Northern and Riverlands Army, possibly the Golden Company, those are a different matter.*

"I don't know if I'll be able to do that," he said honestly. "Unless Rannar Stark decides to bet it all on a single roll of the dice, a campaign in the Riverlands could take months. And we're still at least a week and a half possibly two weeks away from entering the Riverlands at all."

Melisandre nodded, not speaking. If she was a saner woman, Melisandre might've pointed out that possibly some kind of peace treaty with the Starks might be necessary at this point, but she wasn't. Melisandre was still enamored of the idea of sacrificing the Targaryen woman to her flames. The power that would give her would be incredible, and Melisandre now knew she would need that power when they went to war with the Great Other.

"Though I am loathe to suggest it my Lord could a return to the oceans hasten our journey?" She said after a moment.

"Without a doubt, though we might lose a few ships along the way at this time of year. But that would force us to either fight our way through the northern navy, which has grown in recent years, or have already beaten their king's army, forcing them to sue for peace." Stannis would never go to Rannar and offer a peace treaty, but if he beat the Stark youth he was more than willing to welcome the rest of the North into the fold once more. Better that than facing continual attacks on his army when he moved to the Wall.

"In any event, I will send a raven to Duskendale and have them send out a cutter to find Seaworth have him be ready to meet us either in Maidenpool or Duskendale. " They had received word that Dragonstone had been retaken, and Driftmark's port razed to the ground several days ago from a messenger from Duskendale. Stannis had been pleased to hear that Ser Seaworth had responded in precisely the manner he had hoped, that he would continue to pursue Viserys' fleet. He doubted Viserys would find any friends anywhere, which would force the boy to remain at sea. And at sea, Davos and the pirate Salladhor Saan would slaughter him.

"Can your visions tell us anything more, anything concrete?"

"I've seen visions my Lord that I would interpret as meaning that one of the Tyrells has won its little war, and is marching down to a river."

"Willas then. I doubt that Garlan would be in any position just yet to take the war to the Ironborn in the Shield Islands or along the Mander." In this he was correct, Garlan was still in Oldtown at that moment, gathering resources and arming his ships for the campaign to come. "Go on."

"The Second Fleet, the one that has a golden sheen to it Azor Ahai, has arrived and won a battle. I did not recognize the keeps involved, but it has arrived to Westeros and won several victories. This time however I was able to see some of the banners my Lord." She went on to describe them, and Stannis slowly nodded.

"A mercenary army entirely. If not for the Golden Company, their threat would be negligible at this point. My men and even those from the Reach are veterans, and veteran armsmen are always better than mercenaries who will turn their tails the moment a battle is against them. However the Golden Company, that makes it a different kettle of fish. They won't find any allies among the lords or smallfolk but they can have an impact on any battlefield. Can you tell me anything more?"

"A man who is not a man is joined them, and they may take to sea once more. But once at sea my Lord, my visions lost power. If I could but sacrifice someone..."

"Tell me the rest of your visions and then will decide on that." Said Stannis was still very wary of creating internal enemies by allowing Melisandre her head on that issue, but there were more than a few lords whose death he would not exactly miss. Arranging it in such a way that could not come back on that would be an issue, but not an insurmountable one.

"There is not to tell. I saw a city, portions of it burning but only portions. What that could mean I do not know. The Black Dragon my Lord is a mad creature that much I do know, that bit of my vision was tinged with madness fire and death."

"Viserys." Stannis replied grimly. "We already knew he was mad, the depths of that madness doesn't really affect us right now."

Melisandre nodded. "I saw some wild men battling men of the North, though there was no context, and it faded quickly into the visions of the Great Others that I've already spoken of. Whether it was part of those visions, a segue into them perhaps, or something entirely separate, I cannot say."

Melisandre **hated** to admit that, but she had to, the Lightbringer deserved to be told honestly about her shortcomings. Particularly since doing so might convince him to let Melisandre sacrifice someone to gain the power to see better. "I saw the Wolf and the Fish fully intertwined, marching on, got the impression they were marching towards us, but not directly. I also saw men marching east then north. I do not know their banners, so it meant nothing to me but..."

She went on to describe a few of the banners, and Stannis' smile twisted slightly. "The Vale! So those fools have finally decided to stop sitting on the sidelines?"

"East then north I said." Melisandre said sharply before going on in a softer tone, staring into his eyes. "They will not interfere I do not think with the war against our human opponents, but they hear the call North as well my Lord. We must go north soon!"

"If the Riverlands and Northern army is marching towards us, I may be able to smash them and move on to Maidenpool. From there it will take about a month or so if we're lucky to get to White Harbor by sea. That is the best I'm going to promise, and I won't even promise that until I know what the Golden Company is up to. If they were any other mercenary force, I would be willing to allow the remaining lords here south of the Neck to deal with them. But as it is, I can't even promise that."

"Then will you allow me to sacrifice someone to the flames my Lord?" Melisandre replied. "That is the only way I will be able to get the information you seek."

Stannis frowned. He didn't want to be completely dependent upon her visions. The need for a spy network was paramount in his thinking for the future, though he honestly only had the vaguest idea of how to go about building something like that. But right now, he couldn't turn that resource away just because he was worried about being dependent on those visions.

He finally nodded. "Yes I will, but you will have to wait until we are close enough to the woods near the God's Eye. I refuse to allow the army to realize what we are doing here. My position among the lords particularly from the Reach is not the best, and I can ill afford to empower such division when we are about to face our sternest threat."

Melisandre nodded eagerly. "I will have something prepared by then my Lord."

OOOOOO

The wildling assault on the Wall came with the pounding of the drums from the towers. In his castle along the wall Tyrion woke up abruptly during the noise, pushing the previous night's whore off him quickly and ignoring the woman's shouts of protest as she fell to the cold stone floor. He shivered a little himself as he got out of bed, but quickly raced over to pull on his armor.

About five minutes later Tyrion was up on top of the wall, along with Bronn and the rest of his order. A raiding party of wildlings had somehow crept up, in broad day light to the Wall and thrown up several of their climbing ropes. They hadn't been noticed until they'd done the same thing at least five times to get up the Wall.

"How the hell did that happen?" Tyrion shouted even as he drew his sword and raced forward to hack at a few of the wildlings who had scaled the Wall in the face of several dozen archers firing straight down at them.

"Ask questions later." Bronn grunted blocking a man from getting around the edge of the line and hurling him off the Wall with a fierce overhand blow the man had been forced to block.

The battle was quick and vicious, with over a dozen wildlings falling to their deaths and even more slain by arrows with only a few having been able to scale the Wall despite having had such a surprising head start on doing so before they were noticed. None of the defenders had been hurt by enemy fire, though more than one man was hustled back inside dealing with frostbite.

"What was the point of that?" Tyrion growled. Shoving his sword back into its sheath and sticking his hands underneath his armor plate. It was more sweaty than warm in there, but it was better than the alternative right now. *Note to self, remember gloves next time old boy.*

"I don't know Little Lion, it doesn't seem to serve any purpose unless they're trying to gauge how quickly we react, though why they don't know that yet, hell's I'm not going to guess."

"Maybe, I certainly wouldn't want to trust what a wildling scout could report about things like that. Hmm... still I have to wonder..."

Moments later just as Tyrion was about to head inside to find his gloves, the sound of drums reached them from much further down the Wall to the east. He looked at Bronn and the two exchanged glances before Bronn turned and began to bellow orders to the men around them to head in that direction while leaving several dozen archers where they were, spreading out as more men came up from Sable Hall to join them.

Tyrion hastened inside to grab his gloves, and by the time he caught up with his men the battle was already over.

"Another skirmish," said a Night's Watchman, who was in charge of this portion of the Wall. "We spotted them as they came up, and butchered them on the Wall before they could get up even two ladders worth."

The Imp hummed thoughtfully, still wondering what the wildlings were up to when yet another series of drum rolls began to bellow out.

About a week later, the drum noises had become almost constant.

At another meeting with the Lord Commander, Mormont and Tyrion met alone. None of the other lords could be pulled from their positions at this point for a face to face meeting, not when they all knew what was going on now. "They're trying to tire us out, keep on probing and sending small raiding forces here, there and everywhere along the Wall, pulling out the defenders this way and that, stretching us and exhausting us, using his numbers against us."

"Yes, but we can't do anything about it. While we have the best possible defensive position, they have the initiative as to where to attack. "

"And you're still adamant about not using the siege weapons until he starts to throw in larger assaults against us?"

"Yes. While a survivor of some of the original probing attacks might have gotten back down the Wall and to Rayder, it's doubtful. And it's even more doubtful that they would understand how deadly those weapons are now. Especially since all of them are on turn-aisles. I'm looking forward to them realizing that."

"But tiring out our troops like this, it really will have an effect." Tyrion said worriedly.

Jeor nodded, his eyes and face carved like stone. "That's why I'm ordering all of the northern lords and you Little Lion to pull two thirds of your forces off rotation on the Wall. My Night's Watch and the remainder will deal with these probing attacks, but I want most of our men rested and ready for when real battles begin."

So it went for another two weeks, while the weather became colder and the men of the Night's Watch and the others chosen to stand with them patrolled the Wall as aggressively as they could, leaving no area uncovered for long enough for even the fastest wildling raiders to climb the magic-imbued Wall, which was 700 feet tall for its entire length.

No wildling made it up onto the wall, but every day numerous patrols would run into attempts to do so, and the defenders began to flag. Everyone could feel it, even those back down in the castles. And so it came as no surprise when the real attacks began.

OOOOOO

The first full assault hit near The Torches, which was commanded by Harrion Karstark and his men. He was a youngish man, but stern and thoughtful. He stood now staring out down from the Wall as thousands upon thousands of wildlings streamed out of the forest heading towards the Wall.

Behind them hidden in the woods several dozen catapults began to fire up at the Wall, but they simply didn't have the range to reach the top. The stones slammed into the Wall with a great booming sound, knocking loose some of the ice covering it, but that was all.

Harrion nodded over to the nearest catapult team. "Aim for the back of the horde lads, not your opposite numbers. Leave that to the ballistae. Other than that, fire!"

The man nodded, ranging their weapons on the attacking horde, a few of them further down the Wall needing to push hard on the turn-aisles their weapons were affixed to before firing. Dozens of massive boulders flew out from the Wall, some of them separating in midair before they plummeted down to impact among the horde of wildlings charging towards the Wall. Screams of anger, pain and fear filled the air, loud enough to be heard high above on the Wall.

Still the wildlings came on, entering bow range now and taking even more fire, though admittedly at this far a range the arrows lacked any kind of penetrating power. Yet neither did the wildlings have much armor to speak of, and gravity aided the arrows lethality too.

Behind the horde their catapults continued to try to arrange upon the Wall, and one or two larger ones began to fire. Yet in response the ballistae now fired on them in turn, the anti-siege weapons taking out their fellows quickly, smashing them to pieces and oftentimes killing their crew.

Long ladders began to clank along the Wall, along with grappling ropes to carry the men up portions of the Wall, though of course none could reach the top by any single ladder. More and more men began to fire arrows straight down at the attackers at the bottom of the Wall, until Harrion ordered, "Rock barrels forward!"

Here and there along the portion of the Wall facing this onslaught, teams of men came forward bearing large barrels filled with small fist sized rocks. They began to liberally pour them over the sides, moving along the Wall as they did to spread the effect. They also ripped away grapnels and ladders, carrying any man either carried to their doom.

Harrion had no idea how many wildlings died over the remaining moments of that battle, but they probably outnumbered the men his House had sent to the Wall by at least 3 to 1 possibly more. And in return he hadn't lost a single man. *The wildlings might be able to surprise us from time to time in small groups, and possibly larger ones during the night, but this kind of mad assault during the day is pointless. Not with the number of men that look the Lord Commander had ordered to be rested anyway.*

*And now to put a bit of an emphasis on it!* Harrion smiled at that thought, looking over at one of the larger trebuchet. "Load one of the specials."

More than one man looked queasy at the very idea, but all of them set to willingly, loading the large siege weapon not with a giant rock as it could have held but with a large bundle of heavy, clay flasks tied in a loose net. The alchemist who helped them was looking incredibly nervous, hoping that the jostling wouldn't set off his precious cargo.

It didn't, and moments later the cargo of wildfire flasks was flung out from the Wall by the massive siege weapon. It didn't aim for any of the attackers, most of whom were now retreating. No, it aimed for the forest well behind them.

The wildfire ignited in midair from the jostling, exploding out from its casks one after another and spreading as it did, so what hit the forest was as near to a blast of dragonfire as could be contrived by human means. And it spread, lighting the forest on fire for acres in every direction, a maelstrom of green flame. Screams abounded, the noise of them reaching the Wall above even the tumult of the ongoing battle and more than one wildling turned to look, wailing in shock and fear at the horror that the defenders of the Wall had unleashed upon them.

They broke of course, even a disciplined army would've broken upon seeing their camps destroyed like that along with thousands of their fellows, not even considering the losses they had already sustained. Here and there in family groups or clans they broke, rushing away from the Wall and away from the wildfire moving north and west to get away from both.

Harrison stared across the battlefield, his face grim but his eyes showed the understanding of the terror had just unleashed. Still, he had his duty, and the wildlings now knew there would be no mercy from the defenders of the Wall if they kept this attacking. "Ready some men with torches. We'll need to send them down to the bodies piled up at the bottom of the Wall and in the clear zone. We don't want our real enemy to be able to boost its forces after all."

OOOOOO

Benjen led a force of ten Rangers and fifty Karstark men down the wall, rappelling down via ropes rather than using the nearest tunnel at Rimegate. Many of his men cursed at the necessity, but Benjen had agreed with Jeor's decision there, and his own mind was on the issue at hand.

Nearly an hour after their descent began, they reached the bottom, and for once, Benjen was glad it was so cold here at the Wall year round. It kept the smell of the bodies down to a minimum. They were piled so high in places that he couldn't see the ground underneath them. "By the gods old and new..."

The men all around him paused too, staring at the bodies. One turned away, throwing up against the base of the Wall.

Benjen shook his head after a moment, pulling up his scarf to cover his nose more securely, and pulling out flint and tinder. "Let's get this over with boys."

The men spread out wordlessly, taking burning torches with them, and soon the smell of charred meat was everywhere. Benjen and his men worked diligently and soon hundreds of the bodies had been set aflame.

Leaning down Benjen set another body onto the nearest pile, then turned back, moving to pick up another body. Suddenly two others nearby moved and two living wildlings jumped toward him, one from behind him, one from the front. The one from behind Benjen wrapped an arm around his neck, but Benjen grabbed the arm with both of his own, crouched and heaved, tossing him away. "Ambush, watch out for them among the bodies!"

For a moment there was shock, and ten men fell to wildlings blows before the others roused themselves and fought back. From above arrows began to fall, cutting down a few of the wildlings, but it was hard to tell friend from foe from so far above especially with the smoke from the pyres.

Benjen leaned back and away from a sword thrust, his weapon up and cutting into the wildling's side, before he danced back avoiding a wild charge by an unarmed raider. The pommel of his sword slammed into the back of the wildling's head, sending him down to the earth with a thud. "Damn it, stay down! Why won't Mance talk to us?! We know why you're coming south, if you,"

"Fuck you crow!" the man replied in mangled common, a knife in his hand as he lunged forward. "Never deal with the kneelers or you fucking cro-gah!"

The man's voice cut off abruptly as he practically impaled himself on Benjen's outstretched sword. Benjen sighed, kicking the body off his sword and looking around as the last of the ambushers died under the blades of his Rangers and the Karstark armsmen. "Damnit, what an old god's damned waste."

OOOOOO

Mance Rayder knew it was hopeless. He had known that since the first time one of his scouts had reported seeing men not dressed in the black of the Night's Watch on the Wall. The reports before that could've been discounted, men out for vengeance against wildling raiders, adventure seekers, young man wanting to be blooded in battle all those could've been reasons why the colors of Hornwood and Karstark among others were seen.

But the moment he had reports of those same **banners** on the Wall, he knew that any assault was hopeless. The

Wall was such a strong defensive position that a hundred green troops could hold an army measuring in the thousands so long as they could concentrate on one point. That had been his original plan. Mance had wanted to stretch the Night's Watch, to tire it out, to make it seem as if every portion of the Wall was under threat of attack.

Then he would throw a few real attacks to the sides here and there or straight up the middle, wherever the defense appeared to be weakest. Then, when reinforcements had been rushed to that point, he would launch his **real** attack elsewhere.

That would have been either at Westwatch-By-the-Bridge across the bridge or even better up the Wall someplace where he knew the nearest castle couldn't have been easily put back in working order from his time in the Night's Watch. That would allow him to hold a portion of the Wall long enough for him to reinforce his initial assault and slowly but surely get his entire nation over the Wall whatever the defenders tried to do against the wildling's superior numbers.

Now that was impossible. The Wall wasn't held by a Night's Watch barely numbering in the thousand with much of them rapists and murderers, barely trained with bow and arrow, and not inclined to take their oaths seriously. It was held by forces from practically every Northern House, a force that might have given him trouble in the open field, let alone on the Wall!

"Harma's dead, along with more than two thirds of her assault force!" Said one of his advisers, a large man named Tormund. "They used some kind of, of green fire and they weren't tired out, they were waiting for us! And in numbers!"

"I know, I feared that." Mance shook his head slowly staring at the makeshift map of the Wall. Along it were a series of x's, where spoiling raids had gone in, marked in different colors in an effort to make sure that he knew which ones have been at least somewhat successful. Unfortunately that color was practically buried under the ones that showed unsuccessful attacks.

"I'd hoped that keeping the small spoiling raids going would allow us to wear them out despite their higher numbers. But they simply have too many men despite the sheer length of the Wall. They can't be strong everywhere, but they have a strong enough reserve that those reserves are spread out enough, and are aware enough that they can cover the entire Wall in enough strength to turn us aside."

"So what are we going to do?" Said one of his advisers angrily, a man named Styr, who led the Thenn, a group of wildlings more heavily armed and armored than most wildlings. "We're stuck between a Mormont behind us, and a long drop in front of us! We can't fight the Others, and they are pressing us hard. Every settlement and clan north of the Milk Water have been abandoned, including the Thenn curse it! And there've been reports of sightings from as near as the Fist of the First Men! It's only a matter of time before they follow us down here."

Mance grunted irritably. The sheer energy and speed with which the Others were moving, even now when winter had only just begun here in the True North was worrying, as was their openness in attacking large groups. *And if you fall against them, you rise to attack your own.* Worse, the wildlings had no weapons against them. They had no Dragonglass as their old legends said could be used against the Others, or Valyrian blades. Fire seemed to keep them at bay in large enough amounts at night, but even that failed against the Others themselves rather than their wights.

"Keep up the small attacks for now but I think... I think it's time we probe harder around the Gorge..." Mance said musingly.

OOOOOO

Though Mance didn't know, his authority within the horde had already eroded badly. While no wildling was even able to think of something like an easy victory, they had expected to at the very least hurt their enemies. Not one of them had truly understood how attacking the Wall, trying to get this number of people across it, was different from trying to sneak smaller bands across. And not a one amongst them except possibly Tormund and Styr, had understood what the reinforcements on the Wall really meant.

Now they did, and there were those who were rethinking the entire idea of trying to head across the Wall. Groups here and there broke off from the horde. Some of them headed over the mountains to the Frozen Shore or down towards the milk water's gorge further on to try and get across is there. They failed to do so, the nature of the mountains and the shore turning them back.

The largest group to break off, a force of around 6000, consisted of two clans who had been allied in recent years.

Their lands were along the shore of the Shivering Sea, and they had many a fisherman or sailor among them. "Enough of this!" One clan leader said to the other, who nodded in agreement. "You don't get through a wall by bashin' your head against it, and there be no battering ram big enough ta get through the Wall."

They headed through the Haunted Forest towards Storrolf's Point intending to make rafts and get around the Wall that way.

Not one of them would ever be seen again, not alive anyway. The White Walkers and their undead allies were closer than even Mance realized. And now with winter gripping the True North they were becoming even bolder.

OOOOOOO

Theon smiled thinly crouching behind a tree his bow raised side-along and an arrow pulled back to his chin as he stared through the forest towards his targets. It had been several days since the expedition had set out from the small fort they had made near the shoreline, and they had been attacked several times by small raiding forces. Not once had someone tried to speak to them. It was always "Death to the invaders, death to those who bowed to the dragons."

*I thought the last punitive expedition sent to this cursed island would've made certain that the inhabitants knew the penalties for rising against House Stark, but I guess not.* That had been a few hundred years or so ago after all, and the inhabitants were so used to being left alone that's they had simply taken up new grievances rather than going back to the old ones. *Though I don't think that whole kneeling thing's applicable any longer. Ranma like to do a lot of things to Daenerys, but I doubt kneeling comes into it.*

Just then Theon's thoughts juddered to a halt as the men he was targeting came through the trees towards the column visibly marching through the forest two-hundred yards or so to his left. Skagoski seemed to prefer to attack from the sides rather than straight on, and this attack didn't seem about to buck that habit. *We'll see if they change their ways after one of their ambushes turned on them.*

He waited a few more moments, his mind going blank as he concentrated on choosing a target, watching the ambushers slip into positions. Their position was on a slight rise in the trail that the column was trying to follow, allowing them a slight height advantage. But Theon still didn't see many bows or arrows among them. Spear users they had in plenty, and his men had learned to be wary of them throwing the damn things, but not archers.

*And they're so confident that they haven't even noticed myself and my men.* Theon thought scornfully. It was obvious that Skagoski were overconfident in their ability to move silently through their forest. It never occurred to them that someone else could turn the tables on them.

Theon gave a mental shrug, sighted down his arrow and between one breath and the next loosed. His arrow caught one of the would-be ambushers straight between the eyes. Even as the man fell like a puppet with its strings cut Theon had turned his eyes towards another, an arrow pulled out of the ground in front of him and loosed within seconds.

All around him the other archers had begun to fire, but by the time they had loosed their first ones Theon had already fired four times each time killing an ambusher. The battle was over before the column could even race forward to join in, the last ambusher going down with one of Theon's arrows in his thigh. That had actually been a tougher shot than simply killing him, but Theon felt it was time to get some answers from the locals, willing or no.

Even with an arrow almost entirely through his thigh the man tried to escape, crawling along the ground. When that didn't work and when he felt Theon and his men around him the local pushed himself onto his back turning to spit up at them while his hands tried to scramble in the dirt for anything he could use as a weapon.

He said something in the old tongue, but Theon didn't understand it. Theon turned to one of his men, who shrugged his shoulders. "You don't want to know."

"Charming." Theon replied dryly, crouching down to the man. When he seemed about to spit, Theon swiftly smacked him across the face hard enough to leave a bruise. "None of that. My name is Theon Greyjoy. I'm an Iron Islander, and if you've heard anything about me in mine, then you know I'm more than willing to start carving bits off you to get the answers I need."

While Theon didn't consider himself an Ironborn any longer, he was certainly willing to use his people's reputation for cruelty to his advantage if he could. "Now, can you speak common?"

The man grunted, and looked about to spit again. Theon smacked him once more on the other side of the face. "Pull out one of his hands. I think we'll start getting answers out of him by, oh, the fourth finger or so? What do you think?"

The men around him grunted in amusement, grabbing the local by the shoulders and holding him down as Theon pulled out a dirk. "Or are you simply going to answer my questions?" Theon asked looking down at the man.

He glared back defiance, but stopped and screamed after Theon cut off his middle finger. He started screaming then, and Theon waited patiently until he stopped his voice going down into a mumble. "I'll ask again, do you speak common?"

The warrior violently shook his head, then spoke rapidly. The man who Theon had looked at before shrugged his shoulders. "He can't speak it, but he understands it well enough. I'm not certain if he's just refusing to speak it, but so long as he understands we're asking I don't suppose it matters."

"True enough." Theon shrugged his shoulders. "Alright, we're here as representatives of Lord Stark, your Lord Paramount. Why are you all attacking us? Why were you attacking the transport ships?"

The man sneered and spat out something in the Old Tongue, while Theon turned inquisitive eyes to the translator. He frowned for a moment, then shrugged. "They've always raided the ships passing through the Bay of Seals, they claim it's theirs he says, anything they take is theirs by right. And the Starks have never held much sway here, and what little sway they had faded when they bowed to the, er, the dragon-fuckers."

"Really? I doubt they'd be able to find produce of ownership." He replied dryly, wincing internally at how alike these barbarians were to the Ironborn under his father. He squatted down again, staring into the man's eyes. They were watering slightly from the pain he was in, both from the arrow in the meat of his thigh and his finger..

Theon stared into his up the man's eyes, then asked. "How many men have you and yours lost the since we arrived on this Skagos?"

The local shrugged ignorance, still staring up at Theon defiantly. He then spat something else, something that the man who was translating frowned at. "It seems as if they have their own king now, and he is ordering them to continue to harass us."

Theon's eyes widened slightly. "Who's this King, did he order the attacks on our shipping, has he united the clans here?"

The barbarian nodded speaking so rapidly that the translator had trouble keeping up. After a moment the Northerner, who Theon absently noted was strangely enough a Glover man, nodded. "Apparently the raiding started before the king had united the clans, but the last one, the most successful one was under his command."

That had actually been the only one that was entirely successful in taking a galleon intact. The attackers had come up on the transport convoy during a heavy, cold fog, and the ship had fallen to the pirates before any of its escorts or sister ships could go to its aid, blinded as they were by the fog. Losing an entire ship like that had finally convinced Lord Manderly and Mors Umber to allow Theon to go forward with Theon's invasion plan.

The translator went on. "It seems as if the king, one Ulric, has magic and is trying to organize the people here. He's even built a small permanent village, calling it his capital. Or at least that's what I would translate that word too, maybe headquarters, or symbol?"

Theon smiled thinly. "I'd call that a target. Where is it?" He asked the man at his feet.

The man was happy enough to give them directions, of course he also interspersed his words with threats that the king would kill them all, that Ulric's magic would slay them and that Skagosi would enrich themselves with the weapons and armor of their invaders. Theon ignored it all, already making plans.

OOOOOO

Kyle Condon and castle commander Bowen Marsh did not like one another. Bowen Marsh didn't like the fact that the Night's Watch needed help at all, and in particular did not like the fact that none of the newcomers had been forced to swear the oath of the Night's Watch. It seemed to cheapen their ongoing and unending duty and sacrifice, not wanting to acknowledge the fact that he, and most of the other brothers, had only come here to evade the gallows. He looked on the order of the Ardent Defender in particular as a weak debased concept. He wasn't the only one among the brethren who felt that way, but he was one of the most highly placed.



This hampered their abilities to communicate with one another, and had worsened when it was the Night's Watch who were tasked to watch the Wall while the majority of the Northerners rested over the past few weeks. Taking their cue from their commander, there had been several dozen incidents between the two factions along the wall in front of Shadow Tower, Westwatch-By-the-Bridge and Sentinel Stand, the three castles that Bowen and the men seconded directly to him from the north commanded along with Kyle.

It had finally got so bad that Kyle removed his personal command entirely to Greyguard, putting some distance between him and Bowen Marsh, who had taken Westwatch as his command. He was still close enough to respond to any threats, and against orders he had taken over patrolling the Wall between Greyguard and Icemark, where patrols out of Castle Black took over. These forced him to use more of his men, mostly from House Mormont and Cerwyn, than he was supposed to, but he felt it was worth it.

But the bad blood between the two groups remained.

When the drums began to sound that a large assault had been spotted, the men of House Cerwyn and House Mormont responded with alacrity. But this time the attack came at night, and had begun by bands of fifty or so wildlings sneaking through the night until they were at the base of the Wall. Then they began to climb, trying to get to the top without being noticed.

By the time they were spotted thousands of them had made it up onto the Wall and were in the process of trying to climb up it. The catapults and ballista began to rain upon the groups still far below trying to rush towards the Wall, while the archers and the men carrying the heavy barrels of stone went to work.

For a moment it looked as if some of the wildlings were going to actually reach the top of the Wall, but Kyle and his men turned them back. The last wildling fell from the Wall screaming as a boulder the size of two fists pressed together smashed into the top of his head, shattering his skull and sending pieces of skull and brain matter splattering against the ice of the Wall and a few of his fellows to either side of him. His flailing body hit another man, taking him off the Wall below him, but many others had already fallen back.

They however left many of their ladders in place. Kyle ordered them burned, and his men began to fire down at them with fire arrows while he frowned at the retreating horde. They hadn't retreated entirely into the forest, he could still spot them milling around right at the edge. "Are they daring us to try to use our trebuchets and their special cargo?"

He didn't realize he had said this allowed until one of the men nearby, a man of house Mormont took in the scene at a glance. He guffawed loudly. "I bet the undisciplined bastards are tryin' ter figure out who's in charge now. We must've killed their clan leader or someatlike that. Look, ye can see several of the groups are simply breakin' off and heading east in full view of us, and I bet there are others retreatin' entire."

Suddenly huge boulders began to smash into the top of the Wall, barely below the parapet. Those boulders would've been fit to smash through any other Wall of nearly any other Castle. The Wall however didn't even twitch. Nonetheless, this was a new and possibly dangerous threat and Kyle scowled angrily. They might be marching east but they apparently left some of their toys behind to entertain us." He nodded over to the ballista men. "Do you think you can range on them?"

"Not through the trees commander." said one of the men, shaking his head. "Maybe we could shoot that far, but not into the trees with any kind of accuracy. I wonder how the hell they are even firing the trebuchet up through the trees. Those things take up a lot of space." The ones on the Wall were so large you had to actually walk through the legs of the device to move along it. The swivel mount for them took up the entire Wall's width, and when they were being turned it took seven dozen men on the bars set to either side to do anything to them. Turning them quickly was frankly impossible.

However they did so now, and the much larger defensive trebuchet's ranged on their opponents quickly. Yet at the same time, the force that had retreated from the initial attack on this segment of the Wall charged out of the woods again, with at least half again the numbers they had when they retreated. Kyle scowled as he realized this. *Still it doesn't matter in the end!* "Head back down to the castle," he ordered one of the men. "Get the rest of the men up here."

OOOOOO

What Kyle should've done was call in the Night's Watch from both sides to help deal with this, rather than committing his own men which would leave him with no rested reserves if he was called elsewhere. However his pride would not allow it, and he knew that the Night's Watchmen, at least those on west of him would rather leave him to die than come to his aid.

At the same time that attack was going on, tying up the majority of the men of House Mormont and House Cerwyn, another attack group was assaulting the Wall near Shadow Tower and Westwatch-by-the-Bridge. This group had no siege weapons, and while they had done just as good a job as their fellows sneaking up, the natural defense of the land here was the huge crevasse that separated the True North from the Wall. Admittedly the land here was mountainous, allowing the wildlings to fire from a slightly more equal position, but it also protected the land directly across from Shadow Tower.

The crevasse was only crossed by the Bridge of Skulls in front of Westwatch, which made Bowen Marsh's defense of that area of the Wall ridiculously simple. And because he hadn't gone to Kyle's aid, he still had his full complement, upwards of three hundred Night's Watch brothers.

Archers from both sides began to fire, but it was a rare wildling indeed that could range on the Wall, while the opposite was not true. Yet even so the wildlings continued coming and they finally began to use some weapons the wildlings had long devised to try to offset the height of the Wall.

From their vantage point a little along the edge of the crevasse and up into the mountains groups of wildlings began to bend back huge bows, far too large for a single man to wield. They were in fact incredibly simple and very muscle-intensive scorpions. They fired incredibly slowly, because two men needed to pull back the bowstring to click into place on the holder while a third slotted in one of the special arrows, which was the size of around three normal arrows put together.

Aiming the thing was difficult. Yet they were more mobile than regular scorpions, and Mance had sent forward every one of the things to bolster this attack. If the wildlings could gain a foothold on top of the Wall, then any amount of blood and effort would be worth it.

The Night's Watchmen began to die, because while the weapons of their enemies were not very accurate, there were a **lot** of them, and if one of those large arrows hit you, no armor or shield would turn it away. They fired in turns, trying to keep the defenders heads down, though they failed to do this, again because even here the Wall was just too damn tall. The defenders still fired back, their height allowing the smaller bows to range far more easily, and the men with the barrels of stone continued to drop them down on the attackers, even those who were able to get across the Bridge of Skulls.

But these were also the same men who had been on patrol practically constantly for the past two weeks. They were tired, strung out, and on their last legs. They began to make mistakes, missing clearly open shots, messing up the timing on the drops as the wildlings climbed up the Wall.

Though that wasn't as much of an issue. After all if they missed one target, the rocks would certainly hit someone below them.

Ducking behind a balustrade Bowen Marsh scowled angrily. *All the other probing attacks were simply an attempt to pull us away from Shadow Tower, so that this, they're one real attack could go through! Where's Kyle and his so-vaunted Northern force when we actually need the puling weaklings?!*

But Bowen Marsh too had been on patrol practically constantly these past few days, and he couldn't remember that he had in fact not sent a messenger east along the Wall requesting reinforcements. "Drive them back boys! Drive them back!"

OOOOOO

While that battle raged, Kyle's anger had died down. He was wary about the sudden stillness however after the last wildling had retreated back into the forest. The land out there was literally coated in the bodies of the dead, he could not count how many men had died this day, all of them wildlings.

Looking at it he found himself inexplicably weary. *By the old gods why didn't they stop? We don't want to kill you, you bastards, just stop attacking us for the old god's sake.*

It was a quixotic thought, and one he knew that his fellow lords would not agree with at all, but he couldn't shake it. After a moment however he roused himself, and turned to a few of his men. "Order the Night's Watch to stand down. We'll patrol the Wall for now. Patrols of 400 in each direction. After the initial patrols go out, send another further 820 men after them, they're to reinforce or relieve the signal tower men along the way, the rest are to fall back into the castle. Once you have that organized, I'll have a message for the last of them to carry to the Lord Commander."

That plus guarding this area of the Wall would stretch them somewhat for the moment. And if the Wall was any kind

of normal height, that might well have spread them a little too far against a competent and organized opponent. As it was, they would still have enough men at any one point to have local superiority and they all knew it.

As the sun was beginning to fall, Kyle was resting himself when a few of his men came in. One of them looked very angry, and worried. "Commander, Shadow Tower and Westwatch 've been under assault the entire day! That bastard Marsh is too prideful to call us in, but I think we need to send men to reinforce them."

Kyle nodded, standing up and pulling on his helmet once again along with a scarf and very warm wool and sealskin gloves. Those had cost him several months' worth of pay, getting them transported up to the Wall (without them going missing) had cost him even more. Still, they were well worth the money. "Let's save the irascible old man."

"Actually my Lord, I'm just thinking of a suggestion the Little Lion made about the Bridge of Skulls. This might be the time to see to that issue. So long as we still have the light anyway."

Kyle smirked, remembering that suggestion himself. The Lord Commander and the other Night's Watchmen had been against it, though frankly it made a lot of sense to Kyle. "Do it."

As he was rushing out the man he had sent to command the first patrol heading eastward was returning. He saluted quickly. "We turned back several of what looks to be probing assaults further east my Lord, stronger than the normal ones. I think they just wanted to see if we were still up for more combat tell the truth."

"Keep it up." Kyle ordered slapping the man on his shoulder. "But you're to stay here and take command, Send Liseac instead. I'm off to save an old ungrateful ass from himself."

OOOOOO

Back along the wall by Shadow Tower and Westwatch the battle had continued. Bowen Marsh had lost around half of his command by this point, not all to the weapons of his enemies either. Most of them were down with frostbite or sheer exhaustion. The exhaustion had made them forget the necessity of keeping covered, and more than one man had pulled off his scarf or face wrapping to let themselves breath and then been too exhausted of mind to notice when they lost feeling in their faces.

The wildlings had begun to make them their way onto the Wall itself here and there. At the sight of that high above them, shouts of triumph rippled through the horde despite the horrendous casualties they had taken so far.

Out of the sky from the east came first a single large boulder, smashing into the horde on the bridge and sending them either careening off the bridge entirely or simply flattening them where they were trampled upon under by their fellows. This had happened before, many times during the course of the battle. The wildlings had actually gotten used to it, and simply ignored their losses as always, continuing to push over the bridge and to the Wall scaling up to join the fellows.

But this rock was special. It had in fact been what Tyrion called a rangefinder. A voice shouted from near the trebuchet that had fired it, the man staring out over the Wall, reciting the litany that Tyrion had come up with for moments like this.. "Target and distance bang on, change out the weights and fire put the next load right on their asses boys!"

A normal catapult could only throw rocks around 25 to 50 pounds. A trebuchet however, could throw a boulder of 200 pounds or more. One such followed the trajectory of the rock already thrown. You of course had to modulate the force upwards to get the same result with larger rocks, but that was much easier than turning the trebuchet on its pendulum.

In actuality that boulder didn't kill as many of the wildlings as the first one had. No, what it did was worse. While blotting out one man unlucky enough to be directly below it that rock smashed into the Bridge of Skulls. A crack formed, and a loud creaking was suddenly heard through the tumult of battle.

Hundreds of thousands of eyes suddenly turned in that direction, both from on top of the Wall and from the wildling side. They watched in dumbstruck silence as the crack it stopped, and the wildlings both on the bridge and on either side of it breathed heavy sighs of relief.

That was before another rock fell almost directly on the spot where the first had hit. With a resounding crunching sound of rock shattering the bridge gave way. It broke in the middle, dragging hundreds of wildlings down to their bloody ruin.

"Archers fire!" Said Kyle and he and his men suddenly stood up from where they had been hiding all along the Wall,

waiting for that moment.

Half of them rushed forward to join the Night's Watch along the portion of the Wall directly in front of Westwatch while the rest piled in with their arrows from where they had been hiding. Others ran inside into Shadow Tower to grab up more barrels of rocks, something else that Bowen Marsh, in his exhaustion, had forgotten to order.

The wildling horde on the other side of the broken bridge faded away. They didn't break, they didn't run, they simply faded away, small bits and pieces of families and clans breaking off the action now that there was no hope of coming to grips with the hated crows and their kneeler allies along this area of the Wall.

Kyle marched through up to Bowen Marsh glaring at the man. "Next time you put your damn pride over our duty, I will gut you myself!"

Bowen Marsh glared back then turned away heading into Shadow Tower without a word. Kyle sighed, then went back to reorganizing the battle. *Still*, he thought philosophically. *With the bridge gone we'll be able to draw down our forces here down to a bare pittance.*

OOOOOOO

Mance leaned back a tankard of mead in his hand, his thoughts dark. *We've lost utterly. With the numbers they have patrolling the Wall in strength, there is no weakness we can find to get up onto it. The men I've sent forward to look at the tunnels say they're frozen over entirely, the only one left open is the one in Castle Black, which is normally left open.* That was to allow men of the Night's Watch to travel through it and head into the forest to give their oaths in front of the old gods at an ancient weirwood tree.

For just a moment he wondered if he should sue for peace and said so aloud looking at his top advisers. He knew that these men would not take it as a sign of weakness, though many in the army might have.

Orell, the leader of the few skin-changers with the army, shook his head. "None of us will make deals with crows!"

"Not unless we are looking straight at the death of our people." Said Tormund sharply. "Which we are in case you've forgotten."

The two men almost looked come to blows, and Mance shook his head sharply. "None of that. Still you answered my question so thank you. Our men will respond in that manner, and right now the kneelers hold the whip hand."

Mance used the word with feeling, having grown to share the disdain for the soft southerners that the wildlings held in abundance. He didn't look down on his former brothers nearly as much, though he still felt a certain amount of contempt for them in the way that all of them were so happy with simply going along to get along, of subsuming their personalities into the Night's Watch, to escape their pasts and anything else.

"How many men in total have we lost?" he said after a moment of stiff silence.

"Some 60, 64,000 I think. I know that at least a dozen clans have been wiped out already." They weren't actually wiped out, they had lost their fighting strength. While in the South that meant the houses themselves might be able to survive, here it simply meant that their youngsters and noncombatants were absorbed into other clans. Noncombatants were a very small percentage of the wildling population, usually denoted by pregnant women and those aged too much for battle but with important skills they needed to pass on.

Mance winced. That was a little over a fourth of his total force. Worse he knew those were only the dead, and even that number was probably lower than what had really happened in the past few days of blood and brutality, since it discounted the number lost in the smaller raids. And as for the wounded...

The wildlings had healers after a fashion, but they were **very** limited in what they could do. Four out of every five wounded who were debilitated enough to no longer be able to fight would probably die, making that initial numbers skyrocket. So Mance fully expected to be told in a few days that he was down to possibly a little over a third of his effectives.

A thought occurred to him. Mance stood up abruptly, pacing around as he continued to work at it then smiled thinly. "Get together some of our best night scouts, I want to go see the remains of this bridge myself. There might be something we can do with that."

OOOOOOO

A few days after the massacre at the defense of Shadow Tower, Tyrion looked out over the Wall at a massive attack heading straight towards the portion of the Wall that his order was sworn to defend, near Sable Hall and Rimegate. It was a massive force, almost as large as the reported army that the wildlings had lost almost in its entirety in that battle near The Torches. "How many men do they have?!"

He knew that trying to calculate the size the wildlings could put into the field was an exercise in futility. Practically every person in their society fought in some fashion, men and women, hell even children were taught how to fight and thrown into true combat well before the children of knightly or Noble Houses in the lands of Westeros. So where a normal, powerful Noble House would only be able to field a trained force of upwards of 4000 or so, a wildling clan might have near that same number, in a war like this could raise that number up to nearly their entire population.

*Still, unless they're intending to make a mound of bodies in an attempt to get over the Wall, they're no real threat to us.* For a moment Tyrion actually found his mind trying to calculate the number of bodies it would take to make such a ramp, high enough for the last few wildlings to reach the top of the Wall. It was such a morbid exercise that even Tyrion paused, shaking his head quickly than looking at Bronn. "I can't say I think overmuch about this King-Beyond-the-Wall if he's still trying to throw his numbers at us like this."

He frowned however when Bronn didn't answer him. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not a superstitious man Little Lion you know that. You know I'm still superstitious about this threat you and the other commanders see coming."

"Yes?"

"Ta me, **this** is more proof than any sparkling old-style lettering in armor or weird weapons." At Tyrion's inquisitive noise he went on waving a hand at the horde down below as it came under fire from the defenders of the Wall. Catapults began to fire, not with single stones but with nets of rocks which broke apart in midair spreading destruction. "This I mean."

"I know you an' the other Lords are tryin' to find some kind of military reason behind this. But that group out there, that ain't an army. I've never been beyond the Wall, but I've talked ta men who have and who've spoken with wildlings. Those are strong, hard and prideful people. They wouldn't continue ta throw their lives away like this, not if they had any choice. When I look at those toward hordes Little Lion, I wonder what they're so afraid of that this kind o' slaughter seems a better idea than facin' it."

Tyrion nodded grimly. "You're not the first to think it. All of the old Night's Watch commanders are saying the same thing. The wildlings **never** attack like this, they should've simply stuck to the skirmishing and raiding, trying to sneak across the Wall even if it wasn't working at all, they might have eventually worn us all down enough to break through somewhere, in a few months anyway." Tyrion shook his head. "If they keep this up, we might be looking at the death of an entire society here."

By that point the front of the horde had gotten close enough to the Wall to enter even Tyrion's bow range and he sighed lifting up his bow. It was a northern bow, though smaller than most thanks to unfortunately how close his shoulders were to the ground. "Well to work Bronn, to work."

Over the next few days assaults looks like this would come in then pull back right before they came to the bottom of the Wall, where they would begin to take losses from things dropped from above, which amounted to a surprising amount of those losses. Aiming at single targets at that range from up on top of the Wall wasn't actually easy, an archer could fire six or seven times and only hit on two of his arrows, which kept the wildlings losses down for now.

However they also started to use the same makeshift scorpions that they had used in their assault on Shadow Tower and Westwatch. Doubling up on the strings allowed the individuals wielding them to get their arrows up onto the top of the Wall, though it also made their firing much slower. However they were mobile, and that impacted how the wildlings used them.

Instead of trying to use them as cover fire for their fellows to rush forward and try to scale the Wall these scorpion men operated in groups of 50. They would rush forward at night, moving as silently and quietly as only wildling raiders could until they were close enough for their weapons to range on the top of the Wall. Then they would send up a barrage at a portion of the Wall, sometimes killing or wounding some defenders, sometimes not, before they would retreat.

In this way they had finally hit upon a method in which they could bleed the defenders without paying a horrific return. Tyrion and Harrion's men took some casualties now, losing five men into two nights then an unlucky patrol was

practically wiped out, 25 men, on the third night.

The Lord commander called a meeting the next day. "This is a new twist on an old tactic." He said flatly. "I don't think they can hurt us badly with it, but they can certainly inconvenience us, and if they can weaken us enough, they might throw an even larger attack at us at that same point."

"Agreed," growled Mors Umber. He was cranky because his command Eastwatch itself, had not been attacked, only the area of the Wall nearby under Harrion's control had. That meant he and his men had yet to truly bloody their blades, or in this case arrow points, on the wildlings. "Do you want me to draw down my men, send them to reinforce the areas that have been attacked?"

Even as Jeor answered in the negative Tyrion shook his head, staring into the fire of the Lord Commander's office, not even thinking about the actual discussion. "How many men do you think they have to lose before they get the idea?"

The windrows of the dead after the assault on his Order's portion of the Wall was bothering him even days later. He had never imagined a slaughter like that, and it was bothering him somehow especially when combined with his own concerns and Bronn's words about what the true threat was.

"That would depend on how many what wildlings there were originally. The land beyond the Wall is larger than even the North so there's no way to tell." Said Benjen, looking even more haggard than Tyrion where he was slumping against one of the nearby walls. As commander of the rangers he and his men had been in charge of the burning parties that scaled down the Wall and burned the bodies of the dead after each battle.

It wasn't truly hard work save the climb down since the Lord Commander had forbidden the use of the tunnels, keeping them iced over. They had also been attacked a time or two by ambushers, but his rangers quickly became experts at sniffing such out, or they died. He had lost a tenth of his remaining rangers before the others learned. No, it wasn't hard physically. Yet dealing with that many dead bodies, that much death, got to a man unless he was a complete psychopath.

Worse, he actually respected the wildlings. To make any kind of life in the far North you had to be hard and tough, and he could respect that in anyone even if he felt that their raiding tradition was abhorrent, as were their courtship rituals. But the thousands upon thousands of dead bothered him, it bothered him a lot.

"Bah!" Mors spat, shaking his mangy head. "What did you think would happen? The wildlings know nothing except how to raid and rape! Not one of them will care how many of them die so long as their family or their clan lives. To stop them, we'll have to kill them all or this King Beyond the Wall this Mance whelp. And he hasn't shown himself yet."

"He did actually." said Jeor thoughtfully. "He led a raid on the area of the Wall right in front of Castle Black. One of those raids that could've been a major assault except they turned back rather than chance it after a few dozen of them had fallen to our arrows. I think Mance saw something."

"He must've confirmed the fact we've used ice to cover the tunnels my Lord, all save the one in front of Castle Black." said Benjen nodding his head. "It'd be a brutal business to attack it, but it is a weakness in the Wall."

"Yes, one we might need to do something even more permanent about in the future." said Tyrion thoughtfully looking at the mall. "Unless I am incorrect in assuming that such ice might not be a true defense against our real enemy here?"

There were sober nods of agreement all around the room, but Jeor had already moved onto something else. "I think." He said thoughtfully. "I think that the wildlings will make one maybe two more major assaults. I can't imagine there's more than 250,000 of them all told, and I think we've already killed at least a third may be even closer to half that already."

Benjen and Tyrion both winced, understanding that they weren't really dealing with an army here, they were wiping out an entire population. The Northerners on the other hand simply looked grimly satisfied, with the Norrey and Umber leaders both looking jubilant at the very idea. It was their people who had suffered most under wildlings after all.

"The trick will be to predict where along the Wall they're going to come." Benjen murmured.

"Yes." said the Lord Commander heavily. "They've lost a lot of people already, if they lose half again as many I think that there will be enough angry clan leaders to force a change in leadership. What happens after that, I don't know."

The question will be will they be able to surprise us?"

"What are your orders, commander?" Asked Kyle, who had been silent up to this point.

"I think you hit on it, I think they're going to try to get smaller raiding forces around the Wall and take us from behind either down the crevasse or by small boats in the Bay of Seals. They'll never be able to get large numbers around us, but smaller parties, those they could do. As such I'm going to pull your man off the Wall, Norrey." He said looking at the mountain clan leader. "I want parties of your men to start up into the mountains behind Westwatch and Shadow Tower. Mors, I want the war galleys based at Eastwatch to be reinforced, send an extra 50 men out on each and tell them to start patrolling the waters closer to shore heavily."

"You know that Theon's going to be angry about that. Those war galleys were supposed to be ready to drop off more men to support him on Skagos."

"He'll have to do without them for a few weeks. After that he can have them and your own men if necessary to reinforce his punitive force."

Mors nodded agreeably. Skagosi barbarians or wildlings, he didn't care very much who fell under his blade.

"I also want every converted cavalryman pulled off the Wall and ordered back to Castle Black. Just in case they get past the Norrey in numbers that your men don't want to face in the open field we'll have that group as a hammer just in case."

Going over the numbers in his head Tyrion frowned a little. "That will leave us short in some sections of the Wall." He cautioned. His own order would be half by that command, the other houses not nearly as much, since the North had never really had much in the way of cavalry outside of Manderly and Ryswell, and neither of those houses had contributed much to the Wall save in logistics. Though at this point they had horses at all was surprising given how cold it was appear. But the Northern horses were a shaggy, hardy lot, able to survive these temperatures when their southern fellows would have already succumbed. *And the Maesters say it's not even full winter yet. Feels full enough to me!*

"That's why we're going to redistribute the men of House Mormont and House Cerwyn." Kyle looked up at that startled.

But the commander went on unhurriedly. "You did an excellent job during the attack on your section and going to the aid of Bowen, despite his idiocy. We'll let him and his men stew in Westwatch and the other towers. I'll deal with him after wildlings have finally given up. For now however, half of your men don't need to be there any longer. Without the Bridge of Bones Westwatch and Shadow Tower are defended by the crevice enough that I am confident we can only leave Bowen's men there to patrol those two castles and even Sentinel Stand."

"If I may make a suggestion, I would think that a buffer force between Kyle and Bowen Marsh could be necessary at this point. No offense to you or your order commander, but Bowen Marsh is a prideful and very stubborn man, and his men aren't the most rational of fellows." Tyrion said.

Kyle nodded reluctant agreement. "There have been a few clashes in the past few days between us, no drawn blades but fistfights and shouting matches between patrol groups along the Wall are common."

Tyrion nodded in his direction before turning back to Jeor. "And my force is the one that you're going to be reducing the most when it comes to pulling back the cavalymen. That way the rest of the Order can be close enough if the cavalry forces run into trouble somehow. "

Jeor thought for a moment then nodded. "Agreed. I'd like to remove Bowen Marsh from command here and now, but I don't have anyone else with enough seniority outside the rangers I could set as commander of Westwatch, and the rangers are too useful where they are and serving with the clansmen for me to want to use one of their best that way."

The movements began the next day. While the sun gave what little warmth it could Tyrion and the men of house Cerwyn began to exchange their positions, with the men of House Mormont broken up to add a reserve force elsewhere along the Wall for the other commanders. Patrols became even more aggressive along the Wall, night and day, while the clashes between skirmishing groups became frequent once again. There was a tension in the air, as if everyone on both sides knew that the final clash was going to have to happen soon.

OOOOOO

Theon had sent back to the Fort for more men, pairing the defense there down to a bare 200 men, and sending back a few of his own wounded. With that done, and with the directions to the town that the new king had supposedly created, he and his men marched off deeper into the large island's interior.

The going was incredibly tough, because the village in question was on the highly used mountain on Skagos, which the local had called something which translated into common as 'World's Fang', or something of that nature.

Here the forest floor was steep, rocky and heavy with snow. Most of Skagos had been snow laden, but up here this no truly made their going much more difficult. Here they are along their chosen route they had to turn back thanks to snow and rocks being in their way. It slowed them down so much that what should've taken his men a bare two or three days to traverse took more than a week. By the time they finally saw their target with their own eyes the food situation among the men was getting grave even with foraging every day.

Strangely enough, they weren't attacked on their way. Theon took this to mean that Ulric knew where they were going and was going to try to smash in a trap there with whatever piddling little defense he had been able to raise.

Despite this, Theon and his commanders remained confident that they would be able to win their way through. None of the attacks they had seen so far had come in sufficient numbers to stop them. The armor and discipline of the Northerners had also stood them in good stead against the wild nature of the Skagosi in every attack that had closed to hand-to-hand.

Eventually Theon and his men were on top of a small plateau cut into the side of the mountain which continued on, looming above it. It was heavily laden with snow, but it was flat, much more flat than the lands they had traversed to get up to this point. The village wasn't much, a sprawling collection of small hovels, around one huge longhouse, which reminded Theon forcefully of the one he had seen on bear Island all those years ago.

There was also a wooden palisade thrown up around the village. From where he was staring out at it from hiding Theon could see over two hundred archers stationed up there. *Now we know where their hunters are. I wonder if this Ulric has been planning this all along?*

In front of the palisade were groups of men moving about. There were about six hundred all told, armed with the normal assortment of weapons that Theon had gotten used to since arriving on Skagos. *Not enough to stop us, he thought to himself staring up at the wall behind those men. But enough to slow us down for the archers to have a field day with us. Yet they still have an obvious weakness.*

Moving back to his commanders he nodded at them all. "All right, the archers with fire arrows will start the party, if they're stupid enough to come out chasing us, we'll fight their infantry here in the forest."

"We'll lose our advantage of the shield wall." Calis said cautiously.

"Better than being caught in the open against that number of archers." Theon replied. "I think there are equal to our own not in numbers that at least, and with the palisade heightened vantage and defense will have the worst of it against them. Besides, if the fire arrows work that palisade'll be a death trap."

"Makes sense." Sigmund grunted, before going on thoughtfully. "I'm still worried about the magic that prisoner spoke of."

"We can't plan for something like that until we actually see it firsthand." Theon shrugged. "Besides, he could just be a charlatan all we know."

There was more than one worried mumble about that, but none of them had anything concrete to pin their concerns on. The three northerners returned to their commands, and Theon moved over to join the other archers. Half of them ignited fire arrows, stepping from where they had been hiding around the woodlands to sight through the forest towards the palisade. "Loose!" Theon ordered, and dozens of fire arrows streaked out of the woods smacking into the palisade here and there.

Cries of alarm went up, but the arrows didn't seem to do much, simply smoldering here and there as if the palisade was made of greenwood, or as if it had been splashed with water. Theon frowned at that, staring as the men on the palisade and in front of it began to calm down, some of them even laughing. "Keep it up." He ordered.

Enough fire arrows seemed to do the trick though they were nearly out of them by the time the fires actually caught. Theon could see people trying to pour water down onto fires, but it was a slow process, and now the fires had begun to spread through the wood of the palisade.



Theon grabbed up a dozen fire arrows himself, not aiming at the palisade anymore. Instead he pulled back, aiming up over it through the canopy of the trees. His arrows impacted the huts and hovels behind the palisade, forcing the people there to rush to put out those fires. None of the huts had the same sort of protection that the wall seemed to have and he nodded grimly.

Now the defenders that had clustered in front of the wall charged out into the Woodlands, screaming their battle cries. They were met there by the men of House Flint and House Locke, while the men of house Karstark began to go around their flanks. Theon put his bow on his back, pulling out is dirk and moving forward.

He first came upon two men grappling directly in front of where the archers had been, though they had moved back quickly. One of them was a Skagosi, and Theon stepped behind the man thrusting his dirk into his neck before pulling it out and moving on.

The next clash went far differently for Theon. A islander had just finished off someone in House Flint colors and he turned quickly to engage Theon. He wielded a heavy cudgel and was much stronger than Theon had thought, nearly causing Theon to lose his dirk when he tried to block that first blow. However in return he was surprised that Theon hadn't lost it, and was open to a slice along one arm that nearly cut the arm holding the cudgel off at the elbow.

Even so the man roared in laughter punching Theon hard with his free hand sending Theon backwards in surprise. The man came on laughing crazily picking up the cudgel and hammering at Theon. Theon dodged to one side or the other until he was able to get in close and thrust his dirt into the man's chest. Even so the man grappled with him, his arm closing around Theon's body holding him close. Two headbutts slammed into Theon's head twice before the warrior's body suddenly realized it was dead.

Theon staggered backwards rubbing at his forehead for a moment while around him the battle continued. "What the hells?"

Terrell found him through the melee just then. "We lost about two dozen men already." He reported. "These bastards don't seem to feel pain! You have to hack them apart and even then if you don't hack off their head they'll just keep coming."

Theon nodded, and for a moment was reminded of that ambush that the White Walker's had sprung on the Wolfsworn when they went to up to the Wall. He shook his head rapidly. *White Walker's can't cross the ocean, that's impossible. If they could, the Wall would never've been able to stop them.*

"I know." He said aloud. "But there aren't enough of them to truly stop us, and our own armor and arms are still in advantage. Press them, hard!"

The other man nodded grimly, and the two of them moved forward towards the nearest clump of combat turning the tide there and moving on quickly. There was no way to really organize a battle like this in such dense woodland, but they had done their best in trying to make certain that every man knew how to work with their fellows nearby, and it eventually proved enough.

The last of Skagosi warriors went down, or fled back to the palisade. The losses were heavier than Theon had hoped for but less than he had feared. Soon enough his men were once again formed up and they marched out of the woods.

The palisade continued to burn here and there, but most of it had been put out. Many of the archers up top had joined the efforts to put out the fires and only a desultory hail of arrows greeted their appearance from the woods. At the same time a shout of dismay went up from the defenders as they realized their own men had lost the battle in the woods.

Two small battering rams were brought forward, while the archers and Theon laid down heavy cover fire. Realizing what was going on more of the archers that had joined the efforts to put out the fires came back. The archers began to take losses, as did the defenders but the battering rams went to work.

Someone on the other side tried to pour down something on the battering rams, but Theon shot the man before he could raise the cauldron up over the front of the palisade. The cauldron fell back, and whatever was inside hit several other men causing them to cry out in pain. He continued to rake the wall with arrows directly above the gate, defending the battering rams as they smashed into the gate. They made short work of it, and moments after they began it collapsed inwards.

The defenders fell back quickly, making for the longhouse, where more archers were already positioned up on top of

the roof firing at the attackers as they swarmed into the village. Theon shot two of them, then raced forward soon pushing through the men from the battering rams and racing on shouting, "Get to the longhouse! Don't let them close that door!"

The archers up top of the longhouse cost Theon several men, but he still raced on with others following as the defenders tried to retreat quickly enough to leave them behind and close the door before barring it somehow. They didn't succeed, the last of them going down with a sword thrust through his spine as Theon barreled into the door, smashing it open in the face of five men who had been trying to close it. They flew backwards under the force of his charge, and more of his men barreled in behind him.

A short, very vicious fight occurred there in the area directly behind the door, but soon the last man was down, and Theon strode over his dead body, cleaning his dirk with a bit of cloth torn from one of the dead man's clothing. He looked around the interior of the longhouse, noting it was simply one long meeting hall, though there did seem to be some separate rooms at the far end and along one side.

Tables had been pushed forward to bar the door, but they hadn't been in position just yet before Theon had forced the door open. Other than ten or so men who had retreated quickly from the door there were also more than two dozen women scattered along one side of the longhouse, the first non-warrior women Theon had seen on Skagos, though for some reason all of them had strips of black leather covering their eyes. All of them were good looking too.

In front of the doors to the rooms at the back was a raised dais, on which a very crude throne sat. Before it stood a huge man who had to be Ulric. He was as large as Greatjon maybe, or possibly even larger. He wore heavy chain mail, and held a massive battleaxe and one hand, gesticulating angrily at the last of the defenders as they pulled back towards him, their eyes now showing fear for once.

Yet it wasn't the man who drew Theon's attention. No, Theon's attention was drawn to the woman who had been kneeling behind the throne. She was **easily** the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. High cheek bones, luminescent blue eyes set into a gorgeous face, small pouting and perfect lips, all framed by a magnificent head of wild blonde hair. Her body, from what he could see was magnificent, large yet perky breasts set on display by a tight shirt, legs that were long and slim, with skin unblemished by a single mark.

For just a moment as the last of the defenders retreated to the throne Theon and the woman locked eyes, and Theon could feel the attraction stir within him. That was all he had time for before the man who had been standing before the throne roared angrily, hefting up his axe and charging forwards.

Suddenly angry Theon charged forward to as well, outdistancing the men with him for a moment. He met Ulric, ducking underneath and axe blow and smashing his dirk's pommel into the other man's elbow as the arm went by. "HAHAHA!" The man laughed, taking the blow and turning, bringing up his leg to kick Theon hard in the chest.

Theon felt the air go out of his body as he was lifted off his feet. The man hit harder than Ranma! Even so, Theon had moved to the blow just enough to let him still retain his ribs in one relatively good piece, thanks to his chain mail blunting the blow somewhat. He ducked underneath another overhand axe stroke, his dirk finding the man's leg right behind the knee, gashing him only slightly.

The man bellowed again this time in rage and made to kick Theon away but his leg gave out. Even if he couldn't feel pain, if the tendons were actually sliced the body wouldn't obey any command sent to them by his brain. The man nearly collapsed before steadying himself, but by that time Theon was up on his back.

But Ulric dropped his battleaxe, reaching behind him to grab Theon's head and squeezing. He pulled Theon over his head before Theon could trust his dirk into his back hurling Theon to the ground.

Theon rolled with it, coming up with another man's sword and racing Ulric, dirk in one hand sword in the other. But he lost the sword to a blow from Ulric's axe which shattered the bronze weapon. A sudden lunge before Theon could get away Theon found his good arm grabbed by the man's huge ham sized hand, and soon found himself lifted off the ground as easily as child.

The man bellowed a laugh, saying something in the old tongue. Then he stopped, a quizzical expression on his face for a moment. That was because Theon had reached down to the pouch at his side and pulled out an arrow, thrusting the arrow into the man's eye and into his brain. For a moment Theon still hung there, then the man's body collapsed and Theon fell to the floor.

Around him a wailing began from the Skagosi, and here and there a few of them even threw down their weapons. Through the crowd the woman that had been kneeling by the throne approached slowly, men making way before her,

even his own men, until she stood before Theon. She spoke in the old tongue, kneeling before him bowing her head and placing her palms on her forehead in token of surrender.

Looking up she noticed Theon's look of incomprehension, and then she spoke slowly in common, the first Skagosi that had done so. "What you kill, you keep."

Later that night while his men were seeking similar pleasures among the Skagosi women, who seemed more than willing for the most part, Theon lay with the woman who had apparently been Ulric's. He was caressing her gently, she was too gorgeous for him to want to speed things along quickly.

Her porcelain skin was so cold, but it wasn't painful, rather it was enticing. He wanted to warm her up, whatever it took. The woman had taken to his attentions amorously seemingly fascinated by Theon's barely hairy chest, and his lack of a beard, as well as all the attentions he was paying her.

That wasn't to say the woman, whose name was Elima, was a submissive lover, she gave as good as she did, kneading, caressing, kissing him hard and ardently, her hands working at his manhood bringing it to attention quickly. Soon even though Theon had wanted to take his time, he was simply to aroused to wait any longer. By the look in her eyes Elima was too. They were slitted, her cheeks almost flushed despite the porcelain nature of her skin, a fascinating hue.

Theon began to suck and nuzzle at her neck, as Elima straddled him, pushing him down onto his back as she moved her body down until she was sitting on his thighs, then raising herself slightly. "MMhhhaaa!" Elima threw back her head her eyes closed, moaning loudly as she guided his length into her. Theon bucked underneath her, the two of them began to against one another while Elima's head remained thrown back her eyes closed as she moaned loudly, saying something in the old tongue.

Despite all the experience he had, Theon found his end rushing to meet him quickly, something he put down to how long it had been since he had left White Harbor. Then we went he cum, he gasped feeling the woman clench around him as if trying to pull his cum out of him. Then it became painful, something else was happening, something Theon couldn't quite name was leaving his body.

He felt drained, more drained then the battle and their rutting could explain away. He fell back, his hands falling from the woman's breasts to lay limply alongside his body. Theon simply laid there as the woman continued to ride him, his erection not going down. Moments later Theon began to black out, his eyes slowly shutting, but just as he did so, he caught a glimpse of Elima's eyes opening again, glowing bright blue in the dark of the room.

OOOOOO

It was deep night, and the phrase 'deep night' was never so profound as a night on the Wall, Jeor thought standing on top of the Wall directly in front of Castle Black a cup of warmed mead in his grip warming his fingers and the steam from it kept his face warm as well as he stared out into the night for now.

Jeor was restless, his shoulders twitching underneath his ancient armor, his hand on the hilt of the Valyrian blade Longclaw as he stared out into the dark. He somehow knew that Castle Black would be attacked. It was stupid, an example of emotion and hope overriding fact, but the tunnel through the Wall here represented a possible weakness.

*That was why I left it alone, a possible weakness through which the wildlings could pour their entire hordes far faster than going over the wall. I'm surprised Mance has been able to keep them from attacking us here so far, but at some point his command of the horde will break and they'll attack us here. And it needs to be soon, before they hunt out all of the wildlife in the forest feeding their numbers, and start to weaken and spread out.*

This feeling was proven correct later that same night. The steam from his ale had long since stopped, and the cold was beginning to affect his ancient bones despite how covered up he was when those damnable portable scorpion arrows began to clatter and smash along the parapet of the Wall. Here and their archers who had been covering next to the parapet moved and began to fire back down into the darkness.

There was a shout and a clamor from down below in the darkness and then a shout went up. "Fires down below! They're trying to break through the door!"

Jeor nodded grimly. "Forward the barrels of stone! Pour them all out down there lads, all of them!"

He nodded to Castle black's Master-at-Arms. "Get our brothers up here, but not the Mormont men. We'll hold them in reserve for now, along with the dedicated archers. Wait to use them until they have light to see by."

OOOOOO

Later that same night a runner arrived near the ruins of the bridge of bones. "Mance," the man said gasping for air, hands on his knees. "The attack on Castle Black's begun!"

"Good." Mance said. He had committed all of the remaining portable scorpion's to that attack, along with Orell's men, Styr, all of his men and a little under half his remaining force that wasn't part of the small raiding forces still set to assault here and there further to the east of Castle Black, just enough to keep the defenders there to remain where they were. That attack would continue throughout the night and into tomorrow, along with heavy raidings along the Wall. But all of it was a cover for the real attack, which would be here.

He stared out into the darkness, staring at the expense were there had previously been a bridge. As he had hoped, the bridge wasn't actually smashed entirely, just the middle-most section. The distance between the two sides of the bridge wasn't wide enough to stop a man with a grapnel to throw it across.

*Come on Weeper*, he thought to himself staring at the bridge while all around him fully 40,000 wildling raiders waited along with their giant allies. Their war mammoths were down with a few of their men to make the attack on Castle Black all the more believable. But the clan chief was here along with his men. *Come on Weeper, give us the signal...*

OOOOOO

The Weeper was one of the most intelligent, experienced, and ruthless raiders among the wildlings. He was also personally loathsome, and feared among all his followers for his cruelty. All this made him perfect for the current task.

Three nights previous he'd led a small band down into the crevice and then across the frozen waters of the Milkwater the top of which had frozen more than enough to allow his men to simply walk across it. But getting up the other side had been long and arduous, and he had lost more than a dozen men.

Their screams as they fell to their death would've been enough to alert the men on the Wall far, far above them. However, every man with the Weeper had his mouth muffled in some manner. Those that had protested, had their mouths sown shut by the Weeper, or their tongues pulled out. Finally they were at the top of the ridge line, where they began to scale the Wall itself, which towered over the edge of the ravine.

At Westwatch, Bowen Marsh was an angry and rather bitter man. The fact that he and his men had to be saved by Kyle and the men he had so disdained, the fact that they could leave the Wall after the wildling threat was dealt with, galled him like fire. In his anger he had retreated into the pleasures of a brew of rotgut that a few of his men created here in Westwatch, allowing his men to do whatever they wished.

Very few of them wished to actually continue to patrol the Wall, as angry and bitter as their commander. Especially since without the bridge allowing an attack force across, the most action they would see might be the scorpion men firing on them. No force could scale down into the ravine and across then up again after few were staring toward the east, where faintly they could hear the drums sounding that attack was underway.

The first few of them died to wildling blades before they even realized they were under attack. A few tried to sound the alarm, rushing toward the nearest signal tower, but the wildlings were there before them, and the Weeper himself had raced into the signal tower with a few of his men killing the crows stationed there. He lost a few men to the damn crows, but all of the defenders on this portion of the Wall died before they could sound the alarm.

Looking around he nodded in satisfaction then moved back into the signal tower motioning to a few of his men, while still others moved about, taking axes or torches to some of the siege weapons. "You lot remain here, look as if you're crows if anyone looks in this direction."

"I don't know chief, Ah'm no sure I can act as if I don't have a spine!"

There were some chuckles at that, but not many. Far too many wildlings had died since they had begun to assault the Wall, and the metal of the Night's Watch and the men of the North had proven to be a match for wildling courage.

But now that was over with, and the Weeper smiled in anticipation while ropes began to be thrown back down the Wall making it easier for the next group, as other ropes were tossed across the destroyed bridge, making a very makeshift rope bridge there. It would be tough, and it would be slow, but they would be able to eventually get at large force across that way.

The moon was more than three/fourths of the way it down the sky by the time the Weeper had enough men on the Wall to decide to enter Westwatch. The route down to the castle was a wide stairwell carved into the back of the Wall,

entering a high tower.

At that point however things began to go amiss for the attackers. While Bowen Marsh might have allowed his resentment and anger at the other commanders to color his command, the master at arms of the Westwatch was a man named Qhorin Halfhand.

Qhorin was in the same mold as the old commander of Shadow Tower, commander Mallister. He was a grim, elderly man who took his duties seriously, and truly believed that the duties of the Watch were an honor. He'd been out on patrol with the mountain clans until that night, but since he had come back he had taken Bowen Marsh to task.

Now Qhorin was leading a band of brothers up onto the Wall along the same staircase the wildlings were marching down. For a moment the two groups simply stared at one another, shocked at this sudden meeting. Then Qhorin snarled out "Wildlings! Attack!"

As his men surged forward he turned barking out commands to the men behind him. "Get back into the castle and send runner to Shadow Tower!" Qhorin stared up at the Wall noting that the signal towers in the vicinity were silent. "We can't expect anyone else to hear and come to our aid along the Wall!"

With that the two forces clashed, and the Weeper found himself face-to-face with Qhorin. The wildling chieftain snarled, angry at their plan being so suddenly halted in its place like this, and attacked with furious energy. "Damn you crows!"

Qhorin Halfhand was named that because he had lost all the fingers on his dominant hand in a bygone battle and been forced to re-train himself on his other. He had done so to such a degree that most people never really realized that his new hand hadn't always been his dominant one. He parried the blows of his opponent aside, slicing into the other man's bone armor and almost gutting him with his first strike.

The Weeper only saved himself by leaping back up onto the stair behind where he had been standing, staring in horror as Qhorin finished the swipe in another wildling's shoulder before kicking that man off the staircase and out into the air to plummet down into the courtyard of Westwatch.

Desperately Weeper grabbed a few of his fellows and threw them into the front of the battle. With that cover he turned away, pushing his way through the press of bodies away from the crows that were now forcing their way up the tower, their better weapons and armor allowing them to match the wildlings in this ferocious melee.

OOOOOO

Hearing the clamor of battle closer than it should've been, Mance groaned around allowed before turning away from the rope he was about to climb up the Wall to bark out orders. "Somethings happened up top! Get the Giants across and winch them up onto the damn Wall! If they can hold aid coming along the Wall we can still win this!"

His order went out, and with surprising speed given how disorganized the horde was the Giants were hastened on to the very slim rope bridge. The ropes creaked alarmingly under their weight, but held. The giant creatures, 15 feet tall and bulging with muscle were quickly across and then began to scale up the Wall as easily as any man.

With that done Mance turned staring out into the night out of the Wall. He prayed that the Weeper and his men could hold the top of the Wall against the men from Westwatch long enough for more of his horde to get across the bridge. *Or else all is lost.*

OOOOOO

Back at the front of the battle Weeper had fallen back through his men, staring in astonishment as the crows forced their way up the staircase. His men should've had the advantage, being able to stand above the crows and strike down at their heads. But the better armor and weapons of the crows was telling. For every one of them that fell, four or five of his own men were slain. He was quickly running out of raiders.

Luckily Mance's men had continued to come across the bridge and up the Wall, if slowly, since he had first slain the watchers on the Wall. Fully 2,000 wildlings had made it up the Wall by this point that weren't a part of his original raiding force, and they barreled down the staircase adding their weight to the battle and pushing the thin line of Night's Watch back.

But the rest of the castle had been roused by this point. More men began to pour out of it joining the ferocious battle occurring on the stairs.

For now that part of the battle was a stalemate and the Weeper sighed a little in relief. Then he stared as the first of the giants pulled himself up over the parapet of the Wall.

OOOOOO

Lord Tyrion was roused from a deep slumber by a pounding on his door. "What by the Stranger's puckered asshole do you want!? It's not even dawn yet!"

He opened it to find Bronn standing outside his face grim. "Trouble at Westwatch, the wildlings've somehow gotten across the gorge."

For moment Tyrion gaped at the man then shook his head. *Stupid, stupid, stupid! Just because someone says the bridge is gone doesn't mean that the entire thing is gone! We should've thought of that! And I should've pushed for Bowen Marsh to be removed despite needing Qhorin out with the mountain men!* "Rouse the Order, all of it!" he ordered, moving back and away from the doorway. "We'll march along the Wall to their support. Then get the cavalry moving as soon as possible along the Wall after us to intercept any groups that try to make it down.

Moments later Tyrion and Bronn joined their men about 600 infantrymen, on top of the Wall. Tyrion didn't mince words simply pointed west along the Wall. "Let's get it stuck in boys!"

The men answered with a roar and marched off in that direction, leaving behind man enough to man several of the trebuchets on this portion of the Wall as Tyrion ordered them to start firing the moment they had targets. Only the trebuchets could fire far enough from this position to range on the area straight in front of Westwatch and Shadow Tower.

Not even a quarter of the way to Sentinel Stand they ran into opposition, a force of wildlings moving down the Wall and taking out the signal towers guards and destroying siege weapons as they went.

Tyrion and his men arrived just as one signal tower was being attacked, the men there standing firm against the assault. But there were only five of them, against something like 200 wildlings. Even so one man was banging on the drums while the other four tried to hold the top of the simple tower, two bows firing down into the mass while the wildling tried to scale up the ladder against two men holding it.

The wildlings saw the reinforcements coming by their torches and turned away from the tower to charge at them. Tyrion pointed his sword at them. "Charge!"

At the head of his men Tyrion dashed forward, his eyes alight with battle. He might be a dwarf, he might be the Imp everyone called him back home. But right now, his blood was up as much as his brother's would've been in a similar situation.

He hacked and slashed at the first few wildlings that were in front of him, while behind him his men followed with a furious charge. A few wildlings were knocked off their feet and then off the Wall to either side such was the impetus of the charge. Here, just like on the stairwell down to Westwatch, the armor and weapons of the defenders proved telling, as did the weeks of training Bronn had insisted they all go through.

Each group of five men fought as a unit, watching each other's back and pushing forward as one, their shields in front of them. While they couldn't form a full shield linewall across the breadth of the Wall, the wildlings still couldn't truly flank them. Men fell on both sides, but the majority of dead were wildlings, and they began to fall back.

Tyrion turned slashing open one man's back before ducking under a flail made of bones, tendons and wood rather than metal and chain. He stabbed that man in the chest with his blade punching through his low quality ring mail easily.

Moments later however went up from the wildlings. "The Giants! The Giants!" at the same time many shouts of dismay or even fear went up from Tyrion's men.

Through the throng of wildlings in front of him Tyrion could barely make out a line of Giants coming, huge massive creatures with thick brows, small, deep-set eyes, and furry bodies with barely a loincloth to their names. The fur however was obviously both warm and thick enough to serve as protection, and as he gaped at them through a break in the battle, several arrows hit one giant only to either not penetrate into its body, doing nothing other than make him angry.

The giants wielded massive clubs rather than any more sophisticated weapon, but in their hands it was certainly enough. He watched in anger as they reached the battle, smashing both wildlings and his own men into paste with

blows from those clubs. Worse they had the reach of any sword, even a greatsword.

From behind him Tyrion heard a shout of "Bring up long spears!" Which was a good idea, but one he couldn't make use of. Two of his men had died, leaving Tyrion too far forward from Bronn and the rest of his Order for the moment. He hacked left and right, trying to fall back, but the first of the giants was too close to evade.

*Backing up will only make me an easier target!* He thought fiercely, staring up at the beast which looked down at him as if perplexed by the small creature in front of him. Then the giant turned away obviously ignoring him thanks to his small stature.

This inflamed Tyrion so much he shouted. "Don't ignore me you hairy beast! Your mother could tell you that the best things come in small packages!"

Not his best material to be sure, but it seemed to work and the giant turned back, raising his club and bringing it down far faster than Tyrion had anticipated. Yet even so he ducked under it, rolling along the stone of the Wall. Yet halfway through the roll he was forced to fling out one hand to redirect a blow from a man standing beside the giant, who was bringing down a heavy axe on Tyrion.

Tyrion screamed as instead of smacking his hand along the flat of the axe and redirecting it, Tyrion's attempt had merely put his arm between the rest of his body and the attacks. The axe blow impacted his arm directly behind his wrist cutting off his hand entirely, but Tyrion continued to roll until he was underneath the giant's legs.

From there Tyrion furiously stabbed upwards with his blade, underneath the giant's loincloth.

"GRAHUOOOOOOOooooooooo!" The giant moaned, going to its knees as Tyrion threw himself forward, coming up behind it. From there he stabbed the thing in the back, forcing his full weight upon his sword hilt to press his blade into the things furry hide.

Another giant roared in fury at the other's death, raising its club but by that point several dozen men had come forward carrying cavalry lances and thrusting them at the giants. The one menacing Tyrion turned angrily as he took a lance point in the shoulder, hammering the man wielding it down with its club but falling back now with the other giants as they were menaced by the heavy lances.

They still retained at least reach parity with the defenders and men continued to fall, but the battle had turned, and a surge from his men pushed the giants and wildlings back far enough for them to get to Tyrion. Bronn grabbed Tyrion by the shoulder and pulled him back from the front line, staring at his wound before motioning to another man. "Help me with him."

"Don't bother." Tyrion grunted then nodded over at one of the braziers nearby. "Grab a coal out of that, we can cauterize the stump and stop the bleeding, but I'm not going back to the castle while the fight still going on. Can't you'll all have all the glory after all."

Bronn stared at him, then nodded. "We're gonna have to find a new name for you Little Lion. Little is not a description you can have after you slay a giant."

Tyrion grinned, then began to laugh and only stopped when the man who had rushed over to the brazier thrust a large piece of coal on a pair of tongs down onto his amputated wrist. He screamed loud and long at that, but Bronn held his arms still while other men held him down until the entire wound had been cauterized. It was an ugly ragged thing, and the bleeding hadn't stopped so much as slowed dramatically, but a rough and ready tourniquet was pulled on quickly. With that Tyrion was well enough to go on and he smiled grimly as the sun began to rise. "Press forward boys! Press forward!"

The battle didn't end with the coming of the sun. It remained bloody and desperate while more and more men from further east along the Wall joined in, the men of house Mormont leading the way to aid the order as they pushed towards Westwatch. Runners soon found the men of the mountain clans, and they went to reinforce the brothers of Westwatch and Shadow Tower, which had been besieged just as badly as Westwatch, only with the defenders in a better position to ward off attacks.

Cavalry units also began to patrol along the Wall, killing wildlings who were trying to scale down the backside of the Wall between castles. It was bloody and hard work. But that and even the battles occurring in the two castles under direct assault was a veritable picnic to the battle occurring up on top of the Wall against the giants.

The giants continued to wreak a bloody toll on the men of the Order and House Mormont for more than half the

morning, their hides and size making them hard to kill. Yet there were never many of them, and after the last of them died the order still had more than half of its number. They continued to push the wildlings back and further back, soon aided by more brothers of the Night's Watch and other houses.

The horde that was still trying to press over the makeshift bridge also quickly came under fire of every weapon that could range from that position. Massive bushels of rocks were flung into the air to spread and wreak havoc amongst the horde.

Worse however was the single load of wildfire that was added to the mix on Tyrion's orders. The forest of the mountains on the other side of the crevice went up in flames all around and above the wildling horde. Thousands of them died in that fire before they could get away.

For the rest of that day the battle ebbed and flowed. The wildlings were desperate, and even with the fire raging behind them they still tried to cross the rope bridge. This despite the heavy fire from the siege weapons and then the archers as the defenders pressed forward along the Wall.

By the time the sun was high in the air the last of the wildlings had been thrown down into the Gorge they had climbed up from, the rope bridge had been burned, and the once mighty wildling horde had finally tasted complete defeat.

Though Mance didn't have time to realize it. He died when that one delivery of wildfire had hit the forest near where he had been waiting to go across the makeshift bridge.

That battle signified the end of Mance Ryder and the wildling hordes' attempt to assault the Wall. No one would ever know precisely how many thousands of wildling had died in that battle or the ones before it, but they would know soon how many survivors there were.

Several days after he had lost his hand Tyrion was yet again summoned to Castle Black. He had been on light duty since the battle, turning over much of the day-to-day running of the Order of Ardent Defenders to Bronn as Tyrion recuperated from his wounds. He had taken a nasty knock to the head at one point during the battle, which exacerbated the loss of his hand. Luckily it had been his left hand rather than his right, which was his dominant one.

He was surprised however to see Jeor Mormont on the Wall rather than inside Castle Black, along with several of the other commanders. In fact practically every commander was there, even Qhorin who was now second-in-command of the entire Night's Watch. Qhorin had executed Bowen Marsh for gross negligence after Westwatch was no longer under attack. .

"For what act have you called upon the services of a rather battered if still handsome Imp, oh mighty commander?" asked Tyrion bowing obsequiously and obviously falsely to the older man.

"Mock me not Little Giant, else I decide your skin would do me as a new rug." Said the older man, smiling faintly. That was Tyrion's new nickname among the men, that and simply Giantslayer. It was certainly a better last name than Brightwall to Tyrion's mind, and he was beginning to wonder if he could convince the King in the North to change his last name.

"You don't want my skin, its small and stringy." Tyrion replied then smiled faintly. "Still my lord, why are we here? My warm, and above all magnificently occupied bed is calling me back into her folds."

In reply the old man pointed down at the ground out across the open field between the Haunted Forest and the Wall. Tyrion turned and looked in that direction, peering up over the parapet to do so. He frowned as he noted a wide and very white sheet being held between four wildlings. "It looks to me as if someone wants to parlay."

Of course Jeor could not go down himself. That was left to First Ranger Benjen, and several of the others including young Karstark and Tyrion. Tyrion's men supplied the guards. The Night's Watch commander knew how the wildlings looked at them, and since this was supposed to be a peaceful meeting he had decided not to send that many brothers along so as not to further inflame the issue.

While the gates portcullises were raised and the party allowed through, the rest of the Wall was ready for a sudden attack. The Wall up on top was lined by archers and very siege weapon within sight was trained on the forest behind the supposed peace party. If this was some kind of trick, the wildlings would pay dearly for it.

They stopped several yards away from the wildlings, and Benjen stood forward holding his hands in front of him in token of peace. "I am Benjen Stark, First Ranger. These with me represent the people of Westeros, united in the



Wall's defense. Who are you and what clans do you speak for?"

A woman stood forward. She was young, possibly the same age as Benjen's oldest nephew, with long shimmering blonde hair the color of dark honeyworn in a golden braid across one shoulder, with high cheekbones and pale grey eyes and a rather impressive bosom. Tyrion could not help but find her beautiful, a truly strange thing to think of any wildling woman.

"I am Val, and I speak for all the wildlings that remain." She said bitterly, her voice dulcet despite the bitter tone. "You and your blight-blasted kneelers have slaughtered our people so much that clans barely matter anymore."

Benjen hid a wince, realizing that that last fire and the trick assault on Castle Black must have cost the wildlings even more than he had feared. That assault had actually done a bit of damage to the tunnel's gates, but the fighting there had paled in comparison to what was going on miles to the west along the Wall.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Benjen replied. "You might not believe that, but we, those among the Night's Watch and those with us here, know the true threat that is even now gathering power behind you. I have to ask, have you continued to burn your dead?"

"We have." Val nodded now looking at him more thoughtfully. "You know what we flee from then?"

"Yes, and that is why I personally would have welcomed a peace treaty between our peoples long before this. We need the numbers." *Now more than ever*, Benjen thought sadly. While the Wall remained strong and their numbers decent enough overall, they had still been hammered in that last battle.

The order of the Ardent Defender had been smashed, losing more than two thirds of its members. House Mormont had lost fully half of its complement on the Wall, and the cavalry groups sent up to the Wall and added to the men of the Order that had turned away the wildlings who had begun to scale down the back of it had lost men as well. And the Night's Watch had lost practically two-thirds of their men in Shadow Tower and Westwatch was down to a bare two score.

"However, if you want peace with us you'll have to learn our ways." Benjen went on, knowing that would be a sticking point for the Northerners who were not among his brothers. "There will be no more raiding, no more internecine warfare. You will now longer be able to take anything you wish from someone who isn't strong enough to defend it as you have before, and that definitely includes women."

"You may keep your religion and even your courting rights amongst yourselves. However you will also have to pledge your oaths to that of the Lord Commander of the Wall to obey the laws of the land."

More than one wildling leader gritted their teeth at that and the young woman clenched her fists hard. Her voice however was still controlled as she replied. "You ask much."

"You have cost us much both in this war and over the years." said Harrion harshly. "There are mountain clan men up there who simply want to wipe you out, and most of the men of House Umber and even my own House would gladly help them," he said pointing at the men of House Karstark who were with him. Frankly they all knew that Mors would probably cause trouble down the line about this, but the number of men that this could bring it to the Wall's defense would be worth it.

Val looked at her fellows, and only one of them nodded. The other ones shook their heads angry at the fact that they'd have to give up practically everything that made them wildlings if they agreed to Benjen's demands. One of them put it into words shouting angrily "Never! We'll never kneel to Kings or give up the Free Folk way!"

"Then you can die here." said Kyle Conton, moving forward to stand beside Benjen angrily. "I'll be honest, I don't want to offer this to you, but Benjen and the others are right we could use even more numbers on the Wall than we have. What we've learned about the threats coming, the White Walkers and their undead allies, that's enough to chill any man's bone no matter how brave. But if you don't agree, if you can't speak for the majority of your people and keep them in line, then you're more trouble than you're worth."

Val chopped her hand, cutting off the other wildlings angry retort. "We will talk about it amongst ourselves and our people. We will return apart under the white flag once a decision is reached."

"Very well." Benjen said with a nod. "But do not tarry long. The threat to both our peoples is too strong and too powerful for us to afford you overmuch time."

OOOOOO

Theon felt as dried out and weak as a day-old kitten as he blearily opened his eyes. The torches were out, and Eilima was nowhere to be seen which considering how weak he felt was a mercy. *What the hell happened? Blue light, did I really see that?* Theon knew what that light entailed, he had seen it before in the battle against the wight's assault on the Wolfsworn. *Is that, was that... no, that's impossible, White Walker's can't cross the ocean, it's Impossible!*

*But, but what else could it be?* Theon didn't want to think about it, but he had to try and deal with what might well be a major threat. He then began to look around him wildly. *Have to get away, have to go! Rouse the men!*

He tried to move, but it took all of his effort just lift one hand up to scabble at the edge of the bed the two of them had been using. But Theon didn't give up, dragging himself out of bed and slowly pulling on his clothing. He forbore to put on his armor, too weak to put up with its weight. Once he was bundled up, he slowly began to ease himself out of the bed reaching down to pick up his bow and quiver, nearly collapsing for a moment under even that little weight.

All was silent and still as he made his way out of the room. Something was wrong, something above and beyond that woman possibly being a White Walker. There were no people in sight, not one. None of his men, none of the Skagos women, or their prisoners.

Warily Theon stalked through the longhouse's main hall, keeping his back to one of its walls, the wall that didn't have any rooms connected to it. He eyed every shadow, every corner and inch of the open hall, an arrow fitted to his bow while his body slowly began to regain its strength.

He made it to the doorway without incident, and looked out into the village beyond. But again there was no one there, it was as silent as the grave under the fool moon above, and Theon shuddered. *Those women, with their eyes covered like that, could they have been wights?* He shuddered, swallowing back bile at the idea, but then turned from a sound behind him.

Eilima stood there, naked as the day she was born. Even though her eyes glowed and Theon could now see that her ears were too long, her face too angular to truly be that of a human, Theon still had to fight down a rush of desire at the sight. She spoke in some tongue that Theon didn't follow, raising her hand to him. The end of it glowed, and Theon swiftly raised his bow and fired.

The woman stared in shock, but the arrow didn't do any damage. It smacked into the skin of her chest and shattered as if it had been frozen through and through, but the sound of it carried throughout the village's unnatural silence. The woman laughed, then said in common. "Strong, strong you are, but if not turned you be, then die you will and be servant."

"Over my dead body!" Theon growled, backing away and putting another arrow to his bow this time aimed for her eye. *Even if the damn arrow shatters again it'll cause some pain at least won't it?*

The woman cocked her head, then laughed musically, but it wasn't happy sound, rather it was cold and dark a sinister sort of mocking happiness. "That the idea!" She said in common again then continued to laugh high and cold.

Glancing all around Theon could now hear the sound of movement, and for a moment he hoped it was the men of his army roused from whatever unnatural sleep had been placed on them. And it had been, but it was the kind of sleep no one would ever wake from again. He stared aghast at Sigmund walking towards him from a hut, his eyes glowing dull blue in the dark.

From beyond Sigmund near the entrance to the village the men that had slept outside who had supposed to be on guard came walking into the village. All of those men had visible wounds, and were very obviously dead whereas the ones coming towards him from the village's huts didn't. But they were still just as dead as those that had been on guard.

Theon took one look around, then quickly turned raising his bow and firing at the White Walker. The arrow flew through the air swiftly but she caught it right before it would've impacted her face, the speed of her catch astonishing. The woman laughed and tossed the arrow aside, but Theon had already turned away, racing through the village.

The wights were slower than he was, and he cut several of them out of his way even though they had been his own man the day before, cutting at their hands or ducking underneath and cutting at their legs to put them on the ground as he raced on towards the palisade. There Theon leaped up, grabbing the top of the slim walkway and lifting himself up with a gasp of effort.

He was still quite weak from whatever the woman had tried to do him, but he was a Wolfsworn, and had endurance

and strength beyond that of normal men. That was the only reason Theon was still alive, and he knew it.

Once on the parapet Theon threw himself over the top of it, climbing down swiftly. But by the time he reached the bottom the guards had turned from where they had begun to enter the village and were moving along the palisade towards him, with Terrell in their lead. Theon ignored them, racing on towards the Woodlands away from where the battle had occurred, hoping to circle around before heading back towards the fort by the shore.

The woman watched him go from the palisade wall, having reached it even faster than Theon had. She watched him go, a thin cold smile on her lips as she laughed then she turned northward, closing her eyes for a moment.

Several days later Theon hid himself among the trees high up in one of the branches, staring in shock at the fort. It's gates were open, and Theon could see several men there, but they weren't **men** any longer. Their eyes, when they turned towards the forest where he was hiding, were bright blue. The White Walker's minions had gotten there before him.

*The boats, the ships are my only hope!*

Several hours later Theon once again was hiding himself staring, appalled toward the ships. All of them were there, but they weren't going anywhere. The water around them had frozen, Theon didn't know how thick it was, but he could see it creeping up the side of the ships.

And on those ships was another White Walker, a woman just like the last one, so alike in appearance they looked like identical twins. She stood with one of the captains of the ships, their arms around one another as they whispered something to one another and the woman led him off. Nearby several other men Theon recognized as the captains of the other ships also stood or leaned against the masts of the ship, their eyes somehow vacant.

Just then behind him Theon heard a sound, and he turned quickly, his bow raised, his second to last arrow fitted to the string. From out of the woods all around him came wights, some of his former men and some Skagosi.

"Curse you!" Theon growled, raising his bow and firing at the man. His arrow took one of them in the eye, flinging his body backwards with the force of the blow before he turned, running out onto the shore. Dozens of men from those boats looked on at him, all of them with the same dull blue eyes. But Theon wasn't making for the ships.

No, he was making for one of the rowboats that had been left on the shoreline. He grabbed it, lifting it up over his head and then began to step out onto the ice. Gingerly he made his way across towards where he could see the ocean beyond the frozen shoreline, while behind him the wights chased after him.

Theon stumbled a few times, the ice creaking alarmingly underneath him. But his pursuers had far more trouble with their footing, and were unable to follow him fast enough to catch up before he reached the waters.

Once there Theon through the rowboat into the water where it splashed. He was just about to jump into it when something impacted his shoulder from behind.

He turned, seeing the white walker woman from the boat standing there, a bow of some kind of black wood or steel in her hands, and she smirked maliciously at him. Reaching back he wrenched the arrow out of his shoulder, staring at what looked like a shard of ice used as an arrowpoint before tossing it aside and falling into the rowboat.

"Not this time bitch, gah!" The rowboat rocked under him, and he nearly blacked out with the pain of his wounded shoulder, but he kept conscious through sheer force of will grabbing at the oars. "You'll not have me, not today, not ever!" Grasping the two oars he began to pull strongly on them, pushing the boat away from the shoreline and the ice.

**OOOOOO**

"Ranma wants me to allow Sansa to go south after everything that has happened?! No!"

"Calmly Catelyn." Eddard said holding up his hands pacifically. "You have to admit it makes good solid sense. Having one of our children reign in Riverrun is simply following the line of succession. Ranma could've made it his new capital I suppose, but I think he's got other plans." In fact Eddard knew he did: two capitals, one for winter and one for summer, though how realistic that was Eddard had no idea.

"I understand that it makes political sense." Catelyn said her voice an angry growl that would've sent Shaggydog running before going on almost desperately. "But it doesn't make sense to me, and I doubt Sansa would like to head south again either. Not after the events of King's Landing"

Eddard wasn't so certain about that. While Sansa had enjoyed being back in Winterfell at first, he had seen that had waned slowly. At first it was because so many of her siblings were gone and being reminded of the times she had spent here with her dead friend, Jeyne Poole. Then, even after she had made new friends, she seemed bored, and rather irritable at times about how little she had to do here.

It was as if Sansa had been forced back into a mold that she no longer fit. She had grown up on the trip into a fine young lady but there was no place for her in the power structure here in Winterfell. Lady Catelyn was the lady of the castle, and truly didn't need any help in that area, while Eddard (and Bran technically) handled everything else with maester Luwin and the Master-at-Arm's aid.

Instead Sansa filled up her time with work on various knitting projects. She had created several dozen scarfs, a few heavy, warm cloaks, and even gloves, all of them intricate, and all of them including something personal to the individual. Lord Glover's cloak for example had a picture of a town centered on a cloak of blue and brown, and Lord Manderly's gloves were pure white with fur lining the interior, and the image of a white buttress on the back of them.

Yet really, there was no place for Sansa in the current family/power structure, but in Riverrun she would have to grow into many new duties. He said so aloud and Catelyn frowned at him. Then she sighed. "I'm not going to win this, am I?"

"I'm afraid so my dear." Said Eddard, kissing her gently on a cheek hoping to soften her somewhat. It didn't work and she pulled away from him slightly. "But you don't have any issue with the two young men that will be sent to escort her?"

"No." said Catelyn shaking her head. "Those make a good solid sense. I doubt that Edd will be able to win Sansa's heart, they've been around each other enough that I think Sansa knows what she be getting into with him, and he isn't really her type. Young Ben however, he could be a different story. And reading between the lines I think Ranma understands that too. Tying our house to the Blackwoods makes excellent sense and I think it could become a love match at some point."

*And with Edd defending her I have no fear of Sansa's safety.* Catelyn thought to herself, a thought that Eddard shared. It would be a very brave and incredibly foolish group of bandits that tried to attack a party with a Wolfsworn among them.

"I'm just not happy about another one of our children leaving home." She said almost plaintively, crossing the small distance between them and leaning against Eddard's shoulder as she sat down, sharing his warmth for a moment.

"All children need to leave home love, and you can tell that Sansa is ready. She'll love her life in Riverrun, and I think she will do magnificently as Lady Tully." Eddard replied quietly, kissing her cheek gently once more, happy that this time she did not pull away.

Catelyn nodded morosely, still not happy about it but understanding her husband's point.

The next day when told of the news, both of her becoming Lady Tully of Riverrun and the fact that two suitors were coming up to escort her south, Sansa was both sad and ecstatic. She was sad that she was leaving the North so soon, but happy to becoming a lady on her own. Sansa had quickly become tired of having nothing to do but her sewing yet again, she enjoyed creating clothing but it wasn't something she wanted to make a career out of. Not when her mother had trained her so long to be a lady of the realm, and after her own experiences, both good and bad.

And while she had never met this Brynden Blackwood, what her older brothers message about him said sounded promising. *I've always wanted a prince, a knight in shining armor. But then I learned that my prince was a monster, and my brother more of a knight than any other.*

*Now, now I think all I want is a kind, gentle man, and this Brynden sounds the sort. What did Ranma say 'he might not have the martial abilities of your knightly ideal sister, but he has the skills with song and poem.' Hehehehe, that sounds like fun, though I'll have to see for myself. And I also like the fact that I will be the one choosing between them. Heh, I wonder what Ranma would do if I told them either pressured me? Not that Eddie is likely to even try.*

*Eddie...* Sansa knew Edd, and trusted him to protect her, though she honestly wondered why he was being considered as a candidate for her hand, after all he was practically family anyway. *And he's a little too wild and unrefined for my tastes. I mean, Eddie's nice, and he has a... interesting sense of humor, but he likes to play with fire far too much, and I have to say I can't see him being happy to live in the Riverlands.*

*Still, I will have to give him due consideration for my hand, if only to be fair. Still, I wonder why him and not someone closer, like one of the Glovers? Is it just an age issue?*

But then Sansa realized it might be a nod to the Northern houses, since both her father and Ranma, the heir, hadn't married a northern house. She said so aloud to her mother and added, "You realize mother that both Rickon and Bran will need to marry into northern houses to further solidify relations between us all?"

Catelyn looked at her daughter somewhat sadly. That comment showed a level of political acumen that she had not associated with Sansa before this, but it showed that her daughter had truly grown out of Catelyn's own image of her. "Yes, that is so. I have already thought about what houses would make good matches for them, but for now let us talk about Riverrun. As Lady Tully you will have..."

OOOOOO

Ranma and Daenerys returned to the army a few hours after the Old Gods visions had ended, having stayed on the island to have an argument. It wasn't a shouting match. It was simply an argument, two very intelligent and forceful personalities clashing about what they felt they needed to do from here on.

Daenerys understood how important the threat coming from the Lands of Endless Winter was, and was perfectly willing to send forces North to bolster the Northern forces that had stayed behind, even if this left them shorthanded to face the threats down here. However, she was just as firm on the fact that Ranma personally could not go: he was their best military commander and her brother was still out there.

She knew she couldn't command the army, and had misgivings about the lords that made up that Army. They were fine fellows, excellent small unit commanders or even commanding units in large scale battles, but not general material. If Jon was still with the Army, Daenerys would've been satisfied with him staying behind, but as it was they needed Ranma right where he was.

She was equally adamant that Ranma and their army could not afford to have their movements so controlled by the timeframe that would allow them to return to the North within the two months.

While Daenerys convinced Ranma of the first point, she could not convince him of the second, and found herself swayed by his point of view. They also argued about Ranma's decision to send men north now, where they reached a compromise.

The next day Ranma spent the morning staring out across the lake considering plans, discarding plans, thinking of travel times, and cursing himself for a damned fool for having sent Jon off as he did. It made sense at the time, and with the news that there was an army from Dorne ravaging the Stormlands it might prove strategically important. But right now, it was hampering his choice of strategy greatly.

"Deep thoughts for this early in the morning." Said a feminine voice from behind him, and he turned to see Myrcella and Daenerys standing there. It had been the younger woman who had spoken and she smiled when Ranma turned to them.

Ranma smiled back widely leaping to his feet and moving to engulf her in a hug. He whispered into her ear. "I'm so glad that you pulled through Merry! My world would've become a much darker place without you."

Myrcella flushed, not at the hug but at the emotion in Ranma's voice. Out in the open like this he couldn't say that he loved her, but the meaning still came her Daenerys smiled, putting her arms around both of them and the three of them stood there for a moment.

Eventually however Myrcella pushed him away. "None of that. What were you thinking about so hard?"

"Options, idiotic ideas, and time, time, time ask me anything but time!" Ranma growled.

"Have you come to any decisions yet?" Daenerys asked.

"Not happy ones, no. I don't want to face a strategist, a commander like Stannis with this time limit hovering over my head, you were right about that Dae. And we're not even certain where your brother is yet, so planning for that is tough as hell."

That wasn't to say Ranma had no ideas about how to go about it. Stannis was too linear, too controlling. Causing enough chaos and pulling his attention this way and that was a possible strategy, but it would take too long to set something like that up.

"I take it you're fact-finding mission went well then?" Myrcella asked cautiously looking between the two of them. Daenerys had not talked much when she joined Myrcella in their bedroll the evening before, simply holding the younger girl against her and falling asleep quickly.

"I got a lot of information yes, but none of it was very helpful." Ranma growled again.

While Daenerys simply hummed in agreement, leaning her head against his shoulder the sound sent a little shiver of excitement up and down Myrcella's spine. Ranma looked at her thoughtfully, shaking his mind free of his worries for a moment. "Are you sure you're all right? I know, um, I mean the healers, they did tell you..." He paused unsure how to word it.

"That I won't be able to have children, yes I know." Myrcella sighed, looking away for a moment before turning back. "I can't say that it doesn't hurt knowing I won't be able to be a mother at some point in the far future, but it doesn't hurt as much as I think it should be." She smiled up at Ranma, all her love for him in her eyes. "In a way, it removes a final barrier. Giving your official stance on my birth Ranma, there would have been massive political pressure on me to marry. Now," She shrugged then smiled happily. "Now I can be whatever I wish to be."

Ranma looked around them then gazed at Fenris who had followed Myrcella and Daenerys to the shoreline, using the direwolf's senses for a moment to see if there was anyone nearby. Assured that there wasn't Ranma reached down and gently traced his fingers down Myrcella's face, while Daenerys once more put her arms around the young girl. "And what exactly do you want to be?"

Myrcella's voice was a whisper, yet there was so much emotion it caused both of her listeners to shiver. "**Yours.** Yours always and forever, yours in any way I can be."

Daenerys smiled. Leaning down she kissed the girl lightly on the lips. "And so you will be Myrcella Baratheon, so you will be."

She leaned back, allowing Ranma to lean down in turn to kiss Myrcella on the lips, not allowing the girl to deepen it before pulling back. "None of that." he said smiling faintly. "We'll have more than enough time for that the rest of our lives Merry, but you're still not fully healed."

"Seven-damned teases, the both of you." Myrcella said smacking Ranma lightly on the chest before she burrowed deeper into Daenerys's side. "Seriously though, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to have to share what I've seen with my commanders, and hope that someone else has a bright idea. Because I haven't thought of any just yet."

Later that day Ranma was true to his word, sharing why he had gone out to the Isle of Faces, and the vision the old gods sent him with the lords of his army. Lord Blackwood and the other Old God worshipers were frowning angrily, worry and fear on their faces. They understood what a big step this was for the Old Gods, and the Northerners in particular understood the nature of the threat that was coming.

On the other hand the Seven worshipers among his commanders looked askance at Ranma's news. Yet even they were prepared to accept it given the rumors that the septons had shared in Harroway, what they were concerned about was where the visions came from rather than their content.

Greatjon put all their concerns into words. "This is big news lad and I understand your desire to head north as quickly as possible, but two months? It would take the army a month on the road just to reach the Neck, what with the Riverlanders unable to keep up with us hardy Northerners." He smirked at Lord Blackwood who rolled his eyes at the other man but did not rise to the challenge.

"My son Harrion is on the Wall." Said Lord Karstark his face and voice like stone, his eyes almost challenging. "I trust him and the others there and as much as I also want to be in the North Ranma, we simply can't just leave Stannis and the other threads here the South to fester."

"Regardless of your opinions my Lords, the fact remains that we must be in the North in two month's time. Our forces there might be able to hold off until then, but not after. I have to trust that the Old Gods would not have sent me that part of the vision if it wasn't certain."

"You're not going to budge his mind on this my Lords." Daenerys said smiling whimsically and taking Ranma's hand in hers pulling it up to her mouth to kiss that Palm and gently. "Trust me, I tried to most of last night and didn't get anywhere. If I, with my powers of persuasion can't change his mind, none of you have anything that is going to do the

same."

There was some muffled laughter that, and Greatjon in particular guffawed loudly slapping his thigh. With the mood of the discussion now light and Daenerys went on. "With that in mind Ranma, what are you going to send north now?"

"The Cerwyn Pike regiment, and two-thirds of the cavalry from the north, along with the prisoners heading north including Jaime though they'll have to be watched." Ranma said crisply.

Jaime was still in chains and would remain such until he arrived on the wall where he would become Jeor and Tyrion's problem. Cersei was still lost in her own mind, only kept alive by a servant feeding her occasionally. But Lord Serret would remain a prisoner of the army. Politically he was too important to send to the Wall, and honestly as far as Ranma was aware the only crime, if it could be called that, to lay at the old man's feet would be some of the measures he took to control the populace of King's Landing during the siege.

"We've gained a major cavalry force from the Riverlands and House Tully raised its own pike regiment, so we can make good the loss. Those light and heavy cavalry might be very useful in the North, and I don't think any more pike regiments have been raised just yet." Ranma went on.

Neither of the two northern pike regiments had taken enough losses to mention, not in battle or, like the rest of the army, from disease, thanks to Ranma and Merry's planning. The light cavalry had taken a pounding under Ranma's baiting of Tywin, and again under Brynden, but there were still a little over a thousand of them. The heavy cavalry of the North had lost near to three-hundred men all told throughout the campaign. But with House Manderly's heavy cavalry added to that of the other houses, they still amounted to a little over a thousand two-hundred men.

There was a moment's thoughtful pause, then Wendel Manderly spoke up. "My father intended to raise two pike regiments from the smallfolk of White Harbor over time, though obviously I don't know how far along that process is. From my own observation though, those pikes are as deadly against infantry as they are against cavalry. The wounds pikes cause can be horrible. But against wights or White Walkers?"

"Daenerys and I sent a raven to Dragonstone to order as much dragonglass as we can get our hands on, that works on both White Walkers and their wights. And fireworks on wights just as well, which I'll be certain to tell all of my unit commanders before we send them off."

"I'll send Timot Hammerhand up as commander until they reach the Neck, where he'll hand over command to Lord Reed, as well as a message from me to muster his men and head north with them, though I hope he's already begun his muster. They should be at Moat Cailin within a month and Winterfell a little under two weeks later, unless weather is badly against them." Ranma went on.

All of the lords nodded understanding, though the idea of sending a little over three-thousand men north when they had two enemy armies to deal with would have struck most as insane. But Ranma and Daenerys had won a lot of respect from these men over the past few months, and all of them knew the aid might well be necessary in the North.

"That's all we can do for now." Greatjon said shrugging his massive shoulders.

While messengers were sent to prepare the units chosen for the march as well as to find Timot, Daenerys turned to Alayaya. Even as she did so Daenerys had to suppress a deep pang of grief at seeing who wasn't sitting beside her. Domic's death was a wound that had yet to heal, but she could not afford to let her grief impact her ability to think. "Alayaya, what do you have for us?"

"There's been a fleet seen in the Bay of Crabs your Majesty." said Alayaya. "Many of them were flying the three headed dragon of House Targaryen."

"Heading in or out of the Bay, and how far in?" Ranma asked intently

"The fishermen of Harroway couldn't say." Alayaya said with a shrug. "If I was there to question them personally that might be different, but one of my agents there sent that rumor by rider, and he only caught up to us this very morning. Far out I would assume, at the edge of the Bay of Crabs."

Ranma frowned. "Could he be making for Gulltown?"

"If he is won't find much aid in the Vale." Alayaya replied shrugging her shoulders. "I had time to talk to merchants who trade with Gulltown before the army left, and the news out of the Vale is that it's sharply divided at the moment. There are Houses that want to continue to sit on the sidelines and technically obey your aunt's commands, and there are others who want to act in some fashion, many of whom want to depose her entirely but don't have any real plans

beyond that. We haven't received any response from Ser Breakstone, and frankly at this point it's doubtful that he could get through to us anyway."

"True enough." Ranma frowned. "Still, that's important to know, thank you." The beautiful ex-courtesan nodded her head, even while the other Lords all nodded respectfully toward her. All of them knew that with the death of Domic Alayaya was now the head of their spying efforts, and that made her words extremely important even to those who still looked at her askance thanks to her previous profession.

Ranma stared down at the map on the small camp table, rubbing at his ponytail thoughtfully. There was an inkling of an idea in his mind but he couldn't quite bring it to the fore.

After a moment staring down at the map herself Daenerys broke the thoughtful silence. "We need to concentrate our thoughts on Stannis even with Alayaya's news. To that end, what can he know about us, and more importantly what **doesn't** he know?"

She looked around at the Lords who pondered the question, before Jason spoke up staring at the map himself now. "He's not within sight of our scouts just yet, which means he isn't in the Riverlands, though he'll probably be marching along the Kingsroad as fast as possible. So we don't know where his proper position is, but I can't think of any way that he would know where we are either unless he has his own spy network, and there was never any talk of that."

Alayaya piped up again. "I doubt more than one in a thousand smallfolk would be willing to pass on any news to anyone in Stannis' army either. They all hate him, no they **loathe** the man. There's not going to be any kind of uprising, but even here, even from the woodsmen who stayed near Harrentown even after its destruction I've heard rumors they call him the Flame Fucker."

There was a laugh, but Jason looked at her quizzically. Alayaya saw his glance and understood the unspoken question, woodsmen were not the most open individuals to strangers after all. In response she merely stretched her back a little and working her shoulders, bringing attention to her body. A pang of grief went through her as she did, knowing how often she had done the same thing to Domic, showing him how she always seemed to be able to get people to talk to her.

With a shake of her head Alayaya banished her grief for her friend and went on. "I don't think we're going to see some kind of general uprising my lords, none of the smallfolk are brave enough to face Stannis' men in battle. But they won't help him, certainly not with passing on information."

"Do not discount the Red Witch, good lady." said Ehiric the septon, stepping forward from where he had been standing at the back of the group. All eyes turned to him and he frowned. "The Red Witch is known to advise Stannis my Lords, and she is a magic user. What can one such as that do? And if the old gods could send his Majesty visions, could not her heathen god send such to her?"

"Scary thought." Ranma said still not looking up from the map.

"But she's not a fighting man." Rickard said slowly scratching at his beard. "Would the Witch understand the importance of some of the changes you've made to our army, Ranma? The heavy armor of the pikemen, the fact that they move in formation, their training. Unless some of the survivors from the battle at the Red Fork can get back to him somehow, that could still be a secret."

"True uncle." said Ranma looking up now with a faint smile in space. "And an excellent point. Especially if the Reach is now backing him as Lord Ashford told us." Ashford and his men were still technically prisoners, but all of them had been given their parole for now, and he had been very open about the events near King's Landing.

"Truly Lord Mace has gone mad." said Ehiric, shaking his head. "To use the Lady Margaery so is a travesty."

Ranma nodded, though inside he was hoping that Mace at least would not die if they faced Stannis. He really did not want to know what Margaery would do if his army was the one that killed her father. Whatever her opinion about Mace's actions, he didn't doubt that she still loved him in some fashion.

"We need to reinforce Maidenpool." Daenerys said shaking her head. "I agree that Stannis is the greater threat my Lords, but my brother will make for Maidenpool soon enough."

"Was he one of the Lords that passed on information to you and your brother when you were in Essos?" asked Alayaya.

"I never knew the names of the lords who were passing on information, just that they had aided our family in the past."



But having met the man, I have to say even if he wasn't, Lord Mooton's spine would need stiffening. While his words were flattering, they were just that, words, neither he nor Lord Blackwell have sent us any of the men they promised, and his family was one of those that lost a lot of their power for backing my family in the war against their rightful Lord Paramount."

"Are you sure of that?" Ranma asked suddenly, looking up once more for the map.

"Positive." Daenerys replied firmly.

"What was your impression on Lord Butterwell?"

Daenerys paused for a moment, thinking. "I did not interact with him as much as I probably should have to get a real reading on him." she said prevaricating slightly before going on. "I think that while his family has routinely and traditionally followed Mooton, the current lord Butterwell has ambition."

She paused again, tapping her fingers thoughtfully as she remembered something else she had heard. "He's also a rather bitter young man. The scuttlebutt I heard was that he was promised to the daughter of House Deddings, who was raped and murdered by the Westerlanders after her family's military strength was wiped out at the Red Fork. Why?"

"Does anyone know what the state of his castle is?" Ranma asked, not answering her question just yet.

The Riverlords looked at one another, and Silas eventually spoke up for the mall. "From all reports it's a smallish castle, but very well made and it has a moat along with a well. Those two things made Lord Tully and Lord Robert pass over the place during the war, though the family itself has never recovered from the loss of influence it took during the Blackfyre Rebellions."

Tyos nodded agreement. "They used to have a much larger castle called Whitewalls, but it along with much of their land was taken from them at that point. That castle represents a lot of their remaining capital from that time to now, they don't have any heavy cavalry or any horse at all really because of that investment."

"The castle itself is a defensible one, I want to be clear on that."

"Yes it is. It could only be taken by siege I think, unless of course the other side has an equivalent of your Wolfsworn." Silas smiled thinly. "I don't think anyone here believes that, correct?"

From where she was leaning up against Fenris behind Ranma and Daenerys, Merry winced. "The Shadow Warriors my Lords. They could cause tremendous harm in any kind of battle, let alone one inside a castle."

"Not with us there they couldn't." said Smalljon, smiling thinly. For just a brief moment his fingers glowed blue. "Leave the Shadow Warriors to the Wolfsworn my Lords, we'll handle them."

"And it's been proven that they are susceptible to Dragon fire." said Daenerys smiling equally thinly.

"In that case," Ranma murmured thoughtfully, pulling the discussion back to the topic on hand. "Maybe we shouldn't send reinforcements to Maidenpool at all. I think we're missing a major point here my Lords."

"And that is husband?" Daenerys asked, looking at him her eyes narrowing as she wondered where Ranma was going with this.

"These are not two Allied armies we have to face, these are two enemies not just of us but of each other. And Mooton is what, a week and a half journey from the edge of the Riverlands?"

*Less for our army, and that's another advantage we have: speed. Even with the pikes, we can move faster than any other army in Westeros. Heh. And I also have the surprise from Seagard, Fenris, and commanders I trust to act on their own, I doubt Stannis or Viserys can say the same. And neither of them will want to drag this campaign out, each for his own reasons, which means they can be tricked into coming after us directly rather than strike at Harroway.*

*Stannis will want to deal with us as quickly as possible, to use the autumn to solidify his position as much as possible this side of the Neck, and I he'll want to do something to the Ironborn, even if the Reach has already assembled an army to do so. He'll need a lot of time to solidify his rule and convince the smallfolk to overlook his destruction of King's Landing. As for Viserys, he doesn't seem the type to think in terms of long campaigns, and the Dorne aren't suited for warfare in autumn, let alone winter.*

"Something like that." said Lord Blackwood now staring at Ranma thoughtfully.

"Good." Ranma moved his fingers down the map, moving them this way and that as he thought. Then he looked at his wife again. "I'm afraid I don't know anything about the Crackclaw Point Houses, are you certain they'll follow you rather than your brother?"

"From all reports those houses have always been loyal to my house and bent the knee only unwillingly to Robert at all. They weren't weakened as the rest of the Crownlands in the war simply because they weren't as strong forehand. As for them following me rather than my brother that depends on what rumors have reached them. I think they'll choose to follow me, simply because at the moment I have the strongest history of victory and the strongest backing."

Ranma stared into her eyes for a moment then nodded again. "Good. I think however that we'll need to send them another message, along with an offer."

"Are you going to share what you've been thinking about now?" she asked sharply.

Ranma laughed. "Sorry, just working it all out in my mind. I think we're going to have to make our enemies do the work for us my Lords."

"You're talking about getting Viserys and Stannis to fight one another aren't you?" said Lord Blackwood frowning. "That would be an excellent idea, and possible given Stannis' stubbornness and the hatred Viserys apparently holds for all things Baratheon as you pointed out on many occasions, your Majesty." He said nodding his head at Daenerys. "But I don't know if it's possible with someone as cagey as Stannis."

"He'll have to fight Viserys at some point so he'll probably go along with it, and we can turn it to our advantage somehow." Ranma said. "To that end, I'm going to split off the northern clansmen that we've got with us. Daryn, I'm going to put you in charge of them. Your job will be to head towards Maidenpool, not to engage any large force, but to wipe out any scouting... or foraging force you can."

Daryn nodded. "You want me to blind the dragon and make him hungry? That's fine, I can do that so long as he actually makes port there."

"He will." Daenerys said resignedly. "The moment he knows I'm here, and he might even know that Stannis is on his way. His pride and fury will force him to come here as quickly as possible. Unless he's idiotic enough to think that his one dragon can turn the tide in a sea battle against the Royal Navy."

There was more than one headshake from the Lords around them and Jason put it into words. "Not a chance. Stannis will have left Seaworth in charge, and while that man might have been a smuggler at one point, he is a master when it comes to sea battles. And the Royal Navy was made into a juggernaut before and during the Greyjoy rebellion. Give Stannis his due, he was the one that pushed for that, and it might serve us all well now."

Tytos was less certain. "Viserys and his dragon could possibly wreak horrible casualties on the fleet, fire on a ship is the deadliest of foes, even normal fire."

Daenerys shook her head. "Viserys is not so stupid as to think his dragon alone could win him the throne. Even while he was destroying the royal navy, his own would be mauled, and with it any chance of winning against us or Stannis. Viserys is also arrogant enough to think that if he beats Stannis and us, the royal navy might capitulate entirely."

Ranma held up a hand, forestalling further comment. "Well if we can expect Viserys to arrive on time, then we also need to blind Stannis and his force. Meera, Lord Blackwood, you two are in charge of that. Whatever force you need you can have." That would amount to some of the men that Meera had brought with her from the Neck, half the remaining scouts from the army, and all of house Blackwood's men as well several hundred archers from the North.

"Other than that, I'm going to send a force of men down to aid Lord Butterwell in the defense of their castle." Ranma looked at the Lords then nodded at Tristan Ryger. "Lord Ryger, would you be willing to take command of that force?"

The younger man nodded, seeming proud of having a command given to him. That force would consist of the men of House Ryger and of House Wayn, the least trained force among the Riverlords, but one that was laden decently with archers so would be perfect for this mission.

With that Ranma stood up. "Let's get organized my Lords, above and beyond the forces being sent north, I want the rest of the army on the march by noon. We'll make for Duskenale for now. That will put us between the two opposing armies, and then we can move out of the way and let our enemies do our work for us."

## End chapter

The little bit of lemon here between the White Walker and Theon was not marked because it was important to the plot, sorry to those who might have found it offensive. Theon's final fate is still unknown, he may live, he may not, we'll see.

The next chapter will be... interesting. I have to show Garlan assaulting the Ironborn, the campaign of the Four Armies, some bits and pieces from the North... eesh. Going to be interesting.

The first of the two new stories that I might take up as a third fulltime story will be up soon - A Fate Touched in Middle Earth.

But I had two questions for my reviewers about the other new story that was in the top four of the poll, Wizard of the Dead.

One, and I'd like an honest answer for this. How many people voted for it because of the inherently Ecchi/hentai nature of the universe? I'm all for the idea, heh, but I feel that in my first foray I overdid that aspect if anything.

And two, what would people think of the idea of using a much younger Harry, a prior to second year Harry say rather than after fourth year, as the main character? Magic can be such a game changer I'd want to limit its application somewhat, even in comparison to canon Harry who, let's face it, is a bit of a lazy ass. But there would be other issues involved in instituting that kind of age gap between the HOTD and HP characters, er... sort of along the lines of the Kanokon anime, only with a main character who has powers, and a libido...

## \*Chapter 18\*: Chapter 18

Wild Wolf 18

I don't own ASolaF or Ranma 1/2. Whimper...

Merry Christmas! Well, an early gift for you anyway.

I was almost tempted to go with 'Two Dragons, a Stag and a Direwolf walk into a bar' as the title of this one, but decided against it.

As Always would like to thank Anthony444 for his aid in this, he helps keep all the disparate characters in order and is a font of ASolaF wisdom. Now without further ado, let us begin:

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### Chapter 18: The Judge of Kings

Sansa stood next to Lord Manderly in the Merman's Court, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder where he sat on his lord's seat, leaning to one side indolently a wide, almost vacuous smile on his face, though that was the only sign of his normal fool's mask. Above that smile his eyes were hard and shrewd as he looked over his 'court' before looking up at Sansa, who smiled down at him, causing his face to settle into a normal smile of his own.

While Lord Manderly had been somewhat surprised at the news that Sansa was being sent to Riverrun to become the new Lady Tully, Lady of Riverrun and first among the Lords of the Rivers, he had understood what a shrewd move it was, and approved. Riverrun wasn't a big city, more a large town really, but it was a decent manufacturing point for wool, cotton, and other clothing. It and the lands around it were a fine source of manpower too.

The benefits of putting another city under the direct control of someone whose loyalty you could trust implicitly, and who further tied it into the royal family even if once removed was also excellent. Tying House Tully, and by extension House Stark and the new Royal House (whose name Manderly thought rather silly, but there were SO MANY Houses that was true for it wasn't worth mentioning) to another powerful noble House was also a magnificent political ploy.

*Sending her down to me for training in city management however, **that** was something I did not see coming.* Lord Stark had sent Sansa down to White Harbor by way of the White Knife with a force of a hundred men five days ago, with the suggestion that Wyman start to train her in the skills necessary to run a city. This included managing the disparate interest groups without showing any one group favor, managing relations with the smallfolk, passing judgement, setting tax rates, making certain the upkeep of the defenses and the town was generally kept as clean as possible, and several other skills.

Wyman had always suspected that Sansa was a good deal more intelligent than most thought underneath her training as a typical noblewoman despite her enjoyment in such, but the past few days had proven it beyond a doubt. She had taken to her lessons like a seal to water! She was personable, outgoing, insightful, and was quickly learning to become decisive in her decision making. Wyman had enjoyed their time together immensely, and was sad the time had come to bid her farewell.

At his nod, his seneschal opened the door to the Merman's court ushering in their guests with a loud, "Edmund Blackwood of Raventree Hall, and Eddard Karstark of Karhold!" At those words the two men entered, side by side.

Edd was a decently tall young man, with the wide shoulders of a warrior, the dark eyes and wild hair of his family, and a small, yet unkempt goatee which had not been there the last time Sansa had seen him. He still had laugh lines around his eyes and mouth, but his face in general had become weathered.

In contrast, Edmund was clean-shaven and spare of frame, taller than Edd but not nearly as bulky across the shoulders, with a thin, angular face with high cheekbones, almost feminine but yet in some fashion also undeniably masculine, odd though that seemed. He had long fingers and tanned hands, and seemed as weathered as his companion. Sansa found herself blushing for a moment. *He is a handsome fellow...*

Both men bowed to Lord Manderly, but their eyes strayed to where Sansa was standing next to him, Eddy's eyes wide and delighted, while Edmund looked almost but not quite shy. Sansa found herself smiling openly now. *This looks to be fun...*

"Welcome young friends to the Merman's Court!" Wyman boomed. "Welcome to the North young Edmund, and

welcome back young Edd! I have been apprised of why you have come, and Lord Stark, acting on his father's advice of course, has agreed to his brother, his majesty's, commands in that area gladly. As Edd know doubt already knows, beside me is the Lady Sansa Stark, she who will become Lady Tully at her investiture in Riverrun."

Ranma's actual status in terms of lord Paramount of the North was a grey area at this point. By age old 'custom', a King of Westeros could not also be a Lord Paramount except for the Crownlands, which in Wyman's view was one reason why the power structure of Westeros hadn't changed much before this current war. Considering the rumors that had begun to reach Wyman's ears of the losses among Ranma's enemies and even further south however, along with the sweeping reforms Ranma and his queen had begun to enact, that had already changed.

But until he had beaten all the other claimants, Ranma was technically not king yet, so could act as Lord Stark, and had when telling his family about his plans for Sansa, though couched as they were in gentle language. So Bran would, very technically, become Lord Stark after Ranma became king. But of course his father was acting in his stead, freeing Bran to work on other projects.

Wyman laughed, a booming sound, but his eyes were still and judging as he looked at the youths. "Of course, just because the Lady is here does not mean you'll be able to turn around and start your journey back immediately. You'll still have to head up to Winterfell to present yourselves to her family, though Sansa will go back with you. Eddard is eager to get firsthand accounts of his son's campaigns in the Riverlands, and of course Lady Catelyn is equally **interested** in meeting you both."

Edd and Edmund both winced slightly, causing Wyman to laugh again, while Sansa giggled at his side, though her eyes too were still looking at both men with interest.

OOOOOO

Outside, the army camp was a scene of hectic but controlled activity, as the various units of the army began to pull out of the camp. First were the men heading north under Timot Hammerhand: the pike regiment from House Cerwyn, and the assigned northern cavalry, a force of a little over three thousand men. Quickly on their heels was the force under Tristan, heading straight for House Butterwell's as yet unnamed castle, a force of seven hundred.

Daryn and his unit, a mix of scouts, mountain clansmen, with a smattering of archers from his own house numbering about a thousand-six hundred, was next. Tytos and Meera were slower to get on the way, and by the time they were ready most of the camp had been taken down. Tytos and his force of a little under 2,000 cut across into the forest nearby, heading around the shore of the God's Eye down towards the Kingsroad. This left a force of 17,000 or so thanks to the addition of House Wayn's troops and four hundred men from House Charlton.

As each group left, Ranma and Daenerys bade their commander's farewell, shaking hands and watching them go. Dacey, Rickard, Jason and Greatjon soon joined them after Tytos left, Ranma's four most trusted and senior commanders. Rickard shook his head. "I'd never have believed that an army could separate like this so quickly from camp, the various units getting underway so fast. You and your brother have done marvels with organizing the armies supply situation Ranma, but it's moments like these that I realize those changes spread to other areas of the army's effectiveness."

Ranma smirked a little, smiling internally. *The difference between soldiers and warriors. A soldier can be a warrior, but the name 'soldier' implies a certain level of organization and unit cohesion that warriors lack.* "It's not the only advantage uncle." He gestured with one hand towards some heavily laden mules that had been purchased in Riverrun, a small sample of the mules they had bought there really, since they had bought every single one that was in the city and practically every horse as well, leaving only the oxen behind. "Those are going to come as a nasty surprise."

Daenerys nodded looking over to where he was pointing. Those particular mules were carrying the surprise that had been prepared in Seagard, but she was more concerned about something else entirely. "Yes, but I think the heavy cloaks and other gear we've gotten since taking Harroway from further north will be even more important as autumn continues." Practically every other day there was a small or large storm, and many soldiers had been noted to remark that it was noticeably colder since the battle of the Ruby Ford.

"Yep." Ranma said smiling grimly. "Stannis might've thought about it, but I doubt your brother has. And since Stannis has to deal with the Reach forces under his command now, his own supplies will have been stretched thin. Not so much in terms of food, but everything else. Waging war in autumn is a different kettle of fish than in the summer. Disease and other issues will start to rear their heads soon for any unprepared army."

Greatjon grunted, rubbing at the stump of his ear in a gesture he'd picked up since the battle in Darry. "I have to

wonder if Stannis is going to play to your tune, lad. He'd hurt us badly by simply ignoring our army and taking Harroway behind us."

Thanks to its more central location Harroway was actually more important logistically speaking than Riverrun. Riverrun was now creating many of the goods that came forward with the army, and a surplus of said was building up in Harroway. But Harroway was the hub of both that traffic and traffic from Seagard and further north, though of course that line of supply was far slower than the other two.

"True, and if I was Stannis that'd be what I'd do. But remember, his force consists of Stormlands and Reach forces, and both those nations are having issues at home. Whether or not he likes to admit it, Stannis'll be dealing with a lot of internal pressure to see to us quickly, and then turn around and head back South. Besides, taking Duskendale from him will have much the same impact that taking Harroway from us would in the long run."

What Ranma didn't say aloud was that very few lords thought in terms of logistics and supply. Stannis was one, but even he wouldn't be really able to think of terms of a strategy based off interdicting his opponent's logistics capacity. Greatjon wouldn't have thought of it either before this campaign, where Ranma showed that supplies and logistics mattered both in terms of targets and in terms of an army's strength.

"Besides, I already cut orders for Timot to remain at Harroway with his force for a few days. The troops could use some down time, and they'll make up the time later on using water travel from the supply depot by the Neck up to White Harbor."

Daenerys broke in then. "And the further into the Riverlands Stannis goes, the further from his own supply points he gets. If he has to fight in the Riverlands he'll have to live off the land, and most of the lands south of the Red Fork have already felt the depredations of war."

"True, but Stannis is too smart to believe he can take Harroway away from us. He might not have much of an idea of what the pikes can do, but I bet he knows about the speed of our army, and he won't want to give us the opportunity to come up from behind him like Daenerys said, pinning him at Harroway."

"And we're forgetting my brother my lords. Maidenpool is closer to Harroway than Stannis' army. We need to be in a position to block that line of advance and convince him to come after us instead." Daenerys said, showing once again that she had learned quite a bit about strategy.

"Then I suggest we get going soon." Jason said, nodding at his son and their men as they passed, his son peeling off to join the Wolfsworn. He wasn't quite able to use ki, so would be ineffective against the Shadow Warriors, but his training was coming on apace.

"Agreed," said Ranma nodding his head as Fenris came up carrying Merry. Though her body was healed, Merry still ran out of energy quickly, and Fenris enjoyed carrying the young woman around in any event. She had left the planning session before everyone else, wanting to check up on her mother. Cersei alas was still in a vegetative state, unresponsive to any stimuli, only able to eat if someone actively fed her.

Even so, Cersei would go north with two of Merry's aides, along with her uncle, Jaime, though their final destinations were different. Cersei would be sent to White Harbor to a sept of the Silent Sisters there, while Jaime would go on to the Wall with a few of the other prisoners. The Kingslayer had fallen into a deep depression after Ranma had cut off his sword hand, and had yet to come out of it, though that didn't matter much to Merry, who had never been close with the man. If anything she felt relief that Jaime was being sent to the Wall. Her mother's condition bothered her a lot, but there wasn't anything she could do about it.

Daenerys nodded, leaning up to pat the other woman's thigh before turning to Sunfyre, who she had chosen as her mount for this first day. "I'll see you when we make camp my lords." She said as she vaulted into the saddle, Sunfyre stretching his neck underneath her and warbling in happiness at the idea of flying with her, his cream-colored scales shimmering in the sun.

With that she gave the Valyrian command, "Climb the Sky!" and both Sunfyre and Rhaegon took off from the ground, massive gusts of wind billowing out from underneath their wings. Taking off from a flat surface like this was hard on the dragons, but thanks to the training she had been giving them, they were used to it.

The army marched for the rest of that day, making camp quickly then training in groups before turning in that night before moving off again just before daybreak, with Daenerys riding Rhaegon as Sunfyre rested in one of the carts. Several days of this routine passed before the first report from Tytos' men came in.

Lucas, Tytos' second son brought it himself, along with one of the precious maps that he and his father had been given by Ranma at Riverrun, copied from a larger version that Lord Tully had in his keep.

"We're harassing the scouts and foragers as best we can my lords, but a lot of Stannis' men're old hands at this too. They don't know the terrain as well as us, but we don't know it as well as we did when we were fighting the Lannisters. We're taking losses, not many, but we're not inflicting many either."

"I knew it would be a tough job when I gave it to you and your father Lucas." Ranma said with a nod gesturing at the map. "What can you tell me about Stannis' movements?"

"His army's around here my Lord just on the other side of the border. There's a heavy wood about two days march for his army I think the same that covers the northern and eastern sides of the God's Eye. We're using that as our base for the moment. We'll have ta move back as the army gets closer, but I don't think we're in any danger of being suddenly overrun either. Stannis' men've tried to set up a few ambushes, but his commanders aren't as good as my father at this game."

That was said with a more than a bit of pride in Lucas' voice. Those ambushes could've proven deadly to the skirmishing force, one of which happened in a small village, and another which happened near a copse of trees further south. The first Meera had spotted, pulling back and ambushing the ambushers later when they tried to return to Stannis' army. The second Tytos woodsman's instincts warned him. House Blackwood then turned the ambush onto itself, killing or routing a force of a hundred heavy cavalry that had been stationed in that copse along with the bait, a force of twenty men that had been sent ahead of the army to forage.

Ranma exchanged a grin with Daenerys, who reached across to grab the young man's arm firmly. "Well done." She said sincerely. "That kind of action is precisely why Ranma chose you, your father and Meera for this."

The young man blushed under the praise but went on quickly. "We've been able to sight his main army a few times when Lord, and it's been broken into three segments. My father thinks that's because of hygiene issues though maybe not. All segments're following the Kingsroad, but not very quickly."

Staring at the map thoughtfully Ranma fell silent while Jason spoke up. "Are these three units so far apart we could attack one without the others coming to its aid?"

Both Lucas and Ranma shook his head before Lucas answered for them both. "No my Lord, they're about a normal half-days march between them, but that kind of space can be made up quickly enough at need. Unless you can draw off the middle segment, that may leave one of the other formations vulnerable. It's doubtful though, since I think Lord Tyrell was put in charge of that, we saw the Rose banner flying high over several others there, and from what all my father said, he's not the quickest ta act decisive-like."

The young Blackwood waited a moment as Greatjon and Rickard stopped laughing at his understatement before going on. "Neither my father nor I know the banners flyin' over the third echelon. The first formation is being led personally by Lord Stannis. We saw his banner flying over it, a black stag's head in a burning heart with a crown 'round it's neck."

There were some exclamations of disgust at that, though they'd heard rumors that Stannis had created his own banner before this. No, it was more the way it showcased his new, horrific religion for all to see that drew those exclamations.

"Can you tell me what banners you saw?" Ranma asked.

"I'm afraid not my Lord. I don't have much of a memory for those things, sorry." Lucas shrugged apologetically.

"Can you estimate their numbers?"

Lucas hesitated, then nodded. "I they think somewhere around 30,000 my Lord. Smaller than the Westerlands army was at its height, and much smaller than the Reach force is supposed to be. I think Stannis mauled them badly."

"I need to know more about the composition of Stannis' army, how much of it is from the Reach, how much of it is from the Stormlands. That would hugely impact what kind of tactics Stannis could use in combat." Ranma muttered.

"Could the banners tell you that?" Daenerys asked. "I could fly down there on Rhaegon with one of our Myrishglasses, mark the banners I see them come back.""

"Let's hold that idea in reserve for now." Ranma said looking at her. "Remember, the Red Witch might've been able to

figure out a way to attack your dragons in the air, especially given how she attacked the *Fish's Scales* with those Shadow Warriors to get at you. I don't want to risk that just yet."

Daenerys however knew how Ranma's mind works, and snorted. "But you'll be willing to risk yourself to head down there?"

"Fenris and I can outrun practically anything else that walks on this earth." Ranma said complacently. "We can head down there and come back quickly enough you won't even know we're gone."

"I'll know you were gone." Daenerys said, while Myrcella poked him hard in the back with her toe from where she was laying against Fenris near the back of the tent behind them.

Then Daenerys sighed. "Still, I suppose you're right. Any battle plans we make needs to be made on knowledge of what our enemies are like. And, knowing which lords are in charge of which portions of the Army could tell us a lot about how to defeat them. And what better person than you to see it." She sighed again, then leaned over and kissed him ardently on the lips, ignoring the Lords around them for moment. "But be careful," she ordered after pulling back, staring into Ranma's blue eyes. "That's an order from your queen."

"Of course your Majesty, your will is my command your Majesty, to here is to obey your..." That was as far as Ranma got before Daenerys smacked him upside the head, and Merry once again kicked him in the back while the Lords laughed and jeered.

That very evening Ranma left the army camp, racing South as only he, Jon, Arya and their direwolves could. No other animal had the endurance on the run of a direwolf, and no human who hadn't been trained by Ranma could have kept up with one, nor run at this speed for so long.

They traveled over a hundred leagues that night, and early the next morning Fenris began to smell familiar humans. The direwolf's nose allowed Ranma and Fenris to find where Tytos had encamped his men for the day, though of course not all of them were in the same place. Meera's portion wasn't here, stationed far to the east and south.

Ranma was spotted quickly enough and brought to where Tytos was camped next to a tree. Lord Blackwood stood up quickly almost making to bow before he remembered Ranma's apathy towards such things. Instead he simply reached forward and clasped the younger man's arm firmly. "I'd heard stories of how fast you and the Wolfsworn could move when you had a mind to my Lord, but this is something else entirely!"

"I'm traveling light for now." Ranma said with a laugh then he sobered. "What can you tell me about Stannis' formations?"

That conversation went on for an hour, before Ranma left Tytos' camp, heading forward again. He timed it so that he came upon Stannis' army, or at least the first formation of it at night, then began to write down on a piece of precious parchment the symbols he was seeing on the banners of the camp.

Then he skirted around to the east, heading towards the other two camps, one after another. He noted absently that the first camp was a little further west than the other two, off the Kingsroad entirely sitting along the edge of the forest that marked the northeastern edge of the Gods Eye. *I wonder why that is?*

OOOOOO

Stannis had long since chosen a Lord to execute, the pious Lord Kellington from the Stormlands. He had been in charge of the scouts over the past few days and had performed abysmally, as Stannis knew he would. The man was not willing to put forth any effort whatsoever for Stannis and his cause, despite having been forced to give his oath of allegiance. House Kellington had been known for generations for its piety and belief in the Seven.

But Stannis had placed several newly inducted Fire Guard in his command disguised as regular troopers. Then when an ambush had been turned on Lord Kellington they had taken the man captive and ridden off with him rather than fight the skirmishers.

Now deep in the woods with the Fire Guard spread out between his current position and his personal echelon's camp, Stannis watched as Melisandre ritually sacrificed the man to the fire. The sight gave him shivers, though he was loathe to admit that it wasn't just disgust he felt. Seeing Melisandre kneeling in front of the fire naked, which she claimed helped her control her visions, while Kellington's flesh continued to burn and sizzle in the flames, was a strangely erotic sight.

He ignored those emotions however, simply waiting to hear what the woman would report. His eyes widened however



when she stood up, shrieking like a madwoman. "The Wolf! The Wolf of gold and blue that walks like a man! He is near!"

While Stannis continued to watch astonished Melisandre gestured, her hands entering the fire and not being burned to ash. They touched the man's flaking, sizzling chest, ripping out his heart as the man continued to shriek in the background. She suddenly gestured to one side. The shadows of the pyre began to coalesce forming into a Shadow Warrior, larger and more solid looking than any of the others the woman had created in Stannis' presence before this.

It stood taller than even Gregor Clegane, even though it stooped slightly, its arms longer than even its size could attest. In one hand it held a massive greatsword, larger than any man, even someone of Stannis' stature, could have wielded in one hand. In the other a shield appeared, a tower shield of all things, larger than most men top to bottom.

"Go!" Melisandre screamed. "Hunt the Wolf who moves like a man! He is southeast of us. Do not be seen by any other living man, but find and kill him!" With that Melisandre slumped to her knees again, closing her eyes as her hands moved to her face. She barely spent a spare glance for Stannis, halting him from saying anything, her voice brusque. "Wait my Lord, wait for now! I need to concentrate."

Unused to being so abruptly dismissed Stannis was about to step forward and shake the woman, to demand what was going on when the Shadow Warrior turned, staring at him for a moment before racing off through the woods. Scowling angrily Stannis tamped down his ire and moved to stand beside the woman, staring down at her face for now while in front of him Kellington's body continued to burn sending a smell of cooked flesh through the night air.

OOOOOO

Ranma was putting the final touches to his notes when Fenris began to growl. With a thought Ranma entered the direwolf's mind, using his senses for a second to try to figure out what had set Fenris' hackles to rise. *Burn smell, smoke smell, unnatural! Like the scent of an old enemy, the things that attacked the wooden human thing which went on the undrinkable deep water.*

That was enough for Ranma to know what was coming, and he pulled out of their connection, Ice quickly appearing in his hand from its sheath on his back. With a bare thought the Valyrian steel of the blade began to glow blue in the night air, and he set himself, staring to where Fenris was staring.

Out of the night of the plains came a Shadow Warrior, larger and more solid looking than any of the ones the two of them had fought for on the *Fish's Scales*. The moment the magically created monster saw him it roared soundlessly, charging forward, its huge sword raised high.

Ranma snarled like a Fenris, racing forward and smashing his own blade up and into its sword. Fenris raced past him, lunging at the beast.

It blocked Fenris with its tower shield, keeping the direwolf from ripping out its throat with his fangs or claws, both of which suddenly began to glow blue. With literally inhuman strength the Shadow Warrior threw Fenris aside, before twirling just as quickly, bringing his sword around to slice at Ranma's side. Ranma stabbed Ice into the ground, blocking the blow, twirling his body up into the air by his grip on its hilt, lashing out with a kick to the far larger creature's face channeling some ki into his foot for a moment.

The creature backed away rapidly, somehow knowing to be wary of the blue-gold ki light. But now it was between Ranma and Fenris, and the two of them charged forward exploiting that weakness ruthlessly. The Shadow Warrior blocked and parried Ranma's attacks, both ice and his own ki-laden feet or fist, trying to turn himself so that Fenris couldn't get behind them, but it failed.

Fenris leaped onto the thing's back, his fangs biting deep into the shoulder of the arm holding its tower shield. The Shadow Warrior's mouth opened in a silent scream as it threw Fenris off with a wrench, but that arm now hung uselessly at the creature's side. The thing still flailed about with his sword trying to block Ranma, but Ranma parried its greatsword down with a glowing blue-gold fist, wincing as the sword cut into his arm despite his strengthening technique. Using the momentum of that blow Ranma rose once again into the air, then thrust forward with Ice stabbing through the thing's upper chest.

The Shadow Warrior began to fall, but still tried to pull back its sword for one last stab, only stopped by Fenris grabbing the thing's wrist in his mouth, chomping down. Ranma grimly thrust Ice deeper into the thing's chest, until he could see through the thing that the tip of Ice had passed entirely through its body.

Then the thing admitted the only noise it had made in the entire battle, though even now the noise was but a whisper

on the wind. "Thank you."

With that it dissipated, and Ranma landed neatly on his feet staring across at Fenris. "I think we've overstayed our welcome, don't you?"

Fenris rolled its eyes in an incredibly human gesture then sped off through the woods without another word. Ranma nodded bending down to pick up his notes from where they had fallen during the battle, before racing after his bonded direwolf.

OOOOOO

"GAAHHHH!" Luckily for Melisandre Stannis was close enough to grab her when she suddenly screamed, falling to the side from where she had been kneeling in front of the pyre. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she looked almost insensate. Stannis easily lifted the woman into his arms, moving over to a nearby tree where he propped her against its trunk.

With that done he turned to one of her handmaidens, who had been chosen to follow them into the woods for this ritual. The woman had been staring into the pyre, her face almost ecstatic with a religious fervor, but now she was looking on worriedly. "Get me some wine from our saddlebags."

The woman obeyed with alacrity, coming back swiftly with the wineskin handing it to him then stood there looking on worriedly. Stannis grimly forced open Melisandre's clamped mouth, pouring the wine between her lips until she gagged and coughed, spluttering and spitting it out. "What happened?" he growled.

Melisandre coughed again, then stared up at him, tried to push him away from her, but Stannis held her against the tree easily. "The Wolf, the Wolf who walks like a man, Ranma Stark! He was near, somewhere close to the third echelon's camp, towards the east."

Stannis frowned, wondering if he could send runners back there in enough time to ambush the youth, but from the reports he'd been getting, well rumors were more accurate since they'd started to come near the Riverlands/Crownlands border, he doubted that was possible, especially not at night. *And I'd rather not lose any more of the men I could trust on such a venture. No doubt the Blackwood men we've been fighting recently are out there just waiting for an opportunity like that.*

Aloud he asked "I take it that your Shadow Warrior did not prevail?"

"No my Lord it did not." She replied tartly, yet in a far weaker tone than she would normally have used. "It should have moved faster than any human warrior could've kept up with, it should have slaughtered both the Wolf-Man and his beast. But somehow they are able to fight against my Shadowbound. It was not just the dragon's fire that saw off our first attempt to capture the Stormborn."

Stannis scowled, but didn't otherwise respond to that, wondering already what Ranma had been down here to do. *Scout obviously, but what did he learn? Our formations. I'll have to change them up for the march from now on. Push the third echelon ahead of the first and second, then put myself in the center, but with the second echelon perhaps out to one side?*

"I see. Did your creature at least injure them?"

"No my Lord it didn't."

"And what did your visions report before you became aware of his presence?"

Melisandre had to concentrate on that for a moment, the blue-gold image of the Stark man had filled her vision almost from the start, but she had discerned a few things before that. "The Army of the Starks is moving towards what I believe is the city of Duskindale, Azor Ahai. Yet from that city I saw another army arriving from the water, men with golden skulls on their banners, and a fourth dragon, young but still able to fly and be used."

"The Golden Company and a dragon? I wonder if this is some Blackfyre pretender come to try his luck, or something more." Stannis frowned. "Hmmpf, I had hoped that Seaworth would be able to catch them in the Bay or east of it, but I suppose he was pulled out of position chasing down Viserys."

At the mention of Davos, Melisandre scowled internally. The man was one of very few Stannis would listen to and respected implicitly, and had almost always been a voice against her influence with him. She was thankful Davos was no longer with them, and hoped her news would possibly start to make a chink in Stannis' belief in the man. "I cannot

tell you anything about that, Azor Ahai. But I saw another army marching from the Bay of Crabs, from a town with a maiden hovering above it."

Stannis suddenly frowned, then laughed. "Very clever Stark, but not quite clever enough! Hah, he wanted to get me chasing after him, then move aside and let Viserys and I battle before he came in to defeat the victor. A neat plan, too neat to work in real life especially with a fourth army in the field, one which I doubt he saw coming. Now however, his maneuverability will soon be sharply curtailed, and I might be able to pin him against the Golden Company and Viserys. So long as you are certain you can deal with their dragons at any rate."

"I can my Lord. The blessing of R'hllor will allow me to control any fire I see, though it will take a lot of concentration at any distance. I could even turn their fire back onto the dragons, possibly burn them and their riders."

"A sound tactic." Stannis said approvingly. "Is that all?"

"My visions had already begun to turn north my Lord before they were completely overwhelmed by the presence of the wolf who walks like a man. There was a sense of urgency there! We are running out of time!"

"Then I suppose you should start creating your Shadow Warriors now. Enough of them would make any battle go much faster after all."

Melisandre stared up at him angrily, thumping the ground with one fist in a show of anger that she would never normally allow herself, but what she wanted to do was walk off angrily and she couldn't. She felt as weak as a kitten right now. "I will do so as soon as I am able my Lord. So long as you understand that we, that all Westeros is running out of time! Whatever happens with this campaign we must start north within the next month! Or else we won't arrive in time to stop whatever disaster will occur."

Stannis scowled, but nodded. "I understand your concerns." He said in a tone that made it clear he didn't, but was willing to humor Melisandre given the fact that her powers were very obviously real, which meant her concerns might be as well. "But I refuse to let Ranma Stark behind us. He at least must be dealt with before we head north."

Grimly determined the priestess of R'hllor pulled herself up using the tree has a backrest and waving her arms towards her returning follower. "Then we will start tonight my Lord."

Throughout that night several dozen crates were carried out of the second echelon's camp and into the woods, along with over 100 unconscious prisoners, just as many Fire Guard, and every acolyte that Melisandre still retained. Only a quarter of those retainers would return with only half the Guard, while not one prisoner was ever seen alive again.

The next day rumors would abound as to what went on that night, where the prisoners had gone or what had happened between Melisandre's retainers and the guards. But the first echelon was composed of those men who are most wedded to Stannis' cause, and the rumors would eventually subside while on the march. Yet they would not disappear, and more than one man began to wonder precisely what sort of King they or their lords had chosen to follow.

OOOOOO

Kevan Lannister stood unseeing at the window of his brother's study, staring down from the Rock towards the city of Lannisport. He had been standing there for hours now, ever since opening the missive sent by raven from the Golden Tooth. But it had not come from House Lefford, no it had come from the conquerors of possibly the most important castle outside the Rock itself in all the Westerlands. The Riverlands had taken the Golden Tooth under the direction of the new royal House, Stargaryen.

*How did they do it?* He thought to himself, not for the first time over the past few hours. *How did they take the Golden Tooth so easily? Even if they could get around it somehow with a full army they couldn't have taken it by siege this quickly, the Golden Tooth is as defensible from the west as it is from the east!*

But that part of the message was but the icing on the poisonous cake that was the rest of the message. *My brother dead.* Even now the thought didn't seem to register emotionally inside Kevan. Tywin had always dominated his life, always controlled everything and everyone around him, or at least given the impression he was doing so. *Not only that, but the army has been smashed. The list of Lords dead makes for incredibly grim reading.*

Kevan was a bit of a historian, and knew the losses from all of the wars that the Westerlands had taken part of by heart. And in this one war the Westerlands had lost more Lords and men than in any single war before by far. *Most of the time lords and heirs are captured then ransomed back but this, this Wolf boy doesn't seem to play that game.*

"You're still staring out the window, I would've thought you'd have started to actually do something by now." Said a female voice from behind him.

Kevan turned slowly to stare at Genna, his sister. One eyebrow raised and he actually essayed a small smirk. "I notice you're not in mourning colors any longer Genna."

The woman scoffed and Kevan could almost see that she was trying to fight the urge to spit to one side. "Please," She scoffed. "You know that there was no love lost between me my husband and I. And with the Freys no longer powerful enough for our marriage to mean anything, well..." she shrugged.

In response Kevan shivered at the way Genna was so blasé about having poisoned her husband. Still that was Genna for you, she always tended to speak her mind and go her own way. Or at least as much as she could get away with. Tywin had terrified her of course, but then again he had terrified everyone in the family, not because they feared him physically, but because his personality was so dominating. "That's nice..." he said slowly knowing that Genna would read how uncomfortable he was with the topic.

She scoffed again. Moving quicker than most would've given a woman of her size credit she came towards him, pulling him into a rough embrace for a second before plucking the message out from between his fingers and turning away. While she read it Genna moved back, pulling a chair around the Lord's desk with a loud squeal as it rattled along the stone of the room before plopping into it and actually putting her feet up on Tywin's desk. All of this while wearing a skirt.

For a moment Kevan simply gawked, there was something so bizarre about that sight, so disrespectful, that it took his breath away. *But then again Tywin's dead isn't he?* Kevan sighed and pulled out Tywin's own chair and sat in it, feeling very uncomfortable doing so, knowing now that he was Lord Lannister rather than simply acting in his brother's stead.

The message was well-written, to the point and utterly damning to their families power base. It laid out the bare bones of the campaign in the Riverlands, listing the number of dead lords and heirs, with only a few still missing. It then went on to the trials, **trials** for lords, hell even a Lord Paramount in a time of war! And of course, it told of how Tywin had been found guilty of treason and war crimes, then executed on the spot.

After that, it had laid out the reparations the Lannisters would need to pay to get Kevan's sons back, and the fact that the Westerlands was being broken up into smaller 'duchies'. Though it neglected to mention what in the way of incentives the new 'royal house' offered them. There had to be something of course, though given the major House's anger at the disaster Tywin had led them into, it might not have been much. Even so, Kevan could guess which Houses would jump at the chance to rule their lands with only a distant king to answer to rather than House Lannister.

The Serret-Lydden duchy, which those families, being the most powerful remaining houses and allied to several smaller in the area. House Crakehall, again not overly weakened but facing the Reach forces, and territory to its north to expand into. House Brax, badly weakened and in the mountains relatively near the Golden Tooth would grasp any way to remain neutral with both hands.

House Banefort might as well, they had never really cared for being ruled by the Rock, and the lands separating that of Banefort and Payne from the rest of the Westerlands, which meant reining them in would be tough. Worse, those Houses were supplying Addam Marbrand and his invasion force, so Kevan would need to tread very lightly there.

Prester... possibly would remain loyal, though Kevan doubted it. They hadn't sent many men to war, but they also looked do gain quite a lot of land if they agreed to the 'duchy' idea from the houses that had been wiped out in the war so far.

*All in all, we'll be left alone, bereft of friends though not penniless thankfully, at least for a while anyway.* He remained silent while Genna read the note, watching as she then put it down and turned to him, her emerald eyes cold. "So what are you going to do?" She asked bluntly.

"Do about which part of that gigantic piece of offal?" Kevan asked, buying time more than anything else.

"Don't come over the idiot with me!" Genna shook her head. "You might've always followed Tywin, but I know there's a brain inside of that skull brother. And you're as pragmatic as Tywin ever was, if a little slower to taking violent actions. So, what are you going to do? You know some of our family members are going to push for us to try and fight this don't you? And the only way to keep the Westerlands intact now is by force of arms. None of the Lords that will be forming these 'duchies' of the Stark-Targaryens will willingly join us. They've lost family members, some have lost their Lords or heirs or simply power, and the lesser Houses are practically gone! At least, if this list of dead is to be

believed."

She paused a moment looking at him. "**Do** we believe it?"

Intelligent though she was, Genna did not have any resources outside the Rock for news. She was however quick, and almost up to Cersei's skill when it came to understanding political maneuvers, so understood that the Westerlands were no more. The country that name signified had ended the moment ravens arrived at the disparate castles they had been sent to from the Golden Tooth. If, that was, the news they brought was real and not some kind of trick which would be found out in the fullness of time.

"It's true," Kevan said with a sigh. "News of the beginning of the disaster reached me before the raven message. We were indeed that badly mauled, and Tywin at the very least is dead. The news of that disaster already reached the common folk in Lannisport. The *March of the Wolf King* is being sung in practically every tavern in the city! Tywin wasn't exactly a well-loved individual." He finished dryly.

Genna barked a laugh, knowing that to be only too true, but her mind was on more important matters. "And our monetary base?"

He sighed gesturing over his shoulder towards the window and down towards the city. "The Ironborn did a number on the docks and the fires they started did worse. I've been going over the numbers since that assault, and ordering the weapons we sent with the fleet and repairing that damage has badly eroded our gold reserves here in the Rock."

"We couldn't raise mercenaries enough to force the other Lords into compliance again?" Genna asked, playing Stranger's advocate. It was obvious from her face that she wasn't in favor of that idea.

"The two mercenary units that we had on retainer are gone. I doubt there are 10 men alive from either of them, either on the southern front or the Riverlands. Tywin executed Vargo Hoat for disobeying orders, and that news reached us long before anything else in the Riverlands occurred, so I doubt we could even get any mercenary group to take our money after that, and we'd need thousands of them."

"Even if we could pay them, it would be half a year at best before they could arrive here in the Westerlands. **And** we'd have to pay for their upkeep and their transportation! We could pay for it, but doing so would bankrupt us, and we don't have the transportation! Or even a way to get in touch with enough mercenary bands!"

Kevan rubbed at his forehead. "And besides, what kind of army would relying on mercenaries or even levy's make? The Northern-Riverlands army just smashed an army whose experience and leadership no new army could match. No, we would simply be throwing good money after bad, and I doubt we would survive it if he did."

He looked hard at Genna. "But all that is really beside the point, since this is all supposing we would be willing to forget the fact they have hostages. Including two of my sons!"

"The forces we sent to take the Iron Islands?" Genna asked, ignoring the bit about hostages. Those hostages might be important to Kevan, but they wouldn't be to the rest of the family. The only one that might was Daven, and even then many would look on him as a rival anyway.

"Too small to make a difference on the mainland, and already landed on Pyke, or at least I believe they will have by this point. The last report I had from Banefort said that." He sighed. "House Banefort might take up the offer that was sent to them, but I hope to keep that line of discussion open even so, and since they hadn't lost many men that's possible. The only other House we can still count on to be loyal to us is House Marbrand at this point. All the other **surviving** Houses will leave our side like rats leaving a sinking ship."

Genna nodded agreement, but she was looking at Kevan worriedly. "You know we're going to face internal pressure from the rest of our family to do something. The days of the Lannister's walking in step are gone, and there will be a **lot** of pressure on us to try to do something despite the fact that our options are so limited."

"I know." Kevan said with a nod. "But we'll have to silence those voices, and I will say this now: if anyone acts in such a way as to endanger my boys I'll order their deaths myself, even if I must become a kinslayer!"

He stared hard at Genna, who nodded, her face showing approval for the strength of his stance.

"The time of the Lannister's holding the whip hand in the Westerlands and in the rest of Westeros is over, and the sooner we resign ourselves to that fact the better will be. With Lannisport we'll still be a power to reckon with, the first among equals at least in the Westerlands, that will have to do for our family's ego."

He sighed again putting his head in his hands. "This Wolf King has two dragons to call upon. The Rock's never been tested against dragons, and frankly if the song's to be believed he's done so many incredible things in the course of this campaign of his Riverlands I don't think even the Rock would be safe. No, we build our power base up again, and we by the Seven do nothing to threaten my son's treatment in their hands. We be happy with what we have, or else we'll have nothing."

OOOOOO

Asha stared at the Ironborn longship that was closing on the small strip of land she had made her refuge for the past few days. "I wonder where this ship comes from, and what happened with the battle." She tapped a large makeshift bundle at her side, smirking at what it contained, and what it might mean for the future. "The victors truly did write the story, but such can be overwritten eventually. Especially in times of great upheaval, just like this one."

It was evident the ship was stopping here to search for freshwater, and she remained in hiding watching the men come ashore until she spotted the captain, Thereon Harlaw. She knew the man, one of the lazier captains of the Ironborn, and one of the fattest men she'd ever seen, and somewhat dull, even in comparison to other Ironborn captains she could name. The Reader however was more than capable of doing this thinking for him, and his loyalty to his lord had never wavered.

Even so she was cautious, coming out of the scrub brush above the party heading deeper into the island towards the small pool of freshwater that had accumulated from the rainfall that was almost constant now. She waited until the man was close by, then spoke sharply, reaching down with the butt of the makeshift spear she had created since arriving here from the wood of one of her oars.

The butt of it smacked into the fat captain's head, and he turned quickly, far quicker than Asha thought he could if she was honest. She glared down at the man and said sharply. "'Hail Thereon, be you still loyal to Lord Rodrick?"

For a moment the man's face was blank then his rotund face split into a wide pumpkin grin. "Asha Greyjoy! We thought you dead!"

"I nearly was thanks to treachery among my own forces." Asha growled, while all around her the man's crew stared at her in astonishment. "I was stabbed in the back, literally. Then I had to choose between dying with a sword in my guts or diving into the ocean. I chose the ocean, and survived everything the Drowned God could throw at me since."

More than one man shifted uncomfortably on his feet at her disparaging tone when speaking of the Drowned God, but more of them grinned at her spirit. Thereon however simply cocked his head in shock. "Why would someone betray you like that?"

"I don't know." Asha frowned thoughtfully, unwilling to mention the fact that her hated uncle had been named in that attack. No, she would wait and take her vengeance on the man if he dared show himself in her presence. "Maybe I angered the captains of those ships in the past or something, we're a fractious lot as you know. What happened with the battle, what's been going on since?"

"The greenlanders have landed on Pyke." Thereon said with a shrug. "The Reader's worried about somethin' they're doin', don't know what. The fleet's been smashed, Harlaw barely has 12 ships now, and we're the strongest of the islands at this point by a lot. A few of the captains've tried ta attack the Greenlanders since that battle, and had their ships sunk for their troubles, so the Reader ordered all o' our own ships back to defend Harlaw.

"Smart of him," Asha murmured, nodding her head. If she was the Reader she'd have cut her losses to. *After all, my father's away, and they don't have enough ships to truly guard all of the Island's coasts. Maybe we can raid their supply lines, but that's doubtful too, with Banefort so close. The Greenlanders have the wind behind them now, it'll take something major to stop them.*

"Any word about my ship or its crew?" she asked aloud.

Thereon shook his head. "Gone with all hands in the battle."

Asha winced at that, her fists clenching as she thought about her crew and her ship, her lovely Black Wind, which had been more her home than that old drafty castle on Pyke had ever been, more even than Ten Towers. After a moment though, she pushed her grief aside. "All right, let's get out of here than. I need to talk to the Reader."

She frowned thoughtfully. "With as few warriors of we've still got, we might have to strike a deal with the damn Greenlanders, but if they don't want to deal..." she smiled thinly, patting the heavy bundle at her side once more. "I

might have a few surprises in store for them."

OOOOOO

Viserys soared through the air on top of Balerion, urging the beast down towards the ships flying the flag of the Royal Navy, the hated burning heart with the stag's head inside it. The Royal Navy had caught up to his fleet just as they came within sight of Maidenpool, sinking four of his captured war galleys at the back of the fleet before he could take to Balerion. Now it was time for **vengeance!**

"Dive!" He shouted aloud in Valyrian, "Attack with flame!" With that and with his grip on the stirrups turning the beast towards his chosen target the two of them dove down.

Though still young for the breed, Balerion was a massive beast, and quite mad. Viserys' training had been harsh, unfeeling, with every defiance met with pain, every attempt to break his chains or attack Viserys met with more, every act of anger or fury against others rewarded. But it was effective. Balerion roared, then a gout of flame seared out of its mouth and down towards the target ship, smashing into the crows' nest and setting both it and all of the canvas of the war galley alight in a single pass, along with the lookout, who had not seen them coming.

Balerion pulled up swiftly, using the updraft from the flames before continuing its run towards another war galley while behind them men screamed as they tried desperately to contain the fire. But war galleys were susceptible to fire at the best of times, with so much tar, wood, and rope all around. Though they would fight valiantly, those sailors would not succeed, Viserys knew it.

Nor would the sailors of the next ship succeed in staving off Balerion. Arrows flew, but they fell well short. Another gout of flame shot out, catching the main mast of the second war galley. The mast went up like a torch, the fire spreading to the canvas down to the deck, and everywhere quickly while Viserys crowed in delight. "On to the next!" He shouted gleefully, then switching to Valyrian. "On to the next!"

The third war galley was ready for them, and not only its archers but the scorpions set along the fore of the ship tried to range on them. But they couldn't quite turn far enough, with Viserys and Balerion attacking them amidships. The archers did better, and for the first time Balerion had to begin evasive maneuvers. Even so, only a few clattered against the dragon's hide, bouncing off harmlessly. Not a one of them hit its more vulnerable wings.

In response, Balerion's flame smashed into the ship. It yet again took out a mast before the tongue of flame turned downwards as Balerion arced his neck in the same direction to impact the actual deck, setting several men there on fire. They died screaming while their fellows tried frantically to put out the fires.

But Balerion at last paid for his success so far. Another war galley was close enough to their angle of flight to take Viserys and his mount under fire as Balerion pulled away with its main weapons. One of the scorpions of that ship nearly hit Balerion square on. He frantically dodged upwards, but the barb of the bolt still caught him in the tail, making a small, but deep gash there, causing Balerion to scream in fury and pain.

For a moment it was all he could do to control Balerion, the pain from its tail causing the beast to thrash about in midair, almost throwing Viserys off entirely. Viserys held on for dear life shouting Valyrian commands in as commanding a tone as he could make sawing at the reins at the same time. "Up, up climb the sky! Climb the sky!" Thankfully that ship was the only one that could range on them at that moment.

Balerion beat its massive wings gaining altitude, but on its back Viserys scowled angrily at how willful the creature was. It followed his commands, but that brief moment of panic from the pain had almost undone all of their previous bonding!

Below them the Royal Navy had backed off from the port of Maidenpool, spreading out so the fires of the ships already attacked couldn't reach the rest of the fleet. Through a spyglass he had taken from the Martells, Viserys saw all the scorpions of those war galleys were now elevated, to shoot up into the air as far as possible. Normally that would allow the ships to use arcing fire, shooting over obstacles between them and their target, like this, they could become deadly to a dragon trying to attack them.

*If that scorpion had hit Balerion it would've killed him! His scales might have hardened enough to protect him against arrows, but against scorpion bolts? No. That will take years yet.* "Back!" He shouted, turning the black dragon's head away and heading towards Maidenpool. "We've done enough."

For a moment the beast craned its neck around to look his rider in the eye. Its ire was up, and small gouts of flame began to appear at the corners of its mouth. But Viserys was unmoved, and continued to pull at the reins jerking his

mount's head back and around towards Maidenpool. He thumped its sides with his boots, shouting aloud. "Back to home, food!"

It was that last word that probably caused the beast to come out of its blood fugue and it went willingly down towards the town. The two of them landed in the courtyard of the small keep of House Mooton.

All around him the men of Mooton stared in dread, fear or happiness Viserys did not care. At the same time his own men were already investing the keep, and Arianne was moving towards him even now, several dozen men behind her with the chains necessary to keep Balerion from going out of control, and two others bearing between them a whole elk.

Viserys remained in the saddle for now, waiting until the food was in front of Balerion before getting off him. The dragon chomped down, ignoring the now familiar feeling of the chains being lashed around its limbs, though it growled and snapped at a man who got too close, nearly biting his arms off before they could put the chain around its neck. Only Viserys pulling back on the reins that were still on the dragon prevented the man's death.

"Enough! Food!" Viserys shouted in Valyrian, and Balerion once more turned to regard him balefully, before going back to its food. Quickly the men put the final chain around his neck backing away hurriedly. Viserys left the saddle now, moving over to Arianne. *That's right Balerion snap and snarl, show your power to both our enemies and our allies, let them fear the return of the Targaryen Dynasty!*

"My king." Said his wife, leaning forward to kiss him lightly on the cheek and taking his hand in hers. "Magnificently fought! Your actions saved our entire fleet!"

It hadn't quite, they had lost nearly all of their stolen war galleys and another four hundred men, but it had certainly made the Royal Navy back off for now. Most of the fleet had already been within the port of Maidenpool however, guarded by its ballista and heavy catapults. The Royal fleet could still invade, but it would take severe losses against those set defenses. And she doubted it had the manpower or will to oust them if the fight spread into the town.

"The debarkation process is continuing." She said gesturing to her cousin Elia. "By your leave, the Lords will handle that, while Elia serves as liaison. You and I should meet with the Lord of the Keep and get some information from him, as Nymeria does from our family's contacts here. I know that Lord Mooton is loyal to your family, but his competency is somewhat questionable, so we might have to ginger up his ideas personally."

"Of course my dear." Viserys said, rather more mellow than normal, the joy of combat having filled him for a moment. "Let's see to that."

Lord Mooton was as obsequious and yellow-bellied as could be asked, but he was surprisingly more competent than Arianne had thought. "Your supplies are ready my Lord, as is a baggage train. My smiths aren't the best, so we haven't been able to supply you with as many arrowheads as I had hoped, but your coats and tents and other supply needs are ready. You will even have enough food for at least a week on the march, if you forage at least some of your army. Spears we have in abundance as well, but I apologize for the failure in production of swords and shields."

"Those at least we have brought enough with us." Viserys said magnanimously, sipping at a magnificent vintage from the Arbor that the Lord had kept in his cellar for years. A resplendent meal was laid out in front of them, and he was feeling even mellow than he had after the battle. "No single town can specialize in everything after all ."

The area around Maidenpool and over and down toward Butterwell was somewhat famed for its cheeses along with other cattle products. The fishery was also decent enough here, though not quite as good as deeper into the Bay of Crabs in terms of crabs. "So long as you were able to provide us with enough autumn gear, that will be enough. Gulltown was depressingly unhelpful in that regard."

"Hack, Hack. What can you tell us about what is going on?" Asked Jorah Mormont, while next to him Lord Grafton scowled at the dig to his town. Jorah looked much the worse for wear, and about two stones lighter than he had back in Pentos. He had fallen ill from something he had caught from a whore in one of their stopovers in the Broken Arm, and had only recently begun to recover. Despite this, he was still a respected leader of men and had requested to be a part of this discussion, the only war council he felt well enough to attend since long before they reached Dorne.

"I received a report from the so-called Wolf King my Lord." Lord Mooton replied, making certain that his voice was as contemptuous as possible. "As well as your sister. They are marching down to Duskendale, intending to either sack or take the city as a prelude to fighting Stannis, thinking it is the, they call it the logistical lynchpin for his army, odd words but understandable. Closer to home, I regret to say that there have been issues of bandits in my lands, no doubt rabble from the Westerlands army that have somehow found their way here. I have lost several dozen of my



reavers and thief-takers already. I am afraid, I don't know what you'll run into out there and at this point."

"As if bandits could trouble a full army." Viserys scoffed. He frowned then thoughtfully. "We'll head out in a few days then, my men could use some time in a port, and our horses need to get their land legs under them. That will allow us to figure out where we wish to go."

"Surely we should make for Harroway my Lord?" Asked Elia. "Let the stag and direwolf fight it out between them, while we take the Riverlands from behind them."

"And let them think we're cowards!?" said Viserys sneering a little. "No, the Riverlands and every other nation in Westeros will capitulate once the two pretenders to the throne have been dealt with. I don't want us bogged down in small war after small war. Smash their armies entirely, not just a few towns here and there. Kill their leaders and make an example of them. That will stop others from trying to emulate their rebellion."

"I agree my lord, but we must be cautious." Jorah spoke aloud. "We do not have a large army, we need to use our advantage in horse archers and pike against their weaknesses, not take losses in any kind of 'fair' fight." Around him the Dornish lords all nodded firmly, having no desire to cripple their Houses for no return.

With that the talk turns to other things, with most of it dealing with the events in the Riverlands as Lord Mooton knew them. This included the size of Ranma's army, how loyal the Riverlords were, the latest news of battles in the Riverlands and elsewhere.

Later as they were being led to their rooms for the evening Nymeria Sand moved up to Viserys' side behind Arianne murmuring. "If you would my Lord, I think we should leave a token force here to make certain that Lord Mooton does not make any deals behind our back. He is..."

"He's as spineless as the cheese made on his land." Viserys replied dryly. "I know that. He's a snake, but a useful one just as you are my dear. Though in comparison he is a grass snake whereas you are a true viper's daughter."

Nymeria smiled thinly, eager to head out into the town and meet with her contacts here. She hoped that some of them would have news of her father's campaign in the Stormlands, though she doubted it. With war as spread as it was, getting news from one agent to another was difficult, even with their reliance on trained doves to do so.

"With your leave my Lord," said Petyr, who had been silent for most of the evening. "I could command such a force?"

"Your courage does you credit." Viserys sneered. "No, I want you where I can see you Littlefinger. Indeed, you and your Valermen, most particularly the levy force, will be at the front of the battle. I trust you will comport yourself well?"

Petyr fell silent with a graceful nod of his head, though internally he was angry. He had wanted to stay here to learn what he could of events elsewhere, and possibly put some distance between him and Viserys, who he knew now was quite as sadistic as Joffrey had been, only more controlled. Petyr, for all his other faults, was not a sadist or a madman, and had no desire to remain in Viserys employ any longer than he could.

But Viserys was so distrustful of him that he was constantly under watch, and of course Viserys would not allow him to remain behind. With an internal sigh, Petyr knew he couldn't get away from his current employer just yet, but he could set up a fallback plan. Surely one of his men could remain behind if he could not...

OOOOOO

Davos scowled, listening to half a mind as one of his captain went over the days' losses while he stared at the port of Maidenpool from the raised aft portion of his ship. When the man finished, he shook his head. "Pull the fleet back-a-ways and spread us out, say fifty leagues or so. We'll cordon the city, but I don't want us close enough so that damn Targaryen butcher can simply fly his black terror out and burn a few ships every day. No, as long as we can keep the Dornish army from pulling up stake, we've done our part. I want no more men to die in this chase."

OOOOOO

A few days had passed since Ranma returned to the army, with nothing much to show for it save the distance the army had covered. The Shadow Warrior's attack, and the fact it meant Stannis would know Ranma had seen his army, meant any information he had gleaned was unusable. The creature's strength and speed, which was almost on par with his own, had come as a shock and a warning for him and the Wolfsworn.

It was raining right now, and while the march was continuing, Ranma and his commanders had pulled off to the side of the road once again to meet with a lone rider from the South. Lucas had again been chosen as his father and

Meera's messenger, but the past few days had obviously taken a toll on the young man. "We're beginning to lose more men my Lord," he said grimly. "We're still killing two or three for every one of us we lose, but they've replaced whoever's in charge of their scouts, and this one knows his business almost as well as Lady Meera or my father."

While Lucas had doubted Meera's ability to lead and even fight before this, that opinion had faded since this campaign began. Her skill at blending into the land was phenomenal, and her speed on foot was noteworthy, as was her skill with bow and trident.

"Does your father want to pull your men back?" Ranma asked.

"Not yet my Lord. Their army is still pretty much blind, and the smallfolk aren't helping. Lady Alayaya understated their hatred for Stannis, Stannis has been forced to hang several dozen smallfolk from different villages to force their neighbors to provide his army with food, and he's slowly losing control of some of the Stormlands infantry he uses to bring in supplies."

Lucas spat to one side angrily though his grin was fierce as he went on. "Those are my favorite missions to lead my Lord, attacking those foraging parties. Give it another two weeks or more, and all three of that army's units're going to be feelin' the pinch."

"Excellent." Ranma nodded, though he and Daenerys were not happy to hear about the depredations upon the smallfolk. "Make certain you note down the tabards of the houses involved in that kind of crap for later however. If all goes well, we might need to have another round of trials. Anything else?"

"Er, that was the good news my lord. The bad news, the real reason my father sent me to consult with you, is... well... I don't know how they knew so quickly my Lord, but Stannis' army cut northeast practically the very next day after you and Fenris came down and had your bit of adventure."

"Maybe the Red Witch truly can tell Stannis things thanks to her magic powers." Daenerys said frowning thoughtfully. "That unfortunately gives more credence to your concern that she could somehow neutralize my little ones."

Greatjon laughed. "Your little ones aren't so 'little' anymore lady." He said, looking up into the sky where Sunfyre and Rhaegon flew above the army, happily moving through the air about one another. They were playing a game of tag Daenerys and Merry had thought up. A bright pennant was tied to Rhaegon's tail which Sunfyre tried grab with his claws without hurting his brother.

"Still it is worrisome, this magic..." Greatjon shuddered. "Give me a good sword fight any day."

"Ah, but remember the old saying my Lord, a sword in any wizard's bowels will still ruin his day." Said Dacey from nearby, smiling grimly.

"Whatever the case my lord, they are cutting across our route, and making up a lot of distance on the army despite our own speed. Plus, and this is worse I think, their own pace has increased recently. Though they are getting close to Butterwell, we might be able to have Tristan and his force sortie after the first two units pass over his land."

After sending Cley to fetch his map and looking at the points where the three disparate forces of Stannis were marching, Ranma nodded. "A point, but I think we need to do something better to slow them down. We can't face Stannis' Army and then expect to be able to face Viserys and his without pulling back to Harroway for rest and refit." Even the march was taking its toll on the men's equipment, their boots, leather and camping gear in particular thanks to the rain and mud, despite most of it being gear prepared to face autumn.

"And I've already gotten reports that ships were seen nearing Maidenpool." said Alayaya grimly waving a small message as several of her listeners looked astonished. "I was able to suborn a branch of the Master of Whisper's spy ring my Lords. Darry was one of their collection points."

"Whatever we're paying you it is not enough my lady." Said Jason laughing lightly, though his eyes were grim. "Do you think we have enough space to move out of the way and let them have at it here my Lord?"

"Stannis is too smart for that, and this Red Witch was proven too good at anticipating things. Now, Stannis would probably simply back off, keep his forces to our west and south, force us to fight Viserys first then come in afterwards to pin us against the Bay of Crabs somewhere."

He clapped his hands together like a sound of thunder. "Let's get this organized my lords. Greatjon, Rickard, you and my lady are in charge of the army, keep it moving on its current route."

"We'll cross into the Crownlands in another day at this pace." Jason warned. House Buckwell will have no love for us."

"Doesn't matter." Ranma said with a shrug. "They try to fight us, we'll smash them in the open field, but I'm not going to try to assault any castles anytime soon."

"Thank goodness for that," Roger murmured from where he was sitting nearby on his horse.

Several moments later he was groaning to his wife. "I spoke too soon didn't I?"

"Shut up and ride," Osha growled.

The two of them, a force of a thousand light cavalry and seven hundred archers were moving southwest towards House Butterwell's land, hoping to meet up with the force Ranma had sent to that castle under Tristan and then start either hitting the forward units or attack the baggage trains of Stannis' army if possible to slow up their march. The archers were on spare horses, indeed the force had practically every spare horse the army had, and were riding hard.

The force also included every Wolfsworn still with the army and of course Fenris. Daenerys had wanted to join them on her dragons, but she and Ranma feared what the Red Witch could do to them without some other dragon around to draw her attention.

Having to travel with the rest of the army obviously slowed the Wolfsworn down, but within three days they were met by another one of Lord Blackwood's man, but the news he shared was not good. "Your Majesty, Stannis has sent a force ahead, it's besieging Butterwell now. The rest of his army seems to have slowed down, and are turning aside to head further east."

Ranma frowned, wondering why Stannis would have sent a force ahead to siege Butterwell and turn his army further westward if he was trying to bring Ranma's army to battle. *Unless... The Red Witch could have told him that my army was making for the road between Maidenpool and Duskendale. In that case he might be pushing to cut us off, possibly because he knows someplace along it perfect for an ambush. Could she have also warned him that I had invested Butterwell with some of my men as well? Or worse? No, don't fall into that trap Ranma, they're not omniscient. Still...*

"Could it be a trap?" he said aloud. "Trying to draw our scouts out of hiding to defend the castle, or destroy a fast reaction force like ours?"

"I think that's well within Stannis' ability." Roger said with a nod. Hathan and the others nodded agreement.

"In that case," Ranma said grimly. "I suggest we go in spring this trap. 'If you've prepared a trap for a fox, you're not going to have prepared for the direwolf.'"

"I thought that phrase was, 'if you've trapped a fox you're not going to prepare for the bear?'" Dacey said laughing while the others all chuckled as well.

"I'm King" Ranma huffed airily, looking down his nose at her. "I think I can change one old phrase, can't I?"

They rested for the rest of that day before marching through the night to be within striking range of the Castle of Butterwell before resting for the rest of the night. They found that the castle was indeed under attack.

Fenris and Ranma moved forward with some of the scouts to see, and it wasn't a fake assault at least. A force of several thousand men had surrounded the castle, exchanging arrow fire with the defenders over the moat that surrounded it.

"We'll attack at dawn, sweeping across their flank here, then moving on." Ranma said, motioning toward a makeshift map he had made on the mud of the copse of trees they were hiding in for now. "We hit them hard and fast, roll them up now before they can finish any earthworks. But I want scouts all around now and during the battle. I want to make certain that this isn't a trap for us."

"You're the one that said this was a trap already for me and mine." said Tytos, who had met up with them a few hours ago, while Ranma was moving forward to inspect the positions of the force around Butterwell. Even after more than a week and a half of skirmishing he was still looking hale and hearty.

"Yes, but there's no reason to get complacent."

Despite Ranma's worries the night passed uneventfully. Just before dawn, Ranma and his men it broke camp, the light cavalry getting back into the saddle and the Wolfsworn preparing themselves, while the archers prepared to follow up the charge. Tytos and his scouts also prepared themselves, waiting for any opportunities to arise to snipe at the enemy.

The light cavalry and Wolfsworn road through copse in the waning night until they were on its edge nearest Butterwell, close enough to charge at the besieging army's camp. Ranma nodded all around and charged forward. The rest of the force went into a canter. Then when they reached about 400 yards away and the first shouts of alarm were raised from the tired men on guard of the camp, the horses broke into a gallop.

Surprise was almost total, with only a force of around fifty men able to gather together to form any kind of resistance. The light cavalry rode into the army's camp, swords flashing and cutting down dozens, then hundreds of men, throwing torches into various tents, or at barrels of food or other things here and there throughout the camp.

Looking around Ranma nodded grimly, cutting down one man with Ice and smashing another aside with a blow to the face. Neither man would die, but they would be crippled. In an attack like this none of the defenders had a chance against him even if they would normally and the other men would kill enough. Ranma had so much blood on his hands already he wasn't in any hurry to add more.

Fenris had no such compulsion, and was roaring through camp, killing with impunity. Suddenly he stopped, staring at a crate set nearby in the open, far away from any tent. Ranma felt his worry, and pushed through the melee to join him staring at the crate. Looking around he grabbed one of the panicking men nearby pulling him close and smacking him upside the head pointing at the crate "What's in here?"

The man gulped and tried to get away, but Ranma's grip on his arm was like steel. "The Witch's warriors, no one knows what she does, how she gets them but..."

"Shadow Warriors!" Ranma scowled, letting the man go, before smacking him unconscious with an almost gentle backhand. He stared up at the sun than around at the camp before staring hard at Fenris. "Find any more of these, open them. We can't let a single one of these crates remain."

*Though why didn't they use them already against the defenders of the Castle? Was the trap for Tytos and his men? Makes sense, but the day cleared up so much they are useless now.*

While Ranma and Fenris hunted through the encampment his men had gotten bogged down. The initial surprise and shock of the assault had worn off, and here and there pockets of resistance began to form. None of them were large enough to make any real headway, which was made worse when Tristan Ryger and the rest of the defenders of Butterwell suddenly sortied, the drawbridge clanking down and the man within riding out while the archers on the wall went to work.

It wasn't a planned maneuver. The defenders had been awake enough to see the attack coming in, and Tristan had decided to take advantage of it. Now he rode at the head of his family's men shouting. "The rivers, the rivers for the King!"

Meanwhile Ranma sliced into another crate, wrenching Ice out as shadowy claws tried to reach out of the now open crate. Each crate seemed to contain about five Shadow Warriors. However when the light of day hit them in the now open crate, they shriveled and screamed before dissolving into nothing.

OOOOOO

Melisandre grimaced angrily. "My trap has been sprung my Lord, but the Stark understood what was going to happen, he has destroyed all of my Shadow Warriors present in the camp."

Stannis however smirked. "So the Stark will now 'know' that he's spotted the trap and let down his guard, good." He nodded around him at a force of 3000 heavy cavalry. They were hidden spread out in a large ditch to the west of Butterwell, the scene of some long-ago river. Though given the fact that Stannis' horse was standing in four inch deep water, even though it was no longer raining and sunny for once, it might be a river once again soon.

"Pass the word, up and at them." He ordered, looking around at his commanders, Ser Richard Murrigen and Ser Alec Rogers, a knight of that House one of the lord's nephews who had impressed Stannis on the march. Both men nodded and moved off on their horses quickly.

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Outside Butterwell the camp was still in total disarray, unable to really muster up any kind of large-scale resistance, outnumbered now along with being surprised and attacked from two directions. While his men continued the rout, Ranma and Fenris concentrated on destroying the caches of Shadow Warriors. Both direwolf and man breathed a sigh of relief when they couldn't find any more crates. Ranma hoped this would stop the attack on Butterwell, since that would allow him to use it as a staging ground around the route of Stannis' army, but that would be for the future.

He turned quickly however when somewhere in the distance a horn was blown three quick beads then one long one. Before Ranma could even reach the end of the camp another horn blew from the walls, loud and low. It didn't take a genius to know that something was wrong.

As he thought that a shout was raised from the edge of camp, terror lending it volume to carry over the ongoing battle. "Heavy cavalry coming from the southwest! Seven preserve us, there's thousands of them!"

Ranma stared wildly around, leaping up to stand on top of a spear stuck into the ground nearby, staring over the battle still going on at the oncoming cavalry. *Dammit it was a trap, and I walked right into it!* With a snarl Ranma placed his hands around his mouth bellowing. "Retreat east! All forces retreat east!"

With that Ranma jumped forward, bouncing over the heads of men and astonished horses alike, while Fenris followed him rapidly until they were out of the camp. Behind him the Wolfsworn took up the cry, shouting and grabbing at their men all around them pulling them away from the battle while the camp's remaining inhabitants shouted happily at this deliverance.

Ranma left his friends and Tytos to it, knowing one thing that could hopefully give them enough time to get out of this trap. Once free of the encampment around the castle's front, Ranma nodded and Fenris who sat on his haunches and howled. "AWOROOOROOO!"

He howled long and loud, putting as much energy and timber into it as he could. It was the kind of sound that had for thousands of years told practically every other animal that here was the alpha predator, run or become lunch.

The Royal Army cavalry forces had become acclimated to the sound of the direwolves howling and growling over time, with Fenris or before they left one of the others howling every morning and sometimes during the march to train them for it. The oncoming cavalry horses had never heard such a sound before. Not even when they went through the Kingswood and heard the sounds of normal wolves. A direwolf's howl was like no other. Thousands of those horses panicked, twisting and turning away, pushing and shoving at one another in their haste to get away, to turn aside from where the sounds coming from.

Behind Ranma the Wolfsworn continued to try and pull the light cavalry out of the camp, but it was hard going with the defenders now realizing that they had a chance to exact some revenge on their attackers. Tristan somehow fought his way through to stand beside Dacey scowling angrily and nodding his head at Lord Butterwell, who had remained glued to his side. "Why don't we fall back into the Castle?"

Dacey shook her head. "We can't! If we do that, they'll keep just keep sending those Shadow Warriors against us, we'll never get out and they'll overwhelm us eventually." Ranma might be able to get out himself, but none of the others would be able to.

"You're asking me to abandon my Castle!" Lord Butterwell growled angrily, while Smalljon appeared from behind him, pulling himself up into a horse's saddle while Hathar guarded his back.

"Better fled than dead." Roger barked, coming through the melee around them the Valyrian blade his wife had delivered to him red with blood while she stalked behind him. Osha's spear tip was also bloody, though her helmet was missing, and one of her arms was being cradled against her side. "We need to go, Ranma and Fenris won't scare their horses forever!"

Dacey nodded. "Go or stay Lord Butterwell, it's your choice but we are leaving!"

With that she spurred her horse forward. Joining the other Wolfsworn they hacked and slashed their way through the melee following the rest of the light cavalry as they began to trickle out of the camp, racing away. The archers and skirmishers of House Blackwood had either already died, as many had been surprised by the heavy cavalry, or fled into the woods to where the extra horses had been tethered.

Even with Ranma and Fenris howling and disrupting their horses, the charge had continued, and now the two of them were surrounded by heavy cavalry trying to hack and slash them down. The first few attackers to reach them had been smashed from their horses, or the horses hacked out from underneath them by the direwolf and man, showing

that lances really didn't work on someone as mobile as the two of them.

Ranma leaped up, landing on one such lance for a moment, balancing there in such a way that the man holding the lance didn't even feel his extra weight for just a second. Then Ice whirled around, decapitating that man slicing through armor and neck. Ranma then leaped off, cutting, stabbing, kicking and punching everywhere. For preference he tried to remain in the air jumping from one person's shield to another person's lance to another knight's horse, his punch lashing out and catching that man in the chest flinging him back with such force that he smashed two of his fellows out of their saddle to be crushed under the hoofs of their fellows, disrupting the charge further. "**Winter is coming!**"

Fenris snarled, his fangs piercing through plate mail and dragging a knight screaming from the saddle while one of his legs gutted another horse. Another knight brought down a large axe, but it shattered off Fenris's side, his fur acting like armor for a moment. The man gaped then died as Fenris leaped upwards, his front paw smashing the man out of the saddle with a scream before he turned grabbing a lance between his teeth and pulling that man down horse and all, before leaping from that man's corpse onto another knight.

The two of them however couldn't stop the entire charge. While around them a huge melee began with men trying to hack and slash at them the rest of the charge continued on its way, shouting as they went. "For the True King! The Reach, the Reach for the King! The Stormlands, Stormlands for Baratheon!"

The Wolfsworn were caught out in the open, but they stayed together, hacking several mounted armsmen and knights down, while around them more than two dozen of the light cavalry were caught as well. Heavy cavalry was one of the worst enemies of light cavalry. With their heavier armor both on man and horse any battle between the two groups would end with the light cavalry being simply ridden under.

From his position jumping around among the charging knights Ranma saw this, and also saw in the distance well back of the charge one group of warriors sitting on their horses and watching. Even from here he could make out what looked like blood-red hair on one of them, incongruously reminding Ranma of his female form from his past life. *Yet I didn't have sparks of fire flashing from my fingers,* he thought with a frown.

Behind where Ranma was still fighting the rest of the heavy cavalry had smashed into the camp, catching what forces had been unable to pull away, which included many of House Butterwell's men, but not the Lord himself. He had refused to retreat with the rest towards the east, instead falling back into his castle with most of his men, joining the archers from House Ryger and Wayn who had remained on the wall during the battle. They continued to fire at the attackers, but it was not enough to save their fellows still stuck outside when the drawbridge went up at Lord Butterwell's grim command. The Castle was safe now, but for how long?

Seeing the sparks in the witch's hands growing, Ranma snarled, dropping Ice for a moment. He then gathered his own energies in his hands bringing them down along his sides. Leaping backwards from where he had been standing on a rearing horse's head, Ranma brought his hands the sides snarling "Direwolf's Claw!" The new name he had decided on for the Kijin Raishin Dan.

The vorpal blades of the technique sliced through everything all around him, man, horse, armor mattered not at all. **Everything** in a set radius was sliced through. Ranma however gasped, barely landing on his feet as he fell to the bloody ground behind him. Using that technique took a **lot** out of him.

He turned as the last of the attackers in the near vicinity went down while the men not hit by the technique pulled their horses away retreating in sheer terror. All told the technique might've killed around four hundred men in a bare second.

Ranma however had other problems, a fireball hurled his way from the Red Witch at the same time he had cleared the area around him. Too close to dodge, Ranma was forced to hit it with his own attack, "Fierce Wolf's Roar!" A cerulean blue sphere impacted the fireball prematurely detonating it, but as the backwash of the blast reached him Ranma nearly sagged to his knees.

Projecting ki beyond his body without a physical connection was insanely hard for Ranma in this world, and for some reason it was getting harder over time, not easier with practice as it should. But the Red Witch seemed to have no similar problem with her magic. Already two more fireballs were forming in her hands.

Fenris moved up beside Ranma, his coat matted with blood and one eye shut due to the blood from a tiny cut right above it which had gotten through his armor technique. Despite being exhausted now Ranma was still defiant. Leaning on Fenris he picked up Ice from where he had dropped it, before shouting out towards Stannis. "Next time try to do your own dirty work, **coward!** We'll see if your blood is as black as your soul, Flame Fucker!"

With that he turned, flinging himself up onto Fenris' back. The direwolf howled once more, a deep, somehow contemptuous sound before turning and racing off so quickly he seemed to blur for a moment. Behind him a fireball suddenly crashed down into the ground where he had been standing, and even with his speed, another fireball almost nailed Fenris a second later, the explosion missing Fenris' tail by a hairsbreadth.

From where he had watched the battle Stannis' eyes had widened noticeably at whatever the Stark youth had done, then he paled as he saw the boy do something else to divert the first fireball Melisandre hurled at him. "What was that?" He asked, turning to Melisandre sharply, his eyes narrowed angrily. That first fireball would have possibly immolated some of his own men if it had hit Ranma.

For a moment Melisandre did not answer, casting the fireball that nearly caught Ranma and Fenris. Then she turned to look at him from her own horse, shrugging her shoulders. "I know not Azor Ahai. Some fell heathen magic from the so-called old ones, or mayhap the even more inhuman and demonic 'Children' of ancient song. It does not seem to have the range of my own blessed fires of R'hllor however, and if he had tried to attack us, my Fire Guard would have held him at bay while I worked my magics upon him. Even such as Ranma Stark could not survive a fireball tinged with the power of R'hllor!"

Stannis grunted noncommittally, surveying the carnage of the battle. He had hoped to capture either the leaders of the devilishly competent skirmishers that had been battering his foragers and scouts, or to take whatever reaction force Ranma Stark sent and wipe it out. He hadn't actually expected the boy to come himself, or for so many of his own personal force to get away, though he had planned for it just in case.

*Killing the scouts he still had scattered beyond the fight took us too long, and the watchers on the wall saw us before we could encircle his force. After that, Stark reacted quickly and expertly, reading the situation and taking the only course of action that could save him and his men. Damned boy's as good as the tales made him as a leader at least, and as a warrior apparently. Yet without his personal skills, and that direwolf using his howl to scare the horses into panicking like that, we would have had them all. And now I have the measure of him now, which makes this a victory whatever else occurs.*

"How many more Shadow Warriors do you have all told?"

"A small crate worth with us Azor Ahai, with another hundred or so scattered throughout the first echelon, and smaller packets with the others. I could make more of course." she asked smiling thinly.

"No." he replied sharply. "Unless your powers have suddenly evolved into illusions and trickery of that nature, there's not a place nearby where we could hide the sacrifices necessary. We'll have to make do. However...." he went on staring at the castle in the distance, the archers on the wall still firing at his men while they finished off the men still outside the wall.

"House Butterwell has decided to resist us. Send a few of them forward tonight. Order them to open the gatehouse, if they can, and if they cannot, or if you cannot order them to do so, then they are to slaughter all within." Stannis smiled grimly. "Perhaps after House Butterwell has fallen you can sacrifice their souls to make more of your little friends."

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It took Ranma and the Wolfsworn about an hour or so to gather up the scattered remnants of the light cavalry and archers, and when they did Ranma went visibly shook his head. "A bare 600, we lost that much of the light cavalry?"

"Aye." Roger said shaking his head. "We lost another hundred or so screening the archers into the woods. I doubt all of them died but..." Roger didn't have to say that most of the soldiers who had been wounded or knocked out of the saddle hadn't been able to escape the sudden trap. "I have no idea if Stannis will take prisoners but even if he does given the rumors of the Witch, it might be best if they died in battle."

Tytos shook his head. "You were right Lord Stark, it was a trap, but it was one that could've taken the wolf."

Dacey shook her head. "We gave as good as we got Tytos, no, better! We probably killed at least three or four of them for every one of us that went down! Stannis didn't tell the men besieging Butterwell that he was nearby, or to expect us. That cost him nearly all of those men, and Ranma and Fenris killed who knows how many among the attackers."

"Maybe, but right now we got we have to assume that they'll be after as if they have any light cavalry of their own. Keep the men moving now, and through the night, I don't care about tiring the horses for now. We'll walk them tomorrow but for now keep moving."

As his men obeyed Ranma stared back over his shoulder. He somehow knew that Butterwell was going to be assaulted, and even knew what tools Stannis would use to do it. It was almost tempted to return and do what he could to defend the Castle, but the Red Witch held the range and endurance advantage over his own skills. Frankly Ranma was exhausted, and it was all he could do to keep on Fenris' back let alone run himself. *Even so should I use Umi-Sen-Ken to get back there and ambush her?*

*No, I've underestimated her once already. Her powers don't just include Shadow Warriors and visions. She might be able to somehow sense me magically. And even I can't fight that many men and her at the same time in my current condition..*

With a final scowl Ranma turned, running along with the rest of the light cavalry as they cantered throughout the rest of the day and deep into the night. Behind them that evening the castle of House Butterwell fell, with every man within put to the sword or sacrificed to make more Shadow Warriors.

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"We're coming up on the point where we'll have to put too shore my Lord Stark." said the boatman to Jon. He was a local smallfolk man who had volunteered to man the barges along with several dozen of his fellows to transport Jon and his portion of the army as far south as they could go by the Blackwater Rush.

Jon did not turn away from where he was staring further downriver in the direction of where King's Landing was supposed to be. Every time they stopped over the past few days they had heard tales from the smallfolk about the capital's destruction, but more than one man couldn't truly understand or believe that King's Landing, the largest and most populated city in Westeros, was gone.

*If we had time, I'd like to go and look at the ruins to see what was left of it, but we don't.* "Put us ashore on the southern bank, Bertrand. Then I'm afraid will be leaving you and yours behind."

The smallfolk crews would be taking one of the barges back, while Jon and the others would have to carry the others overland to the Mander, which was supposedly three or four days journey for an army their size from here. Though of course they would be slowed by the need to carry their barges with them.

Jon couldn't afford to assume that they would be able to find similar barges on the Mander, and using the Blackwater alone had shaved off weeks of marching, which he had put to use in training the man in what they insisted on referring to as 'Stark tactics' every time they stopped.

He turned to his sister Arya, Edric, and Lord Beric along with the other commanders. "Let's get this organized." he ordered with a grim smile. "I'll want the boats roped in, the horses across and hitched up to the halters as soon as possible."

The journey from where they debarked along the Blackwater Rush to the Mander took over a week and a half. During this time Jon and his men got news of Stannis marching north, along with the news that he had sent a portion of his army back into the Reach to help clear out the Mander.

When he first heard that news, Jon had to squash the temptation to turn his force north in its wake. They could do a **lot** of damage attacking that army from behind.

But at the same time that the smallfolk shared that bit of news, word was beginning to spread from the Blue Bryn that another army had invaded from the Stormlands. The septon who shared that information with them was scowling angrily. "There have been reports coming out of the Stormlands my Lord, the Viper of Dorne has made an appearance with an army of mercenaries at his beck and call."

"Fuck!" Jon groaned. If the Reach were facing both Dornish invasion as well as the depredations from the Ironborn along the bottom half of the Mander, even knowing that aid had already been sent Jon could not in good conscience turn away. *Not without having to answer to Ranma for it later*, he thought ruefully.

With a sigh he pulled out a map, one of the many that had been copied in Riverrun during their stay there. It did not show a lot of detail, especially out of the Riverlands but it showed the courses of the rivers and the Royal Roads at least. "Can you tell me where along here you think the forces sent by Lord Stannis would be, and where you think the invaders could be?"

The septon traced the line of the Mander starting from its mouth and ending right before Oldflowers. "There have been raids and atrocities everywhere along here, and out along the river heavily to both sides. Several towns and



villages have been wiped out or forced to evacuate by the Ironborn, but thankfully they only began to spread out from the river recently. The worst depredations are along the Mander itself, where a dozen villages have been burnt to the ground, and several House's keeps taken and burned."

"I know that Highgarden is dealing with a refugee problem. The septons there have called for aid from all the nearby septs, and the Lady Margaery has been said to have doubled or even tripled the size of the City Watch. She pays well, and demands they all be trained to a certain degree, further preparing the city for a siege, yet not causing panic among its citizens.

"Sound thinking." Jon murmured. "Go on."

"I have no idea where along the Blue Bryn the Viper is, my Lord, all I know is that rumor has it that the Viper's army is marching deep into the Reach rather than remaining on its outskirts, following the Blue Bryn. But there are a few Houses along that route. They might be able to get word to Tumbleton if you are able to convince that castle's seneschal that you should be able to contact them."

"I'll have to do speak to the man in any event. This is getting more complicated, and I think we need to tell the Lady Margaery that Ranma has made good the promise he and Daenerys sent, and what to expect from us." Jon frowned, wondering if he could convince whoever Lord Footly had left behind that he was acting in the best interests of the Reach as a whole, regardless of that houses stance on the ongoing dispute over kingship of Westeros.

To one side Lord Beric frowned scratching at his chin. "I want to send words to my house and my fiancée of course." He said, his voice low and filled with emotion. The two of them had been promised for years, and loved one another dearly. The bonds of duty were not light however, and he had been separated from her for a little over a year now. "But I cannot remember if Footly would have a raven trained to send to Blackhaven let alone Starfall."

"There is something else." The septon said hesitantly. "The forces of the Dornish Marches are gathering, save your own House my Lord, and that of House Tarly. But they are each taking to the field alone, and there seems to be no consensus among them on what direction to take. Two of them are marching for the Boneyway, another for the Prince's Pass, a third is staying put and marching around in the Marches, while the fourth is apparently marching straight north, their destination unknown."

Jon groaned irritably before looking at Lord Beric. "You and Edric are the only two of us that have led or been in the Reach. Would Tumbleton have any ravens that could head down there? Do any of those Houses have any ties to Dorne or Stannis we should be wary of?"

Both younger and older man shook their heads indicating ignorance, and Jon sighed wearily. The task Ranma and Daenerys had set him was becoming more and more complex. "Back to my original question then, where would the forces Lord Stannis sent be by this point?"

"Almost to Bitterbridge my Lord, I know for a fact that is the case." The septon smiled thinly. "I am one of six brothers from my family, four of whom were forced to take the cloth, mainly because our farm was going to go to our oldest brother. We all stay in touch and one of my brothers serves in a village along the Rose Road near Bitterbridge."

"If they are, then I doubly hope we can convince whoever is in charge in Tumbleton to aid us. If we can, we can hopefully get in touch with the army Lord Stannis sent down. Regardless of anything else, is in both of our interest to deal with this mercenary army. And the Ironborn of course." Jon's voice however did not indicate much hope in that. *This will not be easy...*

OOOOOO

"You know you don't have to come with us Desmera." Garlan said to the young woman before him, a good looking young woman who had just turned seventeen, with long brown hair tied up in a bun and the figure of a far younger girl. Desmera Redwyne, unlike his sister Margaery, was a late bloomer. The end result would still no doubt be stunning of course, and the hints were already there.

The two of them were standing next to the plank leading up to the war galley *Shield's Honor*, named in honor of the coming campaign against the Ironborn. It would be the last one to leave the port of Oldtown, and they were pushing it now to catch the tide. As evidenced by the glare the Captain, Joras, was giving him from the deck.

Still he had to try one more time to convince his cousin that she didn't have to come with them. The battlefield was no place for a woman, Garlan already had enough nightmares about what could've happened to his sister if his force hadn't arrived when it did, he didn't want anymore. *Besides, I'm bringing her brothers along, those idiots are enough*

*of a nightmare.*

That unfortunately was true. Horas, the idiot who had been attempting to woo Margaery on her trip back from King's Landing, had made a fool of himself more than once on the march. And Hobber was even worse. One incident in particular had almost made Garlan hang the two of them for rape. And if not for the gold both brothers carried and handed off to the girl and her family, enough to agree when asked that it was consent, he would have too. Garlan was a knight, and took his vows seriously.

Horas and Hobber did not. They were the worst examples of what his grandmother Olenna had called 'Summer knights', young un-blooded idiots with a sense of immortality and an arrogance unbecoming of a knight, no matter how nobly born. They were also frankly slow of mind, idiots pure and simple. Garlan was of the opinion that if either became Lord Redwyne, it would be a bad day for the House, made worse by current circumstances. Their cousin Desmond was worth fifty of them.

"I owe it to my father, and to all those men and women who died trying to defend the Arbor, who have died since the Ironborn have taken it. I need to go." Desmera replied, though her lips and jaw trembled. If they lost this battle, Desmera would be sending herself into the hell that she had so-luckily escaped from. That thought terrified her, but Desmera couldn't turn away from it, not after hearing so much about her cousin's stand at the battle of Oldflowers.

Actually, if Margaery learned that Desmera was going into danger like this, Margaery would've been the first person to tell her not to and would tan her hide if she could. Margaery had gone to Oldflowers and made her stand there because she felt it was her duty but she would never ask any other woman to do the same, especially not her cousin, a sweet child and one of the finest examples of a normal noblewoman that could be found.

In comparison to her older brothers though, she at least understood that she wasn't the smartest person, and was willing to ask for aid. She also took her duties seriously, and wasn't prideful.

Garlan stared at Desmera for a moment then shrugged. "So long as you explain it to my grandmother when word gets out that you've asked to come with us, I'll allow it."

The younger woman grimaced, but nodded resolutely and followed Garlan aboard the ship.

About forty minutes later they had left the port joining up with the rest of the fleet heading out through the Whispering Sound. It would take them a bare two days to clear the Sound even with autumnal weather against them. The fleet consisted of over 90 galleys, though only thirteen of them were war galleys with the rest being converted merchantmen. However House Hightower had poured forth its effort and its coin to man and arm those ships for war, above and beyond what they routinely carried as secondary ships of the Redwyne fleet.

Every captain among the fleet knew that this war would be a tough one, knew that the Iron Fleet might well be ready for them. After all, none of them were very experienced at full fleet maneuvers, but they were experienced sailors, and knew that the Ironborn were among the most dangerous opponent anyone could face at sea.

Garlan too knew that he was no fleet admiral, so he had come up with a plan that was simple yet unstoppable. They would make straight for the Arbor's main port, Starfish Harbor, daring the Ironborn to try and stop them, keeping all of his ships close together so that they couldn't be picked off or diverted.

*It was surprise, numbers and those Seven-damned fire ships that they sent in first that allowed the Ironborn to take the Arbor in the first place. But they paid for it badly, and their fire ships aren't a surprise any longer. If they try it again on the open sea against us we'll be ready.*

The devastation of the fire ships was something that the captains of the surviving ships had informed Garlan about once they were discussing planning. No one knew how the hell the Ironborn had found enough fanatics, and it had to be fanatics given their fates even when they were able to perform their mission successfully, to man the ships. With the tales of magic returning growing in strength, and his own knowledge of the Seven-sent miracles that had hastened his army on their way to Oldflowers Garlan was worried that it might be a sign up that the Ironborn had access to magic.

To combat this, he had gone to the Citadel, demanding to talk to the Archmaesters and maesters there. But most of them were dismissive of his concerns or contemptuous and refused to see him. Garlan had to go to Gunthor and get his aid to force them to see him, and even then most professed to know nothing about magic. However, one of them, Archmaester Marwyn, had agreed to come with him, saying he might be able to do something to combat any offensive magics used against the fleet.

But even without Marwyn's aid, Garlan would still have put to sea and would have still assaulted the Ironborn. They had spilled too much Reach blood, too much family blood for him to do anything less. *And they don't have Victarion anymore, and everything I've seen about Balon Greyjoy tells me he's overconfident.*

Turning with a smile he watched Lady Redwyne be shown down into the war galley's interior to her quarters before turning to stare forward along the ship's route. Next to him Gunthor and Garth Hightower joined him, leaning against the railing of the ship alongside Garlan, staring ahead. Garth, the oldest and best of the two in terms of combat ability, asked, "What do you think we'll find on the Arbor?"

No rumor of what had been going on in the Arbor had escaped since the remnants of the Redwyne fleet fled. The Arbor was a large enough island that there were several holdfasts in its interior. From what Garlan had been told by the Two Idiots, they were mainly based as the center points for the huge vineyards where the wine that gave house Redwyne its name and much of its income. Most of them weren't very modern, but they were all situated in decent defensive position which no doubt would have given the Ironborn trouble in taking them.

Garlan for one hoped that most of the smallfolk of the island had retreated into those keeps, which were run by knights in service to House Redwyne. Most of those were not truly martial men, rather managers for the vineyards given knighthoods, but some were simply older knights given cushy jobs in their declining years. Men like that could be expected to lead spirited, and well planned defenses.

"It could be very bad around the ports and the towns, though hopefully not as bad as it could be."

"You don't believe that any more than I do." Said Gunthor shaking his head. "I think whatever we imagine, the reality will be far worse."

Garlan nodded sadly, his eyes hardening noticeably, and his hand twitching on his sword while he urged the ship on, the three men falling silent. *We have justice to deliver, vengeance to take, and hopefully some countrymen and women to save.*

OOOOOO

Balon Greyjoy scowled angrily as he gulped down one of the most expensive bottles of wine that the Redwyne vineyards ever produced. It had been put down forty years earlier and kept by Lord Redwyne's for the birth of his first grandson. The wine that was supposed to have been used on that happy occasion slopped into Balon's beard and down his shirt, joining the other stains that had spread there previously.

Despite their initial success, the Ironborn had not had an easy time of it, at least in their own terms. Yes, they controlled the ports, and most of the island. They had taken more treasure and goods than any had in decades of clandestine raiding, more even than they had in Balon's first attempt to rebel. But Balon had wanted more than simply to raid the Arbor, he'd wanted to conquer it, and so far he had failed.

Despite his penchant for not caring about the lives and his own people, for throwing them at any fight and assuming they would win through with their skill and determination, even Balon Greyjoy knew some battles were hopeless. While there were several dozen small streams leading deeper into the Arbor from the sea that allowed his ships to move around, not one of them was near any of the holdfasts that dotted the island. And those small keeps now held a portion of the population of the islands scattered here and there. So long as they held out, his conquest was not complete.

Worse, the Ironborn had spent so much time pillaging the ports of the island that the smallfolk deeper in to the islands interior had been able to gather up supplies before retreating into the keeps. So they had enough supplies to last them through the months since, and more besides.

Balon knew it was only a matter of time, and had sent crews of two ships to each of the seven keeps spread around the island. One of the keeps had even fallen a few weeks back to a surprise night raid. Germund Botley had maneuvered two scorpions through the night to target the keep's main gate. When they fired, the bolts smashed it down, allowing his men access to its interior. Needless to say after they had that access, the battle was over. Numerous the defenders might have been for a keep of that size, but they weren't very well trained, and very poorly led.

But that was the only bit of success they had in the interior of the island. And over the past few months a resistance force had sprung up. Not in any of the ports where his men ruled with grips of steel, but the supplies heading further inland to his forces besieging the various keeps were under almost constant attack. They'd hung thousands of men, killed dozens of known saboteurs and rebels, but still the smallfolk of this island fought back.

*Terror should have given me this victory from the outset, he thought morosely, not for the first time. But then they began to fight back, then those first two keeps we assaulted threw back our attacks. That gave these bastards courage and they continue to defy me even now. And so long as they do, my plans are stalled.*

Balon wanted to become the Islands King, and by that he meant king of **every** island, but he couldn't even conquer this one island, not completely. The Shield Islands he knew had fallen utterly. Victarion had sent him news of that, along with several ships from House Botley and others from Pyke. Though for some reason Balon hadn't heard from his brother in more than a month now. Balon put that down to his brother personally leading the assault up the Mander, and approved of it.

*The captains are beginning to mutter about returning to the Iron Islands. They've taken enough plunder to fill their hulls with booty, and every man among them has at least two new salt wives, they want to return home with their Iron bought gains as they should before coming out to raid again. Indeed, Balon would've already lost at least a dozen captains to that desire if not for his orders that every woman should be kept ashore in the old Redwyne keep, which he and those loyal to him controlled. The amount of booty was astonishing, and would make all of their houses far better off once they returned it to the iron islands, but for now Balon needed that control to continue his conquest of the Arbor.*

He slammed his flagon down angrily, sloshing the expensive wine again this time onto the table of Lord Redwyne's main Hall, staring across at his brother her Aeron, who suddenly lifted his head staring at Balon hard from the same odd bowl that he had used to watch the progress of the fire ships. "There is a fleet coming out of the Whispering Sounds." Aeron reported crisply. "90 strong, most of their ships appear to be converted trade ships that the Redwyne's seem to use so much. They are coming to reclaim the island."

"90 ships?" Balon said, ignoring his wine now as he stared at his brother. "90? That must be the Reach's entire remaining fleet! Good." He smiled, seeing suddenly another larger and even richer prize could be possible then completing the conquest of the Arbor.

*I wanted to be King of all the Islands, but conqueror of Oldtown sounds just as sweet on the tongue. If we smash that fleet, the way to Oldtown will be open. And I would bet that old man Leyton has sent most of his armstrongs to man those ships as well. Kill the fleet and move on quickly enough, and we could surprise the few remaining defenders of one of the largest cities in Westeros.*

With that in mind Balon leaned forward intently. "Tell me, have you figured out any more magic you can use directly? Anything that could tip the balance in our favor when battle is joined?"

"I have indeed." Aeron said, his smile widening into her shark's grin. The Drowned God blesses those who feed him well. Once battle is joined and bodies are falling into the sea, falling into his realm, I will be able to do something to aid us..."

OOOOOO

Elsewhere in the same ocean, about another week's journey away from the Arbor having just passed the last of the Summer Sea and heading into the Sunset sea, a lone longships sailed. It had made its way perilously through the autumn gales and storms from Essos alone. On it there was only one man able to speak, all the other men aboard having had their tongues removed and he always did so to himself.

"I wonder if either of my brothers still live. I sent word to start killing off the remnants of my family already, but I have no idea which of them might fall first. Asha?Victarion?Balon himself? The possibilities are endless and amusing to contemplate, but Balon would've been my main choice. Still, if he was with the force taking the Arbor I don't doubt he's still alive. And if Victarion isn't with him, I could perhaps persuade him to let me come back."

"Or at least close enough to do the deed myself. I wonder if the gods really do strike down kinslayers? There are so few laws against man and nature that I haven't broken, so what's one more godly punishment added to the list?" Euron Greyjoy laughed at his own joke, tapping a large silver enameled horn resting on the table in front of him in his room, while the *Silence* continued on its course toward the Redwyne Straits.

OOOOOO

It took Balon Greyjoy several days to gather his scattered crews and get them back on their ships once more. Even then he had to leave 300 men behind to retain control of the port of Starfish Arbor along with the keep therein. Balon knew that having pulled so many of his crews back out of the country side of the island and away from the keeps there he would lose what progress they had gained in grinding the smallfolk's resistance, but it had to be done. He

would need that manpower whatever his brother might be able to accomplish with magic.

Overall, this gave him 62 ships, 34 from the Iron Fleet. Once all the longships were gathered, they made their way northwest through the Redwyne Straits towards the Whispering Sound, hoping to catch the Reach fleet as it exited the Sound, but they were too slow to gather for that.

Instead the two fleets caught sight of one another near the edge of the Redwyne Straits. In fact they were both within sight of Three Towers, House Costayne's castle which sat on the Dornish isthmus of the Whispering Sound.

Balon smiled grimly. Looking over to where Aeron and the four remaining Drowned Men stood all around the bowl they used to somehow concentrate their powers or worship or whatever it was they did to summon up the powers given to them by the found God. "Prepare your magics brother. Battle calls."

On *Shield's Honor*, Garlan nodded grimly looking over at Marwyn smirking slightly. "Normally I would ask a Archmaester to hide himself down below with battle this close. But you have the look of a man who has seen his share of fighting before this."

"Barroom brawls, some adventures of a misspent youth." the Archmaester replied dryly, holding what certainly appeared to be a Valyrian short sword in one hand. He also wore chain mail of excellent quality, crafted apparently by the man himself.

His eyes were serious as he stared at Garlan. "If the Drowned God has truly begun to give its worshipers powers again, I will be able to combat them somewhat, I'll be able to inform you of what they are doing and where, but that might be all. I have read books and studied magic from books and stories, but this will be my first time attempting to put my learning into practice."

"Then I suggest you get to the back of the ship, good Archmaester." Garlan said with a wide vicious grin. "I'll not keep this ship back when battle calls."

The man laughed, but stayed where he was. Turning away from the older man, Garlan took a moment to nod at the four men who he had stationed by the entrances to the ship its interior. Those men, all of House Redwyne, would be the ones to guard the ships interior from anyone trying to get past them. They were a last line of defense for his cousin and the very few other noncombatants aboard the ship.

With that done he turned to Joras and a small cabin boy who was almost dancing with eagerness. "The fleet will advance. For the Reach, for the Seven, and for justice!"

Joras nodded grimly, that was short sweet and to the point, exactly how he liked his pre-battle speeches. He nodded to the boy who turned racing up the mast like a monkey. From the crow's nest he put out the signal flags to signal the fleets to prepare for battle.

A few hours passed as the fleets closed with one another, moving from bare blips on the horizon to actual ships, with each fleet slowly spreading out. The Iron Fleet ships took the fore, while their smaller brethren gathered on either side of their line. The Iron Fleet ships kept to a decent formation, the other Ironborn ships did not. All told Garlan estimated that they numbered somewhere around half his total strength or a little more.

In contrast the ships of House Redwyne formed into two somewhat neat lines despite most of them being converted merchant ships rather than war galleys. The war galleys including Garlan's flagship took position in the center of both lines. Every ship was assigned a different unit, four ships which would work in concert if the battle became a general one. That, the lines along with the order to keep the range open as much as possible was all Garlan felt up to ordering as a fleet commander, something Desmond, on his own ship the *Herald*, agreed with. Now with battle on the way, Garlan was simply another knight waiting, waiting for the boarding actions to begin as they inevitably would.

The range closed quickly, and around Garlan the war galleys scorpions went to work, throwing out their bolts towards the opposing ships while all around them the other ships of the first line did the same. The second line of ships began to spread to either side, while the front line began to back oars, furling their sails, turning slightly to bring more of their scorpions to bear on the enemy than just the two that could be turned to face forward.

A moment later the Iron Fleet began to return fire, the number of launchers minimal in comparison to the Reach galleys, each Iron Fleet ship only mounting two or at best three while even the smallest war galleys mounted four and Garlan's flagship mounted six. The ships of the first line now had turned enough to bring their full weapons along one side to bear, and they began to fire even more rapidly as the men manning the scorpions on the other side of the ships hurried to aid their fellows.

Garlan estimated that at least six Iron Fleet ships had sunk already, but wind began to favor the Ironborn, hastening their closing speed. From where he was helping the effort on the oars, Garlan saw Marwyn scowl angrily. He held up his staff, which seemed to be lined with a band of stone or some kind along with a bronze tip, muttering an incantation.

The staff came down pointing directly at one Ironborn ship, not astonishingly the largest in the Greyjoy fleet. "There is someone on that ship trying to mess with the weather! He's not succeeding overmuch, and..." He broke off smiling as he felt something with his own magical senses. "Ah, that would be why no one tries to control the weather."

The wind that had been aiding the Ironborn suddenly slackened. This caused all of their ships to have to go to oar power. This slowed their advance enough for another few ships to fall under the weight of fire from Garlan's forces. But the Redwyne Navy now started to take casualties.

Two ships along one side of the front column fell out of formation, almost crashing into one another so close were they before they were able to get control. A war galley to places down the line from *Shield's Honor* floundered, a lucky scorpion bolt having caught it amidships right at the water line. It was sinking quickly, and the men aboard it moved to the two rowboats kept on the center of the ship to unload the troops.

"Whoever is over there should've stuck to spells affecting the waves. No magic user can control the weather, it's too powerful a force, too interconnected!" Marwyn seemed to almost go off into a tangent there for a moment before shaking his head. "That ship holds those wielding magic however, we'll need to smash it quickly. I feel magic in the air and waves, not affecting it but sending something, some kind of command deep into the ocean as if searching for... something."

"Can you disrupt whatever it is?" Garlan asked intently.

The man shook his head, small brief flashes of yellow light showing up around the tip of his staff, which he was waving it in the air. "No! There are too many minds at work. It's a joint working, I've never seen one of those before except some of the old Pre-Fall Valyrian tomes. I'm trying to cut them off from their power source, the men that have already drowned, but somehow they're taking the energy of those drownings and..."

From the east there was the sound of something exploding up out of the waves. Almost immediately it was followed by a harsh cry of terror coming from many throats, and the two men turned to stare, aghast.

What Aeron and the other Drowned Men had summoned was a horror of the depths. Sharks came up, ready to feast on all and sundry, ignoring their normal desire to stay away from ships at sea. Here and there other nameless things arose, creatures of scales and bone, feeding on the bodies of those sinking as the Drowned God fed on their souls.

But those were mere sideshows, brought up by the force of the summoning, not the actual target. The target of Aeron Damphair's summoning spell was a single creature: a massive kraken the symbol of his house pulled from the deepest depths. What Garlan could see of its body was longer than a war galley, and its tentacles, each of them featuring thousands of sharp seeming suckers, was far longer. There were at least 15 of those tentacles, possibly more underneath the waves, with two even longer than the others.

"Seven preserve us..." As Garlan watched in horror the monster assaulted four of the war galleys along that side, smashing their masts off the ships with furious strength, while other tentacles wrapped around the ships hulls causing the wood to creak and groan from the strain of its grip. The men on those ships screamed, some of them running and diving into the ocean in an effort to get away while others grabbed up axes and swords hacking at the rubbery flesh of the tentacles. But that rubbery substance resisted their blows, while their fellows screamed and died under the teeth of the sharks.

Garlan growled, then turned to Joras. "Forward!" He shouted. "Aim us towards the ship that Archmaester Marwyn pointed out! We must sink that ship!" He turned back to Marwyn. "Can you do anything to disrupt this now?"

The man gritted his teeth shaking his head angrily, his staff raising into the air once more. With that gesture more magical lights appeared from the end of his staff and he stared hard at the kraken. "Fuckkkk... I'm trying to break their control, but I don't know what will happen if I do! It could simply turn on them as well, that's better than nothing... but... I'm not... getting **through!** If we can kill one maybe two of the minds that are controlling this, I might be able to overwhelm the others, but that's all I can promise!"

"Then it comes down to steel!" Garlan nodded grimly pulling out his sword and readying himself as the Ironborn ships continued to close. *Shield's Honor* pushing forward, with the majority of the first line moving with it. The other Iron Fleet ships fired on *Shield's Honor*, but did not hit him, sinking one of his fellows but losing four in turn, opening up the way towards his target.

On his own flagship the *Great Kraken* Balon saw the oncoming war galley coming towards him, and pulled on his helm, readying himself grimly. "Protect Aeron and the other Drowned Men!" He ordered his sailors, who nodded and raised their own blades. "Protect them, and they will give us this victory!"

Even the Ironborn didn't want to get too close to the kraken, skirting around it to do battle with the Redwyne galleys which did the same save for the units under assault. The remaining ships that could still move under their own power went to their fellow's aid, firing scorpion bolts at the creature. These seemed to have an effect, sticking deep into the creature's tentacles, and one lucky shot actually caught the body of the beast.

It wasn't deep enough to cause much damage, but it let go with some of its tentacles from the four ships that it had been attacking, trying to lash out at the closest of those attacking it. One was able to remain out of range, but the other couldn't back oars fast enough, and was caught by the two largest tentacles.

Staring back Garlan nodded grimly at that, satisfied that the kraken at least was concentrating too much on those ships to do damage to the rest of his fleet. *IF it had simply begun hit and run attacks and kept below the waves we might have been lost. Morale would have broken, and the reserve ships at least would have cut and run.*

The rest of his fleet was doing well, trying in the main to keep the range open, save the war galleys around *Shield's Honor* which had followed his lead in closing. They were wreaking a horrible toll on the Ironborn ships, in particular the smaller longships which couldn't take more than one or two scorpion bolts before sinking.

That was the last moment Garlan had to take in the full battle before *Shield's Honor* slammed almost proud to prowl with the Iron Fleet flagship. "Across and at them! For the Reach! Growing Strong!"

Garlan was among the first men to hurl themselves over the ships' railings on to the longship, followed by Gunthor, Garth, and several others, including Horas and Hobber. They slammed into the Ironborn, but they had been ready for the Reach charge. The two sides hacked and slashed at one another, the battle spreading across the deck of the Ironborn ship quickly, as well as *Shield's Honor*, with another Ironborn ship coming along the other side hurling its own man across.

War galleys traditionally carried around 300 men, 200 or so who were dedicated armsmen to be used on the scorpions or during boarding actions. The other hundred however were still decent fighters at least at sea, not as good as the armsmen, and certainly not as well armored, but decent enough. *Shield's Honor* carried another 200 men, roughly equaling the numbers the two crews of the Iron Fleet longships.

And while these men were mostly 'summer knights', young men who had reached their majority since the first Greyjoy Rebellion, this did not mean they were soft any longer. Not after the marching, not after the battle they had seen at Oldflowers. Not after the constant training that Garlan had put them through while the fleet was made ready in Oldtown. The Ironborn were combat veterans by this point one and all, so the training between the two was relatively comparative.

It became a bloody and brutal affair quickly, men dying on both sides, with no one really understanding the flow of the greater battle or having any time to spare for it. None save Aeron and his fellow Drowned Men at least, who were protected for the moment by the rest of the crew. Yet they were concentrating on the bowl, keeping the kraken from retreating now that it had taken injuries.

Garlan hacked one man down, quickly turning, bringing his blade up and around to block the fall of a mace, kicking out hard to catch that man in the leg sending him falling to one side. Even as that happened, he turned engaging two other men with sword and shield, knocking them backwards. This knocked the shield of one out of position long enough for Garlan to get a thrust in catching him in the upper chest and punching through his chain mail to find his heart.

The other man roared in anger, but was felled from behind by Garth, who nodded his head at Garlan then went back to back with Gunthor, hacking and slashing it more Ironborn as they it assailed them. Garth was the better swordsman, and protected his younger brother well, but Gunthor too was acquitting himself decently.

Garlan nodded back at both men, noting that two other brothers, Horas and Hobber were nearby, both of them sporting injuries and looking rather panicky. Even as he watched they both shouted something to one another, the words of which he could not hear over the sound of battle, and broke back towards the *Shield's Honor*.

"FUCKING COWARDS!" Garlan bellowed, then had no time left to look elsewhere. Roaring he charged forward, bulling into the man with a mace, throwing him backwards with a shoulder rush. At the same moment Garlan pulled out a dagger with his shield arm. Stabbing his opponent underneath his chain mail right below the belt he was then

forced to turn swiftly, catching another Ironborn's sword on his own throwing that man back with a grimace of effort, his arms and shoulders burning.

A second later Garlan winced, shield blocking another man's blow, but that man went down to a spear to the gut from one of the seamen who went down in turn to a slash that opened up his side. That left the way clear for his killer to move towards Garlan. His helmet was more ornamented than most, his movements somewhat slower, but certain. Eyes that seemed older than most of the combatants stared out from behind his helm as he glared at Garlan. "**We Do Not Sow!** I will send you to the drowned God, Tyrell!"

"Growing Strong!" Garlan roared and charged Balon Greyjoy going sword to sword with him for a moment before his greater strength threw the older man backwards.

He recovered quickly however, ducking to one side and throwing his blade up in an intricate series of slashes aimed to attack Garlan's shield and lag on that side of his body. Only Garlan jumping away for a moment saved his leg from the attack, but he took the other attacks on his shield, coming back and bulling forward bringing his own sword around into a series of attacks that drove Balon backwards.

As their blades locked once more Balon scowled harshly. "When you and your fleet dies, Oldtown will be ours for the taking! Everyone will know the true strength of the Ironborn, never again will we bow to greenlander kings!"

In response Garlan laughed high and cold. "My sister killed your brother Victarion, you know. He assaulted Oldflowers, and was even able to get inside to keep before he was killed by Margaery. A simple knife to the eye. So much for the vaunted Greyjoy strength! We burned his body and all those of his raiders too!"

Balon growled, trying to throw the other man back off his feet. "That's a dirty lie! And you'll pay for it!"

But Garlan was the stronger of the two and he pushed back easily keeping his feet while still speaking. "You think you're strong, you think you're fearsome, but a maiden with no training in war was able to kill your brother! And all of your successes have come against opponents that didn't see you coming! So how strong or fearsome are you really?"

Balon was so enraged he couldn't help but rush forwards, hacking and slashing like a mad beast, but Garlan was cool and calculated as he met him blow for blow with his sword or blocked with his shield. Said shield was soon battered into uselessness, so he quickly cast it aside. Now wielding his sword one-handed, he eventually was able to redirect Balon's sword to one side enough to get within his guard, smashing a gauntleted fist into the man's gorget.

Balon backed off quickly, his hands going to his throat and ripping the battered piece of metal away before could begin to choking, but Garlan was on him before he could set himself anew. Desperately the Ironborn King raised his sword, to block the vast overhand blow, but the attack shattered his sword. He thrust forward with the remnants of the blade, but it skittered across Garlan's chest plate not penetrating and Garlan's blow continued downwards, catching Balon between the neck and shoulder driving him down to the deck.

"So much for your strength," Garlan growled. Pulling his sword out he raised it hacking at the man's now open neck slicing it off not cleanly, but certainly enough to end Balon Greyjoy's life. "Go to your drowned God!"

While the death of their leader like that would have demoralized any other force entirely, the Ironborn hardly noticed. A few men of House Greyjoy did and began to fall back, but that was all.

Yet even so, the battle was slowly going against the Ironborn. No other longship had come to the initial two longship's aid, and the quality of the Reach armymen had begun to tell against the Ironborn. The Iron Islanders had grown somewhat complacent and lazy since the victory against house Redwyne, very few of them believing in training constantly when there was rape and plunder to enjoy.

While Garlan began to shout orders to try to instill some more organization into the chaos Garth and Gunthor had corralled some of their men and devised a small shield wall. Behind this a few of the sailors moved with heavy spears. This wedge of men moved toward where Marwyn had discerned that the control spell for the kraken and the other water beasts were coming from, the maester following after them, his staff red with blood along one end.

They burst through the last of the defensive cordon, and Garth was about to raised his sword to stab one of the men kneeling around the odd plate with water in it when master healer stopped him. "Wait! Guard my back for moment."

Garth looked at the man askance but did so turning to engage other Ironborn as they rushed to the Drowned Men's aid. But the men of Hightower held, pushing the Ironborn back, while Garlan diverted more of the armymen to their



aid through the melee. However nearby another longship seemed to be coming closer to them now, which Gunthor saw standing slightly above the tumult of battle at the raised aft portion of the longship. "Whatever you're doing Archmaester Marwyn do it quickly!"

Marwyn smirked staring into Aeron's eyes, who he could tell was the center of this group working. Sweat was beading on the man's face, but he couldn't pull his attention entirely away from the spell, couldn't even move really. It was taking all of the concentration he and the other Drowned Men had to keep feeding power into their spell.

All he could do was stare angrily up at Marwyn, as he stood muttering words and raising his staff. He brought it down, not on the Damphair's head, but to smash the bowl that was the fulcrum of their spell.

The backlash of having the spell broken like that threw all of the Drowned Men backwards from the bowl, and they began to scream loudly. "GYAAAHHHHHhhhhh!" Without the ability to concentrate and no longer being fed by the power of those drowning all around them, the control spell began to feed off them, and they couldn't stop it.

"Amateurs." Marwyn muttered, spitting to one side. "Never do a working if you don't know the consequences of its failure."

Then he turned, moving with a speed that most would not have thought him able to standing on the bulwarks of the ship and staring over to where the kraken had been fighting against four Reach war galleys, the others having sunk. The kraken was almost absentmindedly tossing men into its gaping maw with a few of its tentacles, while it battled the remaining two ships in its range with the others.

Now however it flailed about wildly for a moment, then pulled back its tentacles from its victims, disappearing underneath the water. However the maester mage could tell it wasn't quite finished yet. There was one more repercussion from breaking the spell as he had. Cupping his mouth Marwyn bellowed as loudly as he could. "Back to the ship! Back to the ship and push us off, the kraken is coming!"

Garlan shook his head in wonderment then began to bellow the same thing. One did not question an expert on his craft in the middle of battle after all. All around him the men heard the call, falling back to their ship while the Ironborn tried to stop them. It was a tough, desperate battle for a few moments, and then the kraken arrived, its tentacles rising up through the water. At the site of that the Ironborn lost heart, all of them turning and running towards the side of their ships tossing themselves overboard allowing the men of the Reach to finally move back to their own ship.

More than half the crew began to push off desperately, trying to separate the two ships, while Garlan and others took up greatswords and hacked at any of the tentacles that came close to their own vessel. But the kraken didn't seem interested in them any longer. No, it concentrated its assault on the *Great Kraken* and stuffing its maw with as many of the delectable treats in the water already as it could.

Eventually there was a roar of triumph as the men on the oars were able to push the ships apart, pushing the ships further and further apart while other men readied the sails. The wind caught, and the war galley began to pull away from the beleaguered longship.

Behind them the kraken ignored *Shield's Honor*, dragging the longship down into the waters as its tentacles crushed it sides. Aeron was the only one among the Drowned Men to be powerful enough to still be aware of his surroundings even after the magical backlash, and he stared as the ship capsized slightly, allowing him to stare directly down into the jaws of the kraken. "Drowned God forgi..."

That was as far as he got before a tentacle swept him and his fellows down the deck towards the waiting mouth. Such was the true, caring, concern that the Drowned God and its beasts gave the men who worshiped him.

With its controller's dead, the kraken submerged once more, disappearing down into the depths of the ocean having eaten its fill. The rest of the summoning spell dissipated as well, the sharks and other beasts of the depths soon joining it.

The battle continued even after that for several more hours, the Ironborn simply having no ability whatsoever to realize when they were beaten. Without Balon, the kraken, Aeron or his magics, the organization and the range advantage of the Reach war galleys and converts won the battle. If not for the sacrifice of the ships that fought the kraken so bravely it could've been different, especially if Aeron had been able to summon up another one of those beasts, but as it was the battle was won.

Every single longship that took part in the battle was sunk. Not a single longship had retreated, but they had lost too many of their ships in closing or grappling range for the wider battle to work out in their favor, especially after the

magic holding the kraken had been broken. There had been a sighting of one longship far off in the distance before it was out of sight over the horizon. But one longship wouldn't be able to stop the 64 remaining ships of the Reach.

It was just 64 ships, and even those ships had less men been they started with. There wasn't a single ship that had been damaged enough to send back to Oldtown that had not subsequently sunk. And if a ship began to sink, that was usually it for the men aboard. Putting to sea in their rowboats had been a death sentence for both sides of the conflict. Aeron's summoned creatures didn't care who they ate, the feeding frenzy had cost thousands of lives on both sides that might have otherwise been saved.

Even so, Garlan estimated that of his original force of thirteen thousand he had somewhere over eleven thousand remaining, the sailors and men of Redwyne and Hightower having done much of the dying in this battle. Despite those losses however, the way to the Arbor was clear, and the surviving ships quickly turned their course in that direction.

That night Garlan sat in a chair in his quarters on his ship, sighing tiredly as he pulled off his armor looking over at Marwyn for a moment. "We have you to thank for this victory Archmaester Marwyn. Without you spotting the ship those iron-loving bastards were directing their magic from, we might have been forced to fight through the entire fleet."

Marwyn took a long swig from a wine bottle before replying. "BURRRRP, ahhh... Even worse, that spell was incomplete. All those beasts and even the kraken were what could be gathered in quickly. Shoddy work! If they had waited until they had more power, they could've pulled three or four of those beasties up to fight for them. Amateurs."

"How do you know all this, do records of such survive in the citadel?"

"I would say that they only survive in the Citadel, and even then only because I have hidden them in such a way that my fellow Maesters will not find them. Such magics among the Drowned Men were known during the Age of Heroes but after that age magic began to fade, a decline that sped up quickly after the fall of the Valyrian Freehold. And every invasion of the Iron Islands made an attempt to stamp the Drowned God worship out, destroying more knowledge. I honestly have no idea how they recovered it frankly."

He smiled. "I myself actually have no idea how they were doing what they were doing, only the effects, and how to stop it. I can call myself an expert in magic, but frankly no one in this day and age is. Too much knowledge has been lost over the ages or willfully destroyed. We may have to re-create everything from scratch. Well almost..." he smirked, touching his chain and the staff at his side. "Some things still are known, at least to me."

"So you don't think we'll run into more magic when we take the Shield Islands?"

"I doubt it. Frankly I bet Greyjoy gathered every Drowned Man who knew even an inkling of such and took them with him on this assault. Now, are you going to fulfill your end of the bargain?"

Garlan looked at the older man thoughtfully. Marwyn had acquiesced to joining them on this campaign only under sufferance. Yes his expertise had been needed, but more importantly to him, Marwyn had wanted to go north and wanted either a land escort or ships to see him there. "Can you tell me **why** you want to go north?"

"I would've thought that was obvious." Marwyn said scoffing. "Magic has returned to the world, the Glass candles are lit. Do you know what that means?"

He sighed when Garlan shook his head. "It means that winter is coming, not just winter as a season, but winter as in the forces of winter, the White Walkers. They march, and all of Westeros should be preparing to meet them."

He shook his head sadly. "I know that's a pipe dream, but at least the North seems to know something of what's going on. But I want to go personally to aid what I can to aid such an effort."

"White walkers? What are they?" Garlan asked.

"Your education has been sorely neglected if you don't know any of the old tales about those fell monsters! But allow me to enlighten you student..." The old man said leaning forward his eyes flashing angrily at this sign that the old knowledge had begun to be forgotten even at the highest levels of nobility. *My fellows have done their to shop far too well it seems. Damn them and their anti-magic bias, and damn the lords for their eagerness to forget the old tales!*

The tale of the Age of Heroes and the place in it of the White Walkers took some time. When it was over Garlan looked the man thoughtfully. "Are you certain that they are appearing?"

"The Glass candles being lit show that their powers are growing. How they will attack is the question I cannot answer. The Wall was built to keep them out, but is its magic still in operation? Or has the neglect of Westeros towards the Night Watch had some effect there? Was the northern reinforcement enough time to offset that? Questions I don't know the answer to. Nevertheless, I mean to go north, and do what I can."

Garlan nodded, frowning thoughtfully. He wasn't disbelieving the man, rather the contrary. He had seen too many examples of magic himself to doubt that such creatures existed. No, what was causing him to frown was the fact that there were literally thousands of graves scattered throughout Westeros from this war. He and his army had burned the Ironborn under Victarion simply because it was faster than digging them all graves, but it looked as if that might have been an excellent idea anyway. "How far from the Wall can their magic reach?"

"Historically speaking it can't reach over the Wall at all. But **something** spooked the Northerners enough for them to reinforce the wall with a large force of their available men. Perhaps the White Walkers have figured out a way through the magics of the Wall, or perhaps even around somehow. Human dupes mayhap." The older man shrugged.

After a moment Garlan nodded decisively. "Stay with my fleet until we reclaim the Shield Islands good Archmaester. Then, we will send words to Highgarden. I received a message from my sister saying that a second force had been sent under Bryce of House Caron to clear the Mander of Ironborn Raiders. If that is indeed the case, we will sail north immediately. The entire army. If you're right about these White Walkers, then it is the duty of every noble and knight to meet them in the North, less we meet them in our own lands."

Marwyn stared at Garlan searchingly for a moment, then nodded. Garlan nodded to then stood up, cracking his knuckles. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go break the noses of two cowards who think they are knights."

OOOOOO

Myrcella and Daenerys woke up very differently. Myrcella was a morning person, who woke up the moment the sun broke the horizon, and was in full possession of her mental faculties within a few seconds of doing so. But even on the march Daenerys was not a morning person. She had to get a good run-up before getting out of bed most days. Unless of course one of her dragons breathed on her, their morning breath would wake the dead.

The younger woman knew that, and since joining their relationship had taken to waking up met Daenerys in fun ways for the both of them. She did so again this morning, kissing along the other woman's jawline before nuzzling into her neck, then moving up to nibble on her ear whispering. "Wake-up Daenerys it's time to get up..." In a voice as if she was talking to a little girl.

"Graaah...that voice and those actions just do not go together." Daenerys muttered pushing her away with a groan.

"I know!" Myrcella said with a laugh, pulling off the bed sheets of their small camp bed before pulling her feet around and getting up, wincing only a little now as she did so. Her side still ached from the wound she had taken in dairy, but it was a dull thing, going away slowly with time. "I'll get us some tea shall I?" Alayaya was even worse than Daenerys, utterly useless in the mornings though she had often remarked that was because of her former profession rather than personal preference. So Myrcella had to get the two royals their morning tea and food.

While Daenerys merely groaned in response Myrcella made her way towards the tent flap opening it only to find her way blocked by a large mound of fur. She smiled happily, rubbing her hands into the fur feeling it rumble underneath her touch. "Hello Fenris, I'm glad you and Ranma are back."

She heard the direwolf huff happily and the thump of his tail but she couldn't see it with the bulk of his body in the way of the tent flap. Fenris had finally stopped growing, but he was now larger than a plow horse at his shoulders, and even laying down as he was now he was an extremely large creature. It was only when he moved that anyone realized he still retained all of the body control and speed of his breed.

"We're happy to be back." Said a voice, and she looked up towards the top of the tent flap to see Ranma poking his head over Fenris' side. He leaned in quickly, his hand appearing beside his head and moving forward to gently cup the back of Myrcella's head bringing it up to kiss.

This was not a peck on the lips, but a full-blown kiss. Myrcella moaned happily, opening her mouth letting their tongues meet and writhe around one another for a moment. She pressed her body up against Fenris, eagerly arching her neck so as to give Ranma better access to her lips.

This went on for several moments, until Ranma reluctantly pulled away as he heard someone moving around behind him. "I love you Merry." He said in a soft voice.

Myrcella backed away, sighing happily while Ranma pulled himself over Fenris' back and into the tent while Fenris huffed happily, amused by the human's antics. "I love you, Ranma." she said moving over to the bed where Daenerys had opened one eye, smiling happily at the scene, then even more happily when Ranma moved towards the bed and did the same with her, including the murmured 'I love you'.

Moving over to her two lovers Myrcella gave them both kisses before leaving them there, knowing that she couldn't remain in the tent for long while the two of them had their reunion from the few days Ranma had been gone from the army without causing talk. With a sigh she left the tent, Fenris now moving out of the way and escorting her through the camp to the cook fires.

She smiled happily and waved at the greetings she got from many of the soldiers and lords around her, before taking her place in the line right behind Tristan. "Lord Ryger? Oh...." Her smile turned to a frown as she realized what the other man's presence might mean. "Something went wrong I take it?"

Tristan smiled grimly down at the beautiful young woman who seemed so strangely at home among these soldiers and men of war and with the giant direwolf beside her. He had actually at one point thought about courting her, but that was before his uncle died leaving him Lord of their family, and before she had taken such a horrendous wound thanks to Lord Darry's betrayal. He needed a wife to take his name now who could bear him a child, and Myrcella could not, nor could he marry her and take the Baratheon name at this point, since a barren woman could not carry on even her own family's name.

"You might say that Lady Myrcella," he said bowing over hand and kissing it in as courtly manner as he could. Then he stood up, his face going grim. "Stannis prepared a double trap for us. Ranma sprang the first and we all assumed that was the only one. It was only thanks to Fenris and Ranma that we were able to get out at all, but there were too many of them and we had to retreat."

He sighed sadly. "We tried to convince Lord Butterwell to retreat with us with his men, but he refused. I'm afraid that he and his household are dead by now. Stannis tried to use the Shadow Warriors as the first trap, and no doubt had more in reserve."

"May the Mother receive them as her own." Merry replied, shaking her head sadly. "I left Daenerys and Ranma to have a moment together, but I'm afraid that news will probably have ruined it for them."

"No doubt." The older man said with a shrug before handing Myrcella a cup of tea and a plate of camp bread, with a hunk of cheese. He smiled grimly at the cheese shaking his head. "That might be the last Butterwell cheese we see for a while."

By the time Myrcella got back to the tent, she found that Ranma and Daenerys had indeed halted their reunion quickly. Ranma was shaking her head as she entered the tent, saying. "He played us, any either of those two tricks could've worked, and both taken together would have smashed a far larger unit than the one I took down to try to relieve Butterwell. And if I hadn't been there, or at least if Fenris hadn't been there, Stannis' victory would've been complete. We would've lost every man there."

"As it is, we got mauled, and Stannis has a victory over us to his name which will no doubt bolster his troop's morale after the hammering they've been taking from Tytos. Tytos and Meera have performed magnificently destroying Stannis's foraging parties and scouts, but any morale benefit was probably lost with Butterwell, and after that Castle falls I don't doubt its stores will replenish Stannis' own."

"Is the overall plan still workable?" Myrcella asked as she sat down beside Daenerys. The two with girls exchanged a hand squeeze, before looking at Ranma, who had grabbed up some of the camp bread, biting into it hungrily.

"Yes it is, though it might be tighter than I was afraid it might. I think that Stannis' armies will start to lose the speed it had been using soon though. I bet that he had to use many of his spare horses to get that ambush force into position, and driven them into the ground. But he's still cut off too much of the angle on us for me to be really happy."

Daenerys frowned. "A messenger from Daryn came in this morning. My brother has landed, after a battle with the royal navy. He didn't know what the losses were on either side, but he said that he expected my brother to start marching in a day or two."

"We'll speed up then, put more distance between us and Stannis' army regardless of how much he's been able to cut our angle of advance." Ranma said with a grim nod. "It'll cut into the troops training time in the mornings to get more time on the march, but that can't be helped."

Daenerys nodded, though she and Myrcella exchanged worried glance. They knew that many of the Riverlands troops were still being worked up on 'Stark tactics', and that the Tully pike regiment was also still being worked up on most of the pike's tactics. Their individual training was excellent, and they tended to be able to work together as a unit, but their response to the horn commands left much to be desired.

Seeing their concerned expressions Ranma smiled taking their hands in his. "I know it's not the best solution, but unless we want Stannis to catch up to us while your brother is still out there unopposed, we'll need to do it. I also think we need to be aware that Stannis' forces are fully capable of moving separately if they need to be. He might be able to send one of them on an even sharper angle, say straight westward to block us from heading down to Duskendale. "I'm going to send Dacey ahead to take command of the scouts still with the army, just in case."

OOOOOO

Having been injured early on in the part of the Riverlands campaign that the bards had begun to call the Baiting of the Lion, Daryn wanted to make it up to his king and friend by doing the best he could on his current mission. Having set out in advance of the rest of the army and heading towards Maidenpool rather than down towards Duskendale, first he wanted to take out any reeve or thief-taker of Lord Mooton. These were the only men on his land that were loyal enough to Mooton to ignore the general swell of support for Ranma and Daenerys among smallfolk.

He actually hadn't had to do much. Out in the country all the smallfolk knew one another intimately, and they had a very good idea of who was telling tales or who was willing to. More often than not as soon as Daryn had moved into an area with his men they ran into more reeves and thief takers hanged here and there than his own men could have accounted for quickly.

Now knowing that there was no chance of anyone passing on tales Daryn sent men forward towards the town to watch the skies. He figured that seeing a dragon in the air above the city would tell him when to start expecting Viserys and his allies. One of his men was actually daring enough to hide right along the shoreline of the Bay of Crabs a league distance from the town, and watched the Dornish fleet arrive before reporting in.

Four days later that army began to march out of Maidenpool, and it found Daryn and his men ready.

At present, Daryn and a group of seven mountain clansmen were crouching hidden among large bushes by a small stream him about a day's journey out from Maidenpool. In the trees above other men waited with arrows drawn on taut bow strings. Across from the small stream a band of fifteen men came forward, their eyes alert as they watched all around them, though their visibility was hampered badly by the downpour occurring at present.

Noticing that most of the men didn't seem to have any autumn gear Daryn smirked evilly for a moment. The men wore light raincoats only if that, and their clothing didn't look all that warm. *I bet their entire army is suffering, though I would assume they've commandeered as much clothing as possible from Maidenpool and wherever else they've stopped along their better this group doesn't seem to realize that there is danger about, they're wary, yes, but not as wary as they should be. Good.*

Daryn had spent a single day observing the army, getting as close as he could, which was very close indeed, to note that it didn't have enough supplies for an army of some sixteen thousand. It was clear that they wanted to live off the land. Not a day out of Maidenpool, Daryn and his men began to see large parties of foragers who doubled as scouts for the army. After getting ahead of the army, this present battle was going to be the first of a series of ambushes to pare back those numbers.

The Dornishmen moved forward, dropping out of their saddles and allowing their horses to drink their fill at the stream while they shared some food they had taken from a nearby homestead. The smallfolk of that homestead had been removed quickly by some of Daryn's other men. It would be their choice whether or not to come back immediately to their house, or head west further into the Riverlands and away from this army's line of advance.

Daryn waited until a few minutes after the last man had dropped out of his saddle, before making a bird call. "Preck, Preck!"

At this signal, the archers hidden above in the trees fired, felling five of the 15 men, though only two of them were dead. Water had fouled their bow strings somewhat, nor were the men actually well-trained archers in comparison to most in the Royal Army.

The foragers turned, shouting consternation as a few of them raised bows of their own, aiming up into the trees. But Daryn and the men with him charged leaping over the small stream getting in among them before the Dornish realized they were there. Daryn's sword took one man through the neck from behind, while he sent a kick into another

man's side cracking ribs and sending him flying with a scream of pain to smash into to others.

Pulling out his sword quickly Daryn turned, engaging two other men who had pulled out long sabers. Lighter than his own longsword somewhat, and curved whereas his own was straight they still wielded them relatively well. But to Daryn, it was as if they were moving in slow motion. He easily batted them both aside, flicking his own blade out once, twice, thrice putting both of them down their wrists and throats slit. The one with his wrists slit only looked up for a second before a pile-driving kick caught him in the face, throwing him backward with his neck broken.

Next to Daryn another man he turned fearfully, trying to jump up into the saddle. But the horse shied away rearing and skittish at the smell of blood and the screams of men. An instant later Daryn's sword took the man in the back, punching through his light chain mail, which was of really shoddy quality frankly, before finding his heart or lung. The body collapsed sideways into the river, it's red blood staining the water quickly.

Daryn looked around grimly satisfied. Every one of the foragers was dead, and seven of their horses had been corralled before they raced off in fear at the sudden combat. "Thomas, take the horses back to Goodman Burke and his family, they might need the animals to speed them on their journey west."

"We could use those animals too ya know," said one of his other lieutenants pushing at his lord's arm playfully.

"True." Daryn said with a nod. "But those aren't going to be the only horses we take from our enemies. Let's away quickly ourselves however, we're not that far away from the main army."

Over the next few days not every ambush Daryn and his men set up worked as well as that one, but most of them worked well enough. They accounted for somewhere around four-hundred Dornish, losing only fourteen of their own.

And any attempts to forage directly in front of or to the angle of the army's advance failed. Daryn had begun to empty the smallfolk villages and hamlets of people, along with every farmstead they could find, before Viserys and his army had left Maidenpool. That wasn't to say that the army wasn't able to find any food, but they certainly didn't find anything easily.

Several days after they had begun, Daryn was sitting on his horse hidden in a small copse of trees between two low hills, several days march away from the army which was marching down toward Duskendale. To Daryn's surprise, the Dornish army had turned in that direction almost immediately. Apparently someone in that army was still getting news on the movement of Ranna's army. That was good news to Daryn, it meant that setting Viserys and Stannis against one another would be all the easier.

Daryn wasn't thinking about that at the moment however, what he was thinking about was that one of the Dornish Houses had taken over foraging for the army, and its Lord was leading a foraging party in this direction right at that moment. Taking them out would put a hole in Viserys' command structure, if only for a little while.

It was raining again. It had rained or at least spritzed a little practically every day, though it was rarely overcast save when the rain was really coming down hard. At the moment, it wasn't raining hard enough to matter to visibility. A small stream however had begun to build on the equally small strip of land between the copse and the small hump of land on the other side of it, it's starting point out of sight from where Daryn was hiding.

As Daryn was staring at the moving water of the stream he began to hear the noise of horses cantering in the distance. Their hoofs made indistinct noises in the wet terrain, but he could still hear them well enough.

He nodded at the men on either side of him, all men of House Hornwood while at the same time readying his longsword. A few of them were even armed with lances, though obviously he didn't have any heavy cavalry with him. Those lances rather than being full metal affairs like those used in tourneys (or by certain rich Reach knights in war) were simply long spears lacking even metal points. Still with the force of a charge behind them, the fire-hardened points would break through chain mail easily enough, especially the cheap stuff that most of the Dornish forces seemed to favor.

He continued to watch from his hiding place in the copse of trees as riders crested the small hill. An instant later they began to make their way down towards the copse aiming for the small hamlet that had until yesterday made their homes among the trees here. They were apple trees, and more than one of his men had taken a few of the ripe fruit for themselves.

The moment those riders, around forty men all told, began to cross the stream, archers hidden among the trees and on the rooftops of the individual houses in the copse of trees fired. Several men went down, but the others spurred their horses on, charging forward.

Daryn yelled out. "Righteous in Wrath!" then spurred his horse forward, his sword raised and pointing forward.

The men coming towards the small hamlet were caught in the muddy area around the small stream their horses unable to move as quickly as his own for a moment, so their charge wasn't as powerful. Several men were smashed from their saddles, others pierced by the makeshift lances of Daryn's men. Daryn's own sword took one man in the shoulder slicing through his leather armor, while portion of his mind wondered why the hell people continued to think that leather was any defense in anything but bow range.

His next attack took another man on the shield, almost slicing through the shield and into the man's arm. But Daryn's blade was stuck in the shield for a moment, allowing the man to bring his saber around. Daryn ducked, punching out with his free hand catching the man in one of his legs shattering his kneecap. "GAHHhh!"

Pulling his sword out of the man's shield Daryn moved on leaving the crippled man behind to be finished off by one of the others. One man wearing colors of a house that Daryn had yet to see in this campaign, some kind of spotted cat holding an axe on a blue and white background, caught his horse with a lance from the side. Daryn leapt out of the saddle rolling as he hit the ground only to throw himself desperately to one side as one of the other Dornish tried to ride him down.

Getting his feet under him for a moment, Daryn stabbed his sword up, catching that horse in the side and ripping out it's guts before rolling away from another rider who once more attempted to ride him down. A brief glance around him however told Daryn the battle was going quickly against the Dornish, as more and more in of his men charged out of the small apple grove. Daryn had devoted over a hundred men to this ambush, not knowing how large a force the lord of whatever house had a cat on it would have with him.

Hacking and slashing at the horsemen around him, Daryn was able to move through the melee, though he did more dodging then attacking for a few moments, surrounded as he was by enemies. Even so Daryn was able to slice one man's leg off. Grabbing the man's sword arm right behind his wrist Daryn pulled him out of the saddle easily. He was just about to hop into the empty saddle when he heard a distant roar from the sky above him. It sounded like thunder, but not quite, more animal-like, a sound Daryn had heard close-up a few times in the past few months, one that filled him with dread now.

Pushing up his visor Daryn quickly looked up only for his eyes to widen in fear at the sight of a large black dragon coming down out of the sky. There was only one reason it would be coming out of the sky like this. Looking around wildly he dived into the small stream, which was more mud than water at this point but it was cool at least. "Down! Get down! Dragon!" After shouting that, Daryn quickly pulled his visor down again, took a deep breath, and buried his head in the mud and water as much as he could.

More than half of his men obeyed with alacrity, having gotten into the habit of obeying orders quickly. A few of them were cut down by the Dornish, but a few were actually were able to dive into the same stream near to where Daryn had. That was the only thing that saved them from instant immolation.

High above them Viserys shouted something that Daryn couldn't make out, and an instant later a torrent of fire came down from the dragon. It was wildly unaimed, torching not just the battlefield, but portions of the apple grove, more than one of the houses inside it, and several feet around where the actual combat had occurred. Screams rose in an unholy cacophony, only to be silenced as the individuals screaming died swiftly from the pain of their burns.

Thankfully the fire went out just as quickly at came, the dragon roaring back into the sky. Behind it Daryn pushed himself of the flash-fried mud, which was thankfully already wetting itself again thanks to the small stream and the rain.

"Old Gods damnit, that was close..."Daryn's back felt like it had been scalded even through his chain mail, and the wet chain mail was clinking with an almost angry sound having been warmed by the sudden heat of the dragon's fire. Steam was rising all around him, making it almost impossible to see, but Daryn still had a job to do. "G, Get me a headcount! Anyone still alive, shout out!"

Over seventy Hornwood men had been set on fire, immolating where they had stood and fought just a second before. Horses too had been set alight, screaming in equine agony with the survivors bolting in pure terror of the sudden conflagration. All of his own men's horses were dead or gone, the Dornish as well, and not just their beasts. The Dornishmen had not obeyed his shouted order, and paid for it, every one of them dying.

Nearby Thomas pulled himself out of the water looking at his Lord. "The, that fucking **bastard!** He just killed his own men to get at us!"

"He would've killed all of us if I hadn't heard him coming." Daryn pulled his helmet off wiping away the sweat that had formed on his forehead. "I'm getting the impression that Viserys doesn't really care at all who else he kills so long as he gets some of us. Daenerys was right about him."

All around him men began to tend to their burned fellows, those that had survived that haven't made it into the pool entirely. Six of them would have to be put out of their misery. They hadn't been able to get enough of their body into watery mud and been cooked in their chain mail despite not having been hit full on by the dragon's attack.

"Do you think that's going to be a new tactic? That Viserys will ride out and attack our men at the merest hint of anything?"

Daryn nodded grimly, staring around at the steaming, burning bodies, their fires being slowly put out by the ongoing rain. "Pull the men back, we've already succeeded in emptying most of the lands within a few days march of their army, we'll spread out backwards from that and continue. No direct clashes anymore above small parties of four to ten. Let's make certain if he does hit us again, he won't be able to do as much damage as he did today. I'll want runners to head out to the rest of our scattered forces as soon as possible to that effect."

The next few days were very nervous for Daryn and his men. Even though they had pulled back and reverted almost entirely to helping the smallfolk get out of the way of the Dornish army, they were still nervous that Viserys would begin to range further away from his army with his dragon. Thankfully he didn't seem inclined to do so, though why that was the case none of them knew.

The Dornish also began to send out larger parties, all of them horse archers rather than light infantry or light cavalry. The horse archers were a unique threat to Daryn and his men. They moved faster than most foragers could, and indeed faster than Daryn and his own men could in short spurts. While he still had horses enough to put one under every man he had, he had lost his trained light cavalry force almost entirely, so did not retain anyone who was used to actually fighting in the saddle. And while the few trained archers Daryn had with him had a range advantage, they weren't as mobile as the horse archers, who could fire on the move closing the range quickly before his own men could escape on foot.

Daryn continued to set up small skirmishes here and there, bleeding any foraging party or scout group he could while always keeping to the front of the army until they were well away from Maidenpool and the somewhat populated area around it. Soon they were deep into the far less populated zone between the Crownlands and the Riverlands, moving along the borders of the territory known as Crackclaw Point.

About two weeks after Viserys' army landed, Daryn sent Thomas ahead down the road, assuming that by this point the rest of the army was somewhere along it. "Tell Ranma that Viserys and his dragon are on the way. His army isn't quite blinded yet, but the bait is damn well set!"

OOOOOO

Viserys was angry, no he was furious. The Northerners had obviously known they were coming, or possibly been intelligent enough to not place any trust in Lord Mooton's loyalty. Whatever the case, within a day of leaving Maidenpool his army had come under attack. Small attacks here and there, never anything major but their foraging and scouting have been curtailed badly.

That sharply curtailed their ability to scout ahead of the Army. This in turn forced Viserys and Balerion to do the scouting, which they did so easily enough. They had even spotted that one ambush, wiping the victors out before returning to the army.

It hadn't occurred to Viserys that his attack had actually wiped out more of his own men than the attackers, nor would he have cared if someone had pointed it out. A few of the Dornish lords had privately speculated on that however after riding out to the site of the battle a few days after, but did not share their thoughts.

Jorah had taken command of both scouting and foraging, using parties of infantry to forage while horse archers covered them in every direction. This allowed them to stop several ambushes, but it slowed the army's progress even further. Viserys wanted to be in position to assault his sister or Stannis whoever won the clash between them, and hated everything that was delaying him now.

Arianne tried to do her best to keep Viserys calm, often times forcing him to exert himself when the two of them were in bed together to such a degree that he didn't have enough energy to be angry. It worked too, though was beginning to make her feel tired of it all frankly. *Is my family's vengeance and my own ambition really worth this, this hell that I'm putting myself through?* Viserys lovemaking had not improved since their first few times together, and he had begun



to show distressing levels of selfishness and some low-key sadistic tendencies in their sex life, which did not please Arianne at all. Nonetheless she knew she had come too far to back out now, and did what she could to retain control over Viserys in some manner.

"Are you sure that we should be marching down to Duskenale? I know that Petyr says that Stannis and Ranma will be fighting somewhere in the area of the road but he is isn't a strategist. Why would they be moving in that direction?"

"For Ranma Duskenale makes for an obvious target. I doubt he knows of King's Landing, so he could simply be thinking of moving down the shore of Blackwater Bay to King's Landing if need be. And Stannis of course is going after him. There's no doubt Duskenale is the linchpin of his own logistics efforts, it has to be saved or protected." Viserys replied, his voice mellow as he leaned against the soft, silken pillow under his head, the sheets of bear fur covering his lower body.

"That does make sense, I had forgotten that would be important to Stannis." Arianne said with a nod. "My house is not used to thinking in terms of sea-based logistics like that." River traffic made much more sense to her, but even that wasn't exactly common in Dorne.

Viserys nodded agreeably, looking over her shoulder at a note she was reading, something Nymeria had given her that morning. "What is this?"

"I was just wondering about that myself my Lord. Apparently, the Iron Bank is not exactly happy with Petyr. According to this, the factors from Essos haven't been able to send us any solid information, or at least such hasn't been sent forward to the collection points like Maidenpool, but Nymeria says that the hatred is not unjustified. This is a suggestion from her, one she thought of several days ago but only now decided to share with me."

Viserys read it, then smiled thinly his eyes flickering with fell light for a moment. "Interesting. I have to say that Petyr has not exactly proven from much of an ally just yet. His spy network isn't better than your family, and bringing only around six thousand troops, more than half of which are nearly untrained levy forces was not anywhere near the amount of aid I was expecting him to be able to bring to our cause."

"And all of those lords my king strike me as more practical than loyal." Arianne mused. Viserys looked at her one eyebrow raised and she laughed. "They will be loyal to you now my lord, because Petyr has lost everything but their loyalty in terms of a powerbase. Whereas you have both the rest of the army, and your claim to the throne. Petyr might have delivered those men, might have negotiated their joining army, but they are ours now."

"And Petyr thus becomes expendable." Viserys said with a nod. "A lovely thought. Especially if doing so could garner any thanks from the Iron Bank. And agreeing to pay the debt the damned Usurper and his whore of a queen accrued with them, even if all of the proof of such on our side is now gone, would possibly bring them to our side entirely. Most devious my love." Viserys said, leaning down and kissing her pulling her back down among the covers of their large camp bed.

Outside a servant that Petyr had suborned not through money but blackmail within a few days of coming aboard Viserys' ship scurried off to find him. Petyr heard the man out wordlessly, then sent a messenger to the next tent over, summoning his bodyguards and servants. Once all still present with the army were gathered he said bluntly. "Start talking to the men of the army, spread money around if you have to. I want to know everything about the army's camp, about who is on watch, about the watch rotation, and the lords in charge. We might need to look for an escape route in a hurry."

OOOOOO

While the forces vying for the throne of Westeros were maneuvering towards one another, far in the North a small boat was seen floating on the waves of the Bay of Seals by a family of fishermen plying their trade. "Look at that father." The lookout said, motioning to his father. "Is that a rowboat? Who in their right mind would use a small craft like that all the way out here?"

"I don't know," replied the patriarch, frowning behind his unkempt grey-streaked beard. "But it might be someone in trouble. Jac, Kale, I'm gonna steer us in that direction, trim the sails to catch the wind from leeward. Let's see what's up."

The two young men did so, and within a few moments their fishing sloop was alongside the rowboat. Its sides were covered in frost, and a single person was lying down inside of it, covered by what had to be the worst skinned seal anyone in the family had ever seen. Then as they could grow closer, they realized it actually wasn't a botched skinning job. Someone had simply killed the seal, then pulled it aboard the small raft somehow without capsizing it,

and had used its blubbery mass to protect himself from the cold. A smart idea, but an incredibly crude one.

All three men winced at the smell gasping. "Is that man alive you think?" said the youngest, Jac.

His father shrugged and jumped aboard the ship, moving over towards the man. Seeing that his beard was short and not very well cared for and what he could see of his face looked young as well he asked, "You alive, youngster?"

He was actually not expecting the younger man to be alive, so jumped back in shock when the man set up, staring at him. "W-who are you?" he asked through heavily chapped and bleeding lips.

"I'm Crant, these're me sons, Jac and Kale, we're fisher folk from the shores of the Bay. We be beholden to House Karstark."

The man nodded, crawling out from under the corpse of the seal. When his upper body came clear, Jac and Kale gasped at the site of his shoulder. I was heavily bandaged, but the bandages were dark black with dried blood, with some red seeping through even now over the wound.

With his sons helping him Crant was able to get the younger man into the sloop, then began to pull away from the smaller rowboat as his wife came out of the deckhouse. Quickly she began to undo the bandages on the man's arm, hissing in shock as she pulled them away. "Jac, get me a double draft of wine, boil it, Then some water and boil that too!"

"What did you get into youngster?" said Crant, staring at the man.

The man looked down at his own shoulder for a moment, as if not really comprehending what happened to it though Jack had took one look at it and thought that he was lucky to still have a shoulder at all. The skin around the wound was just going bad and it was deep and had bled profusely.

After a moment the younger man shook his head licking incredibly cracked and frostbitten lips. "M, my name's Theon Greyjoy. Take me to Karhold. I need to speak to Torrhen Karstark. They, they are coming." With that Theon collapsed, falling into unconsciousness as Crant and Kale moved forward grabbing him before he could hit the deck.

OOOOOO

Over the next few days Ranma's prediction about Stannis' speed proved true, the three units slowing down significantly. Many of their horses had been ridden nearly to death to set up the ambush around Butterwell. Even with a full third of the army no longer needing to forage for its food they were still slowed by that.

Within a few days at their new speed the Royal Army reached the road down to Duskendale, passing through House Buckwell's land in the Crownlands. Surprisingly that House didn't even bother sending out messengers to the army, simply pulling in what people it had and keeping their collective noses down while the army passed through.

This road wasn't quite as good a road as the royal roads, but it was far better than most in Westeros. Trade normally flowed from one port down to the other, luxury goods for the most part as well as out into the countryside. Though those roads weren't nearly as good as the main one. But of course there was no trade on it now. Merchants were even more intelligent than most smallfolk in knowing when to bunker down or hide.

The army began to march along it, now keeping their speed up without having to take away from their training times in the morning. To the army's delight they also began to see some resupply from the local smallfolk. Villages along the road would empty themselves at Ranma's urging, the inhabitants heading east away for now. But they would leave quite a lot of food behind for the army, a sign that the septons, not to mention their own and Merry's activity, had truly brought the smallfolk onto Ranma and Daenerys' side.

Ranma felt they would be able to continue down towards Duskendale for another week or so, before they would have to start making plans to turn back, and then dodge Viserys and Stannis somehow. But still wary of further surprises from Stannis, he had sent Dacey forward like he said he would to command the scouts left with the main army. Ranma had sent Tytos back to continue the campaign of skirmishes to further hamper Stannis' army.

About another week's or training and marching passed before Dacey came back with a report of an army coming up the road. And it was definitely not one of Stannis' attempting to cut them off from Duskendale without Tytos and his scouts having reported its movement.

"They've got what?!" Daenerys asked incredulously.

"I've never seen them in real life before, nor in books." Dacey said with a shrug from where she stood in front of Ranma and the others. "But I'd say they're elephants. It's pretty hard to confuse those massive beasts with anything else."

To one side Fenris perked up. He had seen a picture of an elephant in a book down in King's Landing that Ranma had read with Tommen at one point. They looked rather tasty, and perhaps large enough that one of them would feed even a pack of direwolves.

"Did you see their banners?" Daenerys asked intently. Elephants meant someone had come over from Essos, but who, and why? *Could this be some scheme of the Iron Bank? Could they have thrown their lot in with Stannis and supplied him with another Army?*

Dacey shook her head. "They've got a lot of scouts, and they all look like mercenaries to me, though of few of them are far more uniform than most mercenaries. But I did see one other thing, just as I was preparing to report back..." She said slowly looking at Daenerys intently, breathed in and then decided to just say it bluntly. "I saw a dragon flying above their army. I couldn't make out its color though."

Daenerys gasped before sharing a shocked look with Ranma. "Could Viserys have gotten around the Royal Navy somehow and gone down to Duskendale?"

"I wouldn't have credited it." Jason said with a frown, "but mayhap."

Ranma sighed. "I'll have to head forward with you Dacey. Fenris and I can sneak in when others wouldn't be able to." Fenris might not have Ghost's ability to, well, ghost around but he was still far better at moving through even scrub brush than any man could be. "Halt the army here for now, we'll be back by tomorrow morning."

The others dispersed to their various commands, while Ranma looked at Daenerys inquisitively. "You have a guess of who this could be?"

"The Iron Bank is the only force in Essos that has any interest in sticking their noses into the quagmire that is Westeros at the moment. If they threw in their lot with Stannis they could raise a mercenary army for him. The dragon though, maybe they didn't throw their lot in with Stannis, but found some other puppet king they could prop up, some dragonseed or other."

"Dragonseed?" Merry asked from where she had just gotten off Fenris' back. Already Eric was bringing up the horse she and Daenerys had shared since leaving Winterfell. Daenerys of course was spending most of her time up in the sky with her two dragons, so was only ever in the saddle for a bare hour or so every day.

"A word meaning a Targaryen by-blow, usually found on Dragonstone or Driftmark. I suppose a few of them could have survived..."

Ranma nodded grimly, understanding why this could be a problem. A mercenary army was poison to any land it passed through because most of its men would not be at all interested in ruling the land afterwards, simply plundering it now, and scum of the earth besides. *And it also fucks up my plans something fierce. Dodging two army's is one thing, dodging three?* "We'll figure out what this is then figure out a way to deal with them." he said aloud, his face showing stark resolve for a moment.

After kissing both girls on the cheek Ranma and Fenris moved ahead, while behind them the army halted its march, and began to fall out to make camp.

It took Ranma and Fenris a bare few hours to cross the distance to the farthest scout group towards Duskendale. Brynden Blackwood was the oldest son of Tytos, and his equal in terms of leaving small skirmishes and ambushes, though he had remained with the army when Meera and Tytos had been sent south. Brynden had found a small cave hidden in a small copse of trees about a half days ride away from the road and was using it as his base for now as he keep a look out on the approaching army.

He showed Ranma up to a nearby knoll, were Ranma pulled out his treasured spyglass, watching as the army coming from Duskendale came closer. "Do you have anything new to report?"

"Lady Dacey knew most of it when she left us Ranma." Brynden replied, showing none of the awe he was feeling at how quickly Ranma had crossed that same distance. Dacey had crossed it quickly, taking two thirds of a day or so to meet back up with the army, but even in comparison to that Ranma and Fenris were incredibly quick. "We've spotted a few banners among the outriders, I think we've spotted two, maybe three mercenary companies at least. And you're

not going to like one of them my Lord."

"I don't like anything about this situation Brynden." Ranma smiled grimly still staring through the spyglass at the dust in the distance. "What is it?"

"One of them is the Golden Company my Lord." Brynden replied quietly.

Ranma turned to look at the man but seeing his seriousness he simply nodded. At least 10,000 men all of them trained and equipped better than most Lords in Westeros could field. Not as good as his own army, and Ranma would put his pike against their spear phalanx any day of the week, but still a very big threat. "All right, that tells me this army's dangerous, let's see what else we can figure out."

The two men remained silent, waiting. The sun was nearly falling, and rain had begun to patter down yet again when finally the front of the main force came into view. Ranma saw the elephants that had so astonished Dacey, while Fenris seemed to sit up abruptly, his nose turning in that same direction. "Don't tell me you can smell them from here?"

Fenris snored a lot a wolfish chuckle, nodding his head in the human manner as he sent an image. *Big fat, smelly.* A direwolf's sense of smell was better than even a normal wolf's, and a normal wolf's was among the best nature had ever devised. Fenris could find a single scent on the wind for leagues, and they were upwind of the army.

Ranma nodded pulling out of their connection with a shake of his head. "Interesting. I wonder how those elephants would react to my friend here..." He said scratching Fenris behind the ears grinning as wolfishly officially as his bonded for a moment while he looked over at Brynden.

Brynden winced, then smiled in reply.

A moment later, neither of them had had much interest in smiling. The army down there wasn't as large as their own, possibly around 14,000 or so, and there was not a single Westeros banner among them. What there was however, flying high over the entire army, was the banner of House Targaryen. "My lovely, so intelligent wife was right." Ranma said grimly. "It would appear as if the Iron Bank has found a patsy, or something else is going on here. We'll wait for tonight, then I'll sneak in, see if I can hear some of the talk among their army..."

OOOOOO

For various reasons the other three armies supply situations were not nearly as good as Ranma's which could have a cumulative effect on the road. Stannis faced Meera and Tytos' depredations on his foraging parties. Viserys faced Daryn's. But the army with the worse supply situation was Aegon's. Finding Duskenale not having much in the way of supply had forced him to supply his army off the land.

At first Aegon hadn't thought much of it, thinking the smallfolk would be happy to give his army food, happy to see the return of the Targaryen Dynasty. This concept was so off-target as to have no connection to reality whatsoever. Not that Aegon understood that. He simply put it down to this area of the Crownlands being uncertain of which Targaryen to follow.

Unlike the other army's however, Aegon was getting decent reports from his scouts, who had ranged ahead of the main army quite a ways, and had lost many of their number thanks to their opponents, but were still completing their missions. They had briefly seen the main bulk of the Northern/Riverlands army retreating back up towards Maidenpool at one point. Though since then they had not met with any great success, the Northern scouts keeping them at bay whatever they tried. Yet Varys network was still intact, and had reported that Stannis was in the area as well, marching to engage the Stargaryen force.

"Excellent!" Aegon said smacking his hands together for all the world like a child who'd just heard he was getting an extra present for his name day. "Varys, didn't you say that some of the Houses under Stannis will side with us the moment they see our banner? With that in mind, we might be able to smash both of these armies. After such a victory, and with my aunt either convinced to side with me or captured, Viserys will have to give over as well, wherever he is. And of course, his Dornish forces are not nearly as loyal as he believes."

"Be careful Young King." said Varys warningly. "Overconfidence has gotten many a ruler slain, and not just on the battlefield. Stannis and Ranma Stark have proven themselves to be dangerous generals, you would do well to not underestimate them."

"You worry too much eunuch." Said Old Griff, smiling thinly. "Stannis has only beaten his younger brother Renly in

this war. That's no great feat, and before that, he was only in charge of naval battles or sieges. Naval battles are one thing, land battles are another and there is no easier a battle to plan for than a siege, either defending or attacking. As for young Stark, what wars did the Old Lion fight? He came late and never truly fought an actual enemy army in the war of the Usurper. He wasn't in charge of the overall strategy against the Ironborn, and before that Tywin simply smashed one or two houses one after another in punitive campaigns, not campaigns against an equal opponent."

Harry Strickland, captain general of the Golden Company exchanged glances with his commanders, particularly Tristan Rivers. They all saw this statement as yet another sign that their old comrade-in-arms had not retained his mental faculty over the years. Yes, sometimes sieges were ridiculously simple to plan for, but only a fool would ignore Stannis' ability as a general. And while Tywin's reputation had been based more in the realm of politics and backstabbing, from what Varys had passed on, which was quite a lot, the campaign that Ranma Stark had led against him had been a thing of beauty.

They were not nearly as confident. Indeed, the fact that three of the army's vying for the throne of Westeros had come together in this area of the continent was a sign that someone, either Stannis or Ranma had set it up in that manner. That was worrisome, as was the fact their scouts didn't seem to be able to get through the Northern and Riverlands scouts to what that army might be doing or what could be past it.

After Griff and Aegon left later that evening the remaining men, including Varys, continued the discussion.

"We've come too far back to back out now," said Gorys Edoryen, the paymaster of the Company. He was a cadaverous looking Volantene man with a pointed black beard and blood-red hair, who habitually wore a leopard skin draped across one shoulder. "We can't go back on our contract, not with the young fool, or the ones backing him. There's our reputation to consider, and the fact we don't have enough supplies to make it back to Essos even if we tried. Maybe if we left the elephants behind..."

"No." Harry said sharply, though all the men there knew it was more because he didn't want to leave the elephants behind than any care for the Golden Company's reputation. Strickland was not the most martial of men, though he was a good organizer. "You're right, and I'll hear no talk of us turning back. We came to win a throne, and that's what we'll do."

"I'm worried that we're only seeing what the Northerners want us to see." Lysono Maar said worriedly. He was the company spymaster, a feminine-looking fellow with lilac colored eyes and gold-white hair down to his shoulders. Yet he had been almost sidelined since arriving in Westeros, having no connections here. Then his place was further usurped by Varys.

Interacting with their scouts was the only job left to him now. "We've been losing two or three men for every one of theirs. Stranger's Hells, we've lost more men since meeting with their scouts than we did in taking Sharp Point or Stonedance. Then getting that one glimpse of their army, it's almost like they're baiting us."

Tristan shrugged. "We have to move forward quickly then, try to take some of the initiative away from them, get after the main army before they can prepare whatever surprise they are trying to do."

"Or retreat entirely back to Duskindale, get on our ships and head elsewhere, fight them on our terms after gathering more Westerosi support. I'm not happy about relying on the Reach houses turning for us mid-battle." Gorys countered.

Harry shook his head, looking over at Varys. "The Royal Navy, could it beat us back to Duskindale from wherever it is now?"

"They could certainly be back in Blackwater Bay before we reach the city." Varys replied. "My agent's last reported them near Gulltown, and Seaworth is an able seaman."

Duskindale had fallen easily enough to them, Lord Rykker lacking any kind of spine to face their army, especially since most of his defenses had been destroyed recently in the raid ordered by Viserys on the portion of the Royal Navy that had been left there in dock. Those docks themselves had been heavily damaged, and it had been a very nervous week while the army disembarked, its progress slowed badly by the damage.

"From the Gullet the fleet could possibly catch us in the port. I might not be a military man, but I believe that being attacked while your army is still being loaded onto your transports would not be a good thing, yes?"

"True enough." said Harry. "I'm not happy with how arrogant Aegon and Griff are, but when they say that our quality of troops can overwhelm our enemies they are starting a simple truth. The Reach cavalry against our spear phalanx?"

Or even northern pikes against them? They may get in a few kills, but eventually our discipline and the tightness of our formations will win out."

Varys was not a general, not a fighting man at all. He had no concept of how dangerous the Northern pike regiments were, and had downplayed them and their importance even more so than his agents who equally were not soldiers in the main. The Battle of the Ruby Ford had been put down to more to the Northerners ability to battle the Westerlanders in a smaller area, so that Tywin could not bring his full numbers to bare rather than the devastating striking power of the pikes.

"True enough." Said Tristan Rivers, smiling thinly. He was a bastard from the Riverlands, and was eager to head home the conqueror. "And after this war, we'll all be wealthy lords with our own lands!"

Marq Mandrake, a Westerosi native who had fallen into slavery once and then joined the Golden Company spoke up now. "You're all forgetting something: Stannis and the R'hllor whore he has somehow tamed."

Harry and the others all flinched at that reminder, and Marq went on grimly. "I'm worried more about the fact that we didn't know how effective this Red Witch's powers were before we took this contract. Shadow Warriors, burning the greatest city of Westeros with her powers? We don't have anything in our Company that can face such magic as that! And I'll tell you plain, I don't care a thing about our history of never breaking a contract, me and mine will run to fight another day rather than face such as that."

Varys smiled thinly. "Let me worry about the Red Witch Sers, trust me she won't be an issue."

Later that evening as he sat at a small writing desk Varys looked up sharply at a small noise, almost unseen at the edge of his hearing. Moving far faster than most would give him credit for Varys pulled out a small extremely sharp stiletto from a hidden fold of his garish clothing.

Turning slowly he stopped when a voice from far closer than the noise had indicated. "Valar Morghulis. Greetings from Illyrio, Master of Whispers. You and he have retained my sentences for one life. Do you know the name of the one whose death you have bought?"

Varys licked suddenly dry lips. "I, I wish for you to kill the woman named Melisandre, the follower of R'hllor that sits at Stannis' elbow."

For a moment the man in the shadows of the tent was silent. When he spoke again, the voice came from a far corner, well away from the first place the voice had indicated. "That is indeed the name given to me. Yet since coming to Westeros, I have heard more of her powers, things I did not know before. You and your friend either deceived us, or were deceived in turn. It matters not, but what does is the price. It has gone up, by three times the amount."

"Thr!" Varys gasped, unable to even get the word out for a moment. The initial price had been practically a king's ransom, begging every single bank account Varys had access to, and more than half Illyrio's estate in Pentos. *Three times that amount...I can't promise that! That, that's something like 28 million gold dragons!*

The number was so ludicrously large that calculating it actually snapped Varys out of his initial shock. *Wait, the Faceless Men believe the contracts are a sacred bond with their Many-Faced-God. They would never haggle once a contract is made, even if the danger of the mission goes up. What is this?*

After a moment he sat down again, staring straight ahead rather than continuing to futilely try to find the assassin in the shadows. "I see. I cannot promise that amount, and I believe you know that. What is it you actually want, that you would haggle with me now?"

A tense few moments of silence passed before the man replied. "Equivalent exchange. The Guild has sent me a mission, one passed on to me from within. I require information. Information on the whereabouts of one called Arya Stark..."

OOOOOO

"Viserys' army is about a week behind us." Said Daryn as he leapt out of his horse to clasp forearms with Ranma. "We well and truly blinded them these past few days, and did what we could to make their army go hungry as well as possible."

He watched through grim eyes as Daenerys alighted off her current mount, Rhaegon, shaking his head angrily. "I lost over 220 men thanks to Viserys using his dragon against us. He burned an entire village of smallfolk houses and his own men to kill some of mine not two days back."

Daenerys winced. "I'm sorry you had to go through that Daryn, but my little ones and I will do what we can to make certain that those are the last of our men that died from dragonfire."

"I hope you're successful in that my lady, it is a **horrible** way to go." Daryn shivered for a moment, remembering his own close call with that particular death but reached forward to clasp hands with her in greeting as well.

Dacey nodded. "And the other Targaryen army is coming up from the south about a week away."

"Other Targaryen army? What have I missed?" Daryn asked, blinking.

"A lot." Ranma said with a shrug. "But not enough to make my initial plan unworkable."

"Ranma..." Daenerys said gritting her teeth behind a faint smile "I think we're becoming a little overconfident here."

"No." Ranma said with a faint smile of his own, touching her cheek gently. "We're not. Oh, the initial plan isn't workable in terms of us sitting out the battle entirely. We don't have enough room to evade them all. But remember Dae, these armies aren't going to work together. They're going to be fighting each other just as much as us. And that will cause chaos."

"And chaos is where you thrive." She said smiling now. "Stannis doesn't, nor my brother!"

"Exactly." Ranma said with a nod. "Stannis might know this is coming, but he won't back out. He'd have to skirt wide down the road, then head down to Duskendale itself, and if an army just came from there there's no telling that that city will be able to feed his army. Tytos and Meera cost them too much in the way of supply for him to get anywhere else. He has to smash us, then move to Maidenpool to resupply there."

"Besides, Stannis is arrogant," Myrcella said from where she was sitting as usual on Fenris well on the march. "He doesn't think that anyone else is as strong, honorable, or smart as he is. He looked down even on Father for that, not just because he was resentful of being passed over for Lordship of Storm's End as was his right. He's also 'beaten' you once already Ranma, he'll think he has the measure of you now."

Ranma nodded at her, reaching out to ruffle his hair, but his eyes were grim. "I think it's we need to start preparing a new warm reception for all three of our enemies. Dacey, hand over command of the scouts to Brynden entirely and Daryn, you get back to your men. Don't try to block their scouts unless they are getting close, don't let them see our army or get around us."

He turned to Lucas Blackwood as Dacey nodded and Daryn went off, mumbling something about wanting to get some food before heading back out. "Lucas, get back out there and find your father. I want him here with the rest of the army soonest, but tell him to leave a third of his men out there under Meera. They are to get around Stannis' army, but stay utterly out of sight for now. I want them ready to attack the army from behind if they see an opening, but not until the army is fully engaged with us."

"I'm still hopeful that we can at least talk this pawn the Iron Bank has found into joining us. Our control of the Golden Tooth means that paying off the debt they believe the Iron Throne owes them won't be so arduous now. But that will depend on what role he is playing." Daenerys mused, leaning against Fenris and resting her head on Myrcella's leggings-clad thigh for a moment. "I could wish that I am not going to face a family member regardless, I have no desire to become a kinslayer."

"We all do what we must." Ranma said with sigh. "I would take that off you if I could, but given the fact I'll have to be trying to control the battle and match the Shadow Warriors and Melisandre, I don't know if I'll be able to."

The Wolfsworn around him nodded, understanding what technique Ranma and thought would be able to match a dragon in flight. The Lords around them however looked askance at his confidence. All save for Tristan, who had seen that maneuver Ranma had done to clear the area around him in the battle at Butterwell.

"So what's the plan?" Jason asked.

Ranma smiled. "You were wondering why I ordered so many shovels from Riverrun my Lord, now they're going to be put to use."

Over the next few days while the other armies continued to close with them the men of the Royal Army took turns resting, working on preparing fortifications, and training. Ranma, the Wolfsworn and even the lords and Daenerys took part in all of the work going on, lending their expertise, strength and simply more hands to the projects, and

within a week the army, its esprit-de-corps higher than ever, completed the fortifications Ranma wanted.

The fortifications was a triangular line of ditches set between three large nearly L-shaped forts made out of wood cut from a nearby copse of trees, which almost denuded the entire copse. They were very simple forts only about two stories tall, with a parapet and overhead roofs supported by four pillars. But they were solid affair without any kind of stairwell. The individuals manning them had to climb up their sides via ropes.

As archer platforms they worked very well and each fortification could hold at least 400 archers, facing in every direction. The sides of them and the top had also all been covered with mud, and thanks to the now near daily rain they might be able to survive a fireball either from the Red Witch or the dragons of the enemy.

Maybe. If the dragon came in on an angle the men inside them might not. Then again if it did, they might be able to fire back anyway. But the army seemingly had confidence in Daenerys and her 'little ones' to protect them from other airborne threats. The Red Witch was another matter entirely, but Ranma had proven to have his own powers before this, and morale was high despite the rumors about her.

The forts were connected by several prepared ditches of various sizes. More than a few of those on the side of the triangle facing where Stannis' army would be coming from were then covered over by wooden slats which were then covered with mud and still living grass. It almost looked like normal ground if you weren't looking closely, and Ranma figured that they had a two out of three chance of working.

Behind the ditches was an earthwork about waist high, with a step behind it. This was true on all sides, though the ditches were not as complete on them, and there were several places where there was no ditch or earthwork, but there the pikemen of House Manderly were assigned, a show of trust that made them all puff their chests out in pride.

After it was all finished Ranma allowed the army an entire day off, even opening the very small and closely guarded wine supply to let every man have a single cup at Daenerys' insistence. The army, ecstatic by this act and proud of the work they had accomplished, cheered the royals loudly. The army truly felt now that they had a chance to win this war outright, regardless of the number of their enemies.

OOOOOO

The next day, the other three armies of the pretenders to the throne had finally seen both the main Royal Army and one another. The reactions of the commanders among them to the other armies' presence were varied. Viserys was wrathful, furious that anyone else dared to use the banner of the Targaryens, while his cousin was furious at the fact that he had no idea that Viserys was even in the area, blaming Varys for this as well as his own scouts showing a temper that reminded all too many of them about the stories of Mad King Aerys.

Stannis however was amused and incredibly impressed. "He did it." He murmured shaking his head with a faint smile.

"Azor Ahai?" asked Melisandre looking at him quizzically.

"Oh, I knew that Ranma wanted my army and Viserys' to fight, but even so, he still tried to keep on and might well have done it, simply leaving the three of us to fight it out between us if not for the fact that my army stands directly between him and the Riverlands lands. He has Crackclaw Point behind him, and no one wants to take an army through that land, even if they get local support." Crackclaw Point was dominated by dales, bogs, craggy hills and pine barrens, a wilderness which no army could move through easily.

"Instead he decided to fight here, taking the time to throw up those fortifications. Very good, very good indeed. This will be of tough battle, but I think our numbers advantage and the fact that all of us are fighting one another will give us the victory."

OOOOOO

The day was too far gone for any of the armies to launch full-scale attacks and strangely to Ranma's mind there were proprieties to be considered. "I can't believe we're doing this." Ranma said to his wife. "You don't honestly think that diplomacy is going to do anything at this point do you? Stannis, this 'Aegon' and Viserys all want the Iron Throne, even if the symbol of your family's rule is gone, and we're just as determined to not let them take it."

Daenerys smiled at his honest confusion. "Yes I know you just want to get this over with, but there are pragmatic reasons behind this. I've spoken to Lord Ashford, and I think least a few of the Reach Lords following Stannis might rethink that allegiance given our stance towards Mace. And Mace at the very least will be upset by it. If a few of those Lords decide to pull their men out of the battle citing divided loyalties that could let us tip the numbers in our favor



against him.

"As for my brother, I believe that his Dornish allies are nowhere near as securely in his camp as he likes to think, unless Arianne is pregnant." Daenerys scowled. "There is no way my brother could have convinced Doran to back open war if not for a blood tie like that. And, we need to find as much out about this dragonseed and the Golden Company's reason behind this invasion as we can."

Looking at his wife Ranma frowned a little. One of Dacey's men had gotten close enough to over hear some of the Golden Company's scouts. They spoke of someone going by the name of Aegon, and Ranma knew that had been the name of Rhaegar's son.

Dacey had shared that tidbit with both of them, but Daenerys refused to use the name in relation to the man. "You realize if he actually believes that shit, his claim to the Iron Throne is stronger than yours, right? The line of succession always goes to the son of the oldest son, rather than to a daughter or younger son of the father."

"He's not my nephew Ranma!" Daenerys growled, frowning with a hint of anger in her voice. "My nephew died thanks to the Gregor Clegane's butchery." She smiled suddenly looking at him. "Have I thanked you for killing that monster lately?"

"You did that often enough before we married, my love." Ranma replied, that smiling faintly and nodding over at Jason and the other Lords, who arrayed themselves behind the two royals. Along one side of the pavilion that Daenerys had insisted they put up outside bow range in full view of the other three armies the Wolfsworn present stood like a grim honor guard. Silas, the only Lord among them who had been to Essos said close by Ranma on his other side, ready to tell him what he could about the men from 'Aegon's' army.

Besides the pavilion itself, which was basically a giant tarp which had originally been used for the dragons pulled taut over their heads, there was very little in the way of comfort. The table and chairs were all camp tables and chairs, simple folding affairs. Ranma, Daenerys and most of their lords wore armor, over which furs were hung. Even their crowns, commissioned by Greatjon and Jason in Riverrun and given to Ranma and his wife recently as gifts, reflected this austerity.

Ranma's crown was made out of hammered steel to look like wolf fangs, with a single gold fang in the direct center. Between each fang etched into the hammered steel of the circlet itself were wavy lines signifying rivers. Daenerys's tiara was also steel, but it was burnished instead of hammered, it almost gave the steel a shine. Silver was worked into it, showing small dragons in flight in position over her ears.

Taken all at once the image the two conveyed was of austere majesty. There was no pomp and panoply here, simply authority which came from who they were, not the roles they had assumed.

"How likely is it that we will be able to persuade Mace and the Reach forces to back off as a whole, my lady?" said Rickard. He had never met Mace or any of the Reach Lords, so had no knowledge of them as individuals.

Daenerys hadn't met them of course, but she had studied them and had closely questioned Lord Ashford about them, as she had told Ranma. Ashford was standing in one corner of the pavilion, looking noticeably tense. "I'm afraid that there isn't much chance of that my Lord, a portion of them perhaps, but not Mace. He is too arrogant to take our news about Highgarden and the lord Paramountcy lying down."

"It will almost certainly goad him into foolish actions however. We will see..." Daenerys broke off as she felt her dragons, who were lying outside the pavilion, stirring. Looking at them she frowned, reaching through their mental connection for a moment. Seeing through their senses Daenerys scowled angrily leaping to her feet. "**They dare!?**"

Ranma looked at her surprise, then over to where Fenris was now staring up as well where he was lying at the back of the pavilion. Then he frowned as well, but before he could do anything Daenerys had moved forward, leaving the pavilion to stare up into the sky.

From the sky above two dragons could be seen circling one another warily. For a moment Daenerys thought that they might actually come to blows right away but it was not to be. Both dragons landed, hissing and snarling at one another then at Sunfyre and Rhaegon.

One of the newcomers was a massive black dragon, and Daenerys stared at it in shock, noticing Viserys on his back and realizing this was the dragon from the third egg her blood and the fire in Illyrio's manse had hatched. The other was a red and brown colored beast smaller than even Sunfyre, barely large enough to carry a rider, but seemed snappish. Not as ill-tempered as the larger black one, but still more wild than her own two.

Sunfyre, normally the best behaved of her little ones, reared back hissing angrily at both the largest beast and the smaller. Rhaegon too angrily reared his head up, snapping and flicking its tongue out at the black dragon. Flames started to appear at the back of Rhaegon's mouth, but Daenerys sent a mental command to him, and he closed his mouth with a cluck.

The two new dragons continued to hiss and roar as hers until she opened her mind in that strange manner that Ranna had taught her, not concentrating on her own two dragons, simply shouting "Stop!" at the top of her mental and physical voice.

The word hit like a hammer blow and both new dragons fell back, nearly upsetting their riders, who had yet to dismount. The two dragons stared at her, and she glared back, completely without fear.

"Still!" She ordered in Valerian and sharply gestured with her hands down. She noted with the portion of her mind that was not busy at the moment the amusing look of consternation on the faces of Viserys and this unknown dragonseed's at the dragons obeying her. As the dragons subsided, Daenerys stared at the two men in the eyes for a moment. "There will be no fighting here, not right now. This is a parlay occurring under a flag of truce, not some, some kind of dick beating contest!"

Yet it was taking all of her energy to keep these two new beasts from breaking her control. The smaller beast wasn't fighting her so much. It was angry at her commands yes but obeying Daenerys as a younger dragon would a far older one. Of course there was none of the love or affection that she had built up with Sunfyre at Rhaegon there, simply respect.

Yet somehow she could feel this dragon saw the connection between Daenerys and her two little one. There was a sense of wonder there, yet it also shied back, a very odd feeling.

But the black dragon, the black dragon was another matter entirely. It was insane, there is no other word for it. Its mind was snarling, angry, and mad its own head, it reveled in the struggle in pain, it wanted to unleash its fires all the time, to burn everything. *By the gods old and new, what did Viserys do to you?* This was beyond even her worst dreams, she could sense the taint of its madness, cloying in its brain, could see the scars on its flanks and necks, and bile rose in her mouth.

In her anger at the two dragons Daenerys hadn't even noticed the parties that had followed them on horseback, and now she turned to them. She stared at Arianne then at the woman with her, who was one of the better looking women Daenerys had ever seen, an incongruous thing to notice here.

The men of the Golden Company were also not what she expected, there was not one among them who she would peg as a Lord or noble at all, they looked like what they were, rich mercenaries wearing their worldly possessions on their bodies. They seemed barbarically impressive, but time spent in the North had shown her that austerity bred much tougher men than those who wallowed in wealth.

"Remove your beasts." She ordered the two dragonriders. "Your parties may remain here until you return."

"You have your dragons here sister, it's only fair I keep Balerion! I'm certainly not going to let you..."

"**My** little ones are trained," said Daenerys coldly, reaching out to rub Rhaegon's neck while the larger of her two was glaring angrily at the black beast, who continued to try to break her control. "Your Balerion isn't, it would attack the moment I turn my back. I will send my two back to our camp the moment you and yours are gone, that is the best you're going to get, brother dear."

Viserys scowled, but realized that was the case. He had underestimated the aggressiveness Balerion would feel towards other dragons. He liked it, he liked that aspect a lot. He was eager now for the battle to begin so that he could unleash Balerion's stronger fire and larger body on the smaller ones who had obviously been coddled by her sister. Let alone the one that was somehow being flown by a lowly dragonseed with delusions of grandeur. "We'll see how you and your 'little ones' do in battle later sister." He scowled pulling his dragon's head around. "I will return anon."

Balerion's wings flapped, smacking into Sunfyre and the other smaller dragon, both of whom hissed angrily but were stilled by the weight of Daenerys's mind on them.

With the larger threat dealt with Daenerys turned to the dragonseed. Still in the saddle, he puffed himself up importantly, smiling in what he possibly thought was a winsome manner. "Dear aunt, there is no need for this of hostility, as he can see my Calixares is..."

"I cannot allow you to retain Calixares and send only my brother's Balerion away. As I said, this is a parlay, peace will be discussed here, posing and showing off has no place here. You have proven that at least you have Targaryen blood, well done." She said as concession. "Anything else can be discussed later. For now take your dragon back to your camp please."

The supposed Aegon raised an eyebrow, his smile segueing into a scowl. "Or what, Viserys might feel some familial loyalty to you, but mine is the strongest claim, by what right do you give me orders?"

"I don't give you orders." Daenerys said smiling thinly. "If common courtesy does not move you, then I'll give an order to your dragon itself."

The man scowled, wondering if he should call her bluff but given what she had already done, calming four of the beasts so dramatically, he decided not to chance that it was a bluff at all. With a final scowl he turned Calixares around then ordered it into the air.

Once the two interlopers were gone Daenerys spent a few moments caressing Sunfyre and Rhaegon's heads. She sent them thoughts of affection and happiness that they didn't lose control along with pride in the same. Then she told them to find Myrcella, who would have a tasty meal for them, some bear meat that had been taken by a one of their foraging parties. Not as good as crab, but crab did not travel well. With that done Daenerys barely nodded at the two groups that had followed the dragons before entering the pavilion, allowing them to gawk after her.

Varys was staring after her thoughtfully as were the Golden Company commanders, while everyone in Arianne's party was looking shocked. Nymeria in particular was watching her with narrowed eyes, wondering how in the Stranger's Hells the woman had somehow controlled Balerion, who even his rider had trouble with.

For his part Petyr was now very worried. He had not wanted to be a part of this parlay, for various reasons, but Viserys had insisted and he had not been able to get out of it. *Not good, if she can control the beasts even that little a bit, they might be useless against her forces in battle. Without Balerion, our forces are by far the last least effective of the four gathered here in open battle. And then there is my old adversary Varys being among this 'Aegon's' army...*

Varys was thinking along similar lines except his thoughts held more self-recrimination than Petyr's. *I should've decided to back her entirely, rather than switch my allegiance to the easily led young Aegon. I had proof that Stark was more capable than I had thought, why didn't I think that the same could be said of the woman he took to wife?* That bit of news had finally reached his ears, far too slow for his liking, but he had finally heard of it. *But with Stark married to her, I doubt I could insinuate myself into their camp right now.*

Others were dismayed as well, but not for the same reason as the others. Arianne was dismayed at seeing this dragonseed at all, realizing his presence meant any attempt to bring the Iron Bank to their side was useless. Her cousins were dismayed to see the acrimony between the three Targaryen factions, already seeing that bringing even two of them to the same side might be impossible.

While the two groups were discussing what happened and Daenerys was sitting down next to her husband demurely to grins from all around her, Stannis, Melisandre and his party arrived. Stannis wore a crown of gold denoted with flames and rubies, much like the one Viserys and the pretender were wearing though with different jewels.

Seeing this Ranma stood up, his face becoming grim as he recognized Mace from the description Margaery had given him once of her father. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go perform an pleasant duty." He moved to the edge of the pavilion, noting absently that it had begun to rain again, a light spritz that no doubt would continue through the rest of the day.

He nodded his head in acknowledgment of Lord Stannis. "Lord Stannis Baratheon, we never met, though my father thought highly of you before this all began. I'm Ranma Stark. I've met some of your witch's minions before this." He smiled thinly, watching as Stannis's eyes narrowed. "For now however, you probably noticed that we had to send Viserys and this newcomer back, so it will be a while before the parlay can actually commence."

Stannis nodded his head jerkily. "Your wife should never have brought her own dragons to this meeting, that was simply asking for trouble from those two. This should have been between men, and the fewer the better at the outset."

"Hindsight is always better than foresight my Lord, but that is neither here nor there. But I did not come out here to greet you. I wish to speak to Lord Mace for a moment alone, if I could."

Stannis stared at him, then nodded and Ranma gestured Lord Ashford to join them. Mace scowled angrily. "Bah,

whatever you wish to say to me can be said here! Are you going to demand a price for Ashford's parole, and where is my son if so?" He barked a laugh. "Hah, I bet you don't want to release him because you're scared of meeting him in battle!"

No news of the outcome of Ashford's and Loras' chase of the bastard king and his party had reached Mace. Stannis had heard about the outcome from Melisandre, and had not deemed it important enough to share with the man, but that battle had not been witnessed by any smallfolk, so word of it had not spread far yet.

"Lord Mace, I regret to inform you that your son Loras died nearly a month ago. He was killed by Jaime Kingslayer in battle. My own forces came upon the battle after Jaime and Lord Serret's forces had ambushed their pursuers, though Lord Ashford will be able to tell you more."

"No!" Mace said, his face going white and he clutched his heart for a moment over his breastplate, staggering back as the other Reach lords in earshot cursed and exclaimed in shock. "No! You lie! My son was the most magnificent knight in all of Westeros, no one could best him, not even the Kingslayer!"

"I'm sorry to say Lord Tyrell, but it's the truth." Lord Ashford said somewhat hesitantly. "We had chased the Bastard King for days, and scored a major victory against them once. But in the chase after that we had exhausted ourselves thinking that Lord Serret and his men were also exhausting themselves. But then they turned on us, catching us unawares. We lost much of our own men, and it was only the timely intervention of the Northerners that allowed any of us to survive."

Ashford sighed sadly, shaking his head. "I personally saw your son fall, and how Lord Stark avenged him. He the Kingslayer's sword arm off at the elbow, and has since sent him to the Wall."

"He should've been killed! The man was a traitor to all Westeros, an oathbreaker twice over!" Stannis said harshly joining the conversation while Mace's face went white, his knees seeming to fail him.

Though he would never admit it to anyone, Loras had long been his favorite. Willas had been touted by his grandmother so frequently with Mace's own intelligence compared negatively to his oldest son that a distance had grown between them. Garlan had not spent much time at home since he was 12, being sent to ward with House Tarly, then marrying right after returning from that before moving in to live with his wife's family. Margaery of course was a woman, and thus not as important in Mace's eyes save as a bargaining chip.

But Loras, Loras had been his favorite. A peerless knight Loras who had listened to Mace, and often times agreed with his ideas, who followed his instructions and getting closer to Renly and to the royal house. Strong, dependable, honorable, and willing to follow Mace without question unlike his older siblings Loras had been all Mace wanted in a child. His death was like a saber to Mace's heart.

"I would've executed him, except we need every able sword we can get on the Wall, which is the reason this parlay in the first place Lord Baratheon." Ranma said to Stannis, motioning Stannis to move to one side while Lord Ashford continued to talk about Loras and his last campaign to Mace.

Melisandre's eyes narrowed having followed the two. "So you know of the Great Other as well? Then why do you fight against the Azor Ahai! Is it just in misplaced lust for your wife and a wish to bow to her ambitions?"

"The word is **love**, Witch," said Ranma scowling at her. "I love my wife and that is never 'misplaced'. Besides, you sent your Shadow Warriors to attack her while she was under my protection but not yet my wife. No House could honorably surrender someone who they had vowed protections to, especially not to such a force as you sent against us."

Melisandre scowled while Stannis did the same toward her, motioning Melisandre to be silent. Ranma nodded and went on. "But as to the Others, the White Walkers? Yes I've known of them and planned for it. This war I had not planned, but we're here now, and what has happened in the past cannot be undone." He smiled thinly looking over Stannis's shoulder. "I see that 'Aegon' or whoever he is and Viserys have arrived, shall we sit?"

By the time Viserys and his supposed nephew arrived Stannis and Melisandre had taken their seats at the table opposite Ranma and Daenerys, though more than one lord had stopped, stunned to see Ser Barristan Selmy standing behind where Daenerys was sitting. The fact he was still alive, and apparently had given his fealty to Ranma and Daenerys, came as an unpleasant shock to many.

The two Targaryen members glared at one another as they sat opposite on the other two sides of the table, their own parties ranging behind them. Harry Strickland sat to Aegon's right while Grif sat on his left. Arianne sat to one side of

Viserys, while Jorah Mormont sat to his other.

Jorah could barely tear his eyes away from Daenerys, she was simply magnificent! *I should have murdered Viserys when I had the chance, then Illyrio and I could have backed Daenerys entirely, maybe even found a way to get out of marrying her off to that Dothraki barbarian! Too late now, damn it all!*

When he did tear his eyes away from Daenerys, he found his niece Dacey glaring at him. She was standing directly behind Ranma, her eyes locked on Jorah like she wanted nothing more than to take his life right then, and he frowned, not having expected to see her, or any of his family really, and he looked away rapidly.

"I am uncertain why we are meeting like this at all." Viserys said angrily looking around at the others. "Unless some of you have had a sudden change of heart, we have nothing to talk about! Baratheon, you and your family are regicides, only you immediately bowing to me will negate that! As for you Stark, if my sister renounces her claim on the throne, I will let you and yours live and return to the North provided you swear to never raise blade against me and my House again. Yet I know neither is likely!"

Viserys didn't want to show it, but he was badly rattled by his sister's ability to control Balerion even if only a few moments with just the power of her voice and glare. Before that he would've settled for nothing but their deaths, but now, with the very real possibility that he might lose Balerion if they came down to a fight between him and his sister, he was willing to deal.

"To me you mean, they should bow to me." Said the blue haired youth across from Viserys, smiling thinly. He held out a hand, and Varys put a scroll in it, before going back to leering, in a semi-discreet manner, at Daenerys and the other ladies in the tent. All of them were gorgeous but his aunt was head and shoulders above the others. *No one said my aunt was so gorgeous! Hmmm... She hasn't gotten bred by the Stark yet, and keeping the line true is important...*

He smiled in what he thought was a winning manner. Daenerys thought it made him look like a simpleton. "I am Aegon, son of Rhaegar, firstborn of the last King, the last **true** King of Westeros. The lines of succession are clear uncle, and here are my proofs. My Dragon and my ability to bond with it, and the word of Varys and my own retainer, Jon Connington, who Rhaegar trusted above all others. The two of them secreted me out of King's Landing before the Lannister's betrayal with my mother's contrivance, replacing my body with that of a dragonseed, his hair dyed to look like mine."

"You do realize that the Iron Throne is gone? Any kind of credence or legitimacy you might have thought to take from it is gone with it." Ranma asked lightly while Daenerys smiled thinly. Since the two of them had decided long before the throne was actually destroyed to toss it aside as a symbol of power, it mattered not at all to them. But that bland statement badly rattled Viserys and Aegon, even though they must've heard of it before. They stopped and stared at the two of them, their jaws working angrily before glaring at Stannis.

Stannis glared right back. "King's Landing had to be cleansed. A plague, in that city? Yes, I could've continued the cordon, I could've continued to starve the people within. But would that have been a better way to die? Better to die quickly in fire than a slow lingering death like that to disease and malnourishment."

He glared at all three of those posing as king', before concentrating on Aegon then glaring at Jon. "I remember Jon Connington, and you do look like him, if sickly. I also remember the rumors that you were infatuated with Rhaegar. That you would do anything he asked. That you could come up with a plot to somehow avenge him is easily within the realm of possibility, regardless of any truth behind it. I saw the bodies of Elia and her children, and how the Lannisters betrayal had taken everyone in the Red Keep by surprise, even Varys. This youth is no more a pure Targaryen than I am!"

Viserys found himself agreeing with Stannis for a moment, moving past the fact of the Iron Throne and King's Landing being gone to tackle the current issue. "Anything that comes from the Master of Whisper's mouth is a lie! You might have enough Targaryen blood in you to get a dragon to obey you, but that does not make you my nephew Aegon, nor does it give you the right to call yourself King!"

"Nor does senseless brutality or a dragon to your name." Ranma said. "We've heard what you did in Dragonstone. Do you think that makes you a better option for kingship than this 'Aegon'? The fact you sit there with the traitor Littlefinger and the coward and slaver Jorah Mormont isn't exactly a mark in your favor either."

He smiled thinly, his blue eyes darker than the ocean. "By the way, my mother wants to see you Petyr, well, no, she wants to see your head. My father told her all about your betrayal of him, and how you were the one to convince Robert to send me away, and she was quite emphatic about wanting me to send her your head. Possibly with a bow

attached, though personally I just want to kill you, not emasculate you like that."

Petyr gulped, torn between fear, grief and anger. *So she truly has forsaken me entirely. Very well, I knew it long before this, and Sansa was always the better option anyway, unsullied as she is.*

He let none of his thoughts show however, merely sitting there silent while Jorah scowled at the accusations thrown his way, accurate though they were. Yet Jorah couldn't say anything, pinned in place by the cool contempt in Daenerys' eyes, forcing him to look away.

Viserys however growled angrily, ignoring the accusations thrown at his advisor's feet. "My family conquered Westeros through fire and steel, and if I have to do the same I'll do it!"

"I would say that since only Dorne has agreed to follow you, that is a very high possibility. But what will be left of the country after brother?" Daenerys asked, angrily smacking her hand on the table. "We've also heard rumors about the campaign that set the Viper on, would you rule over a nation of dead?"

She turned to Aegon. "As for you, I agree with what has been said about your claims, that is all they are **claims!** Varys cannot be trusted, a traitor to not one but two Kings, who has always followed those who will promise him more power and security. And your own power is based on much the same, money. I don't see a single Lord of Westeros with you, I see mercenaries, bought and paid for by the iron Bank no doubt."

"Hah, that is just because we haven't been in Westeros over long!" Aegon proclaimed grandly. "I'll gather more allies given time. And I'd say uncle that in terms of conquering Westeros I've made a far better start than you! Varys said that Dragonstone and Driftmark were both taken from you the moment you fled with your tail between your legs from the Royal Navy! Whereas I have already conquered two houses on Massey's Hook!"

Two of the men with Stannis flinched at that, but Ranma simply shook his head. "Fire and sword, is that all you know? And I wouldn't get all puffed up about attacking two Houses when their fighting men were elsewhere."

Stannis nodded, holding up a hand to halt the two men, Lord Massey and Lord Bar Emmon, from speaking. "I agree with Stark on that point, but I would ask if you would be willing to ransom any prisoners of those families at this point."

"We took only two captive from Massey, and none from Bar Emmon." Aegon replied, shaking his head, smiling thinly. "One I doubt you'll want back and the other I refuse to part with for now. Until I get a replacement at least." He leered at Daenerys and Arianne suggestively but neither replied verbally, simply answering his leer with disdainful glares.

Lord Massey growled his hand clenched on his sword hilt. But Stannis held up a hand again, forcing the man to calm himself while Ranma, understanding what the boy was hinting at, growled angrily, the sound sending a shiver up more than one spine.

Next to him Daenerys sighed faintly leaning back but her eyes were hard, nailing Aegon to his seat. "I had hoped to speak to a representative of the Iron Bank, to convince them to back off from paying for this mad venture. With the Golden Tooth under our control, we could pay off the debt in its entirety given time."

The Golden Company men looked interested at that, though Aegon and Jon Connington sneered contemptuously at the idea. Daenerys shook her head. "However hearing what you have already done along with your own position, that option is off the table. Instead, my husband and I will reiterate our position. There is no debt accrued to us, and you and yours will pay dearly in blood to get your gold worth out of Westeros."

"And so we come down to what really makes a king." Stannis said smiling thinly. "No previous claim of Lordship or family ties matter here, only brute force. I broke my brother's army, I have the Reach and the might of the Stormlands and the Crownlands behind me. And I have the prophetess Melisandre, her powers are mine to use."

He looked at Ranma especially, understanding he was the most dangerous threat and the most reasonable. "I am the Azor Ahai, the one prophesied to beat back the White Walkers, or as Melisandre puts it, the Great Other. Join with me, and I will guarantee you, your family and your wife safety so long as you swear fealty."

"What talk is this?" Viserys scowled angrily though if that was at being ignored for a few moments or the talk of something he hadn't heard about before, none could say. "What is this Great Other?"

Melisandre spoke up from where she had sat silent up till now beside Stannis. "The Great Other is a creature of darkness and death, of cold endless winter. It is coming with the power of winter, and we have very little time before disaster strikes."

Ranma looked at her, frowning at the knowledge that it wasn't only the Old Gods who were seeing disaster on the horizon. They had barely a little under a month to go before the ultimatum of two months was over, and frankly from here there was no way he could get his army up to the North in time, not its entirety. Even if they could take to sea that would be impossible.

But that was neither here nor there. "Actually, you don't have the Reach behind you. You have some of its military force, and it's deposed Lord Paramount. Mace Tyrell, your daughter and oldest son have decided my Lord that you have made too many mistakes. You allowed the Reach to be attacked while you were off trying to put kingmaker, and you have backed a follower of a foreign god, going so far as to pledge your daughter to a then-married man." he said looking at Mace who had apparently gotten over his shock at Loras' death and was now puffing himself up like a fish, glaring angrily back at him.

"The Reach, through your daughter Lady Margaery, has sworn to follow us. We've already sent them aid, doing your job for you Mace and will send more if need be." Daenerys took over from Ranma smoothly, holding up the message Margaery sent him. "If you wish you may examine this missive Lady Margaery sent us, essentially pleading for aid and in return placing Highgarden, and in particular herself, at our service regardless of your own actions."

"How dare you!" Mace yelled, making no move to take the message. "My children have done no such thing!"

Behind Mace and Stannis however, many of the Reach lords and knights were looking at one another in shock, and, though many were trying to hide it, hope. Others seemed concerned, which made sense on many levels of course, but regardless it was obvious to Daenerys that Mace's control of the Reach lords wasn't as total as he thought. But Melisandre had turned her body slightly so that she was watching them as well as the men behind Ranma, and most of their faces blanked quickly.

"My Lord." Said Lord Ashford quietly, as if to mirror Daenerys' thoughts. "I gave them my parole and my oath willingly. Loras, your son, he did not wish to follow Stannis. Not just because of his personal friendship with Renly, but because of Stannis's religion, as Lord Stark has said. How can you stand there and follow a fire worshiper, who listens to a witch who burns people alive! The lord who burned the entirety of King's Landing, whatever the reason!"

The septon Ehric took this opportunity to speak up, his voice solemn, soft yet carrying to every ear, and what he said caused even more consternation among the lords behind Stannis, than Ranma's statement. Even one or two houses among the Dornish contingent seemed startled. "The conclave of the Devout of the Seven has decided that Ranma and Daenerys Stargaryen are the right king and queen of Westeros. Her Majesty wears the sign of this backing at her side."

Daenerys smiled thinly pulling Dark Sister out of its sheathe slowly, holding it up to the light of the torches in the corners of the pavilion so that the others could see the Valyrian blade. "Dark Sister, the sword of Visenya Targaryen last wielded by Bloodraven, which was lost in the Dance of the Dragons, given to me by the Seven's representative as proof of their backing. As a sign of the rightness of our cause, one of the two blades House Targaryen wielded when they conquered Westeros takes some beating."

In response Viserys' teeth clenched, and Aegon and Varys scowled. Varys in particular was angry because Daenerys was right, as a sign of her primacy over the other two Targaryen claimants, that and her dragons were incredibly hard to beat. *Stranger's Hell's, why couldn't Blackfyre have really been among the Golden Company, with that at least Aegon would have something the others would have to respect in terms of his claim. I truly did back the wrong horse in this race, curse it! And with Ranma of the oh-so-blindly honorable Starks sitting next to her, I could never convince her to allow me to switch sides, at least not without getting her alone first.*

Stannis however ignored the sword, addressing the more important aspect in a combative tone of voice while Melisandre continued to sneak glances at their own lords. "Where were the Seven when we needed them? They never answered our prayers, never gave us power! When Melisandre asks R'hllor for power, it replies, that is all there is to it. I believe what I can see. The Seven, I have never seen proof of their existence!"

"R'hllor is the true god, all others are mere demons!" Melisandre said, her voice intense, her eyes alight with fervor.

That caused some anger from both the lords behind Ranma and some from her own camp and Viserys'.

Realizing this and looking at the faces of Aegon, Stannis and Viserys along with their advisors, Ranma knew that everyone had said what they had to at this point. All that was left was needless posturing, so he decided to cut it short. *We've already planted a few seeds, and so have they among themselves.* If there was one thing Ranma was certain of, none of these three had anything his own lords were interested in hearing at this point, certainly nothing that would make them change their allegiance at this late a date.

He stood up abruptly, motioning Daenerys to do the same. "We've all said what we wish to, and none of us are willing at this point to actually listen. We were here to talk not make threats, but none of you are willing to truly listen. Very well, the battlefield will have to decide this. Any Lord that takes his men and walks away from this will be allowed to do so, provided that they swear allegiance to my wife and I later. But at the moment I do not see if there can never be real peace between any of our camps."

Harry frowned, and was about to speak up, but Ranma turned to stare at him. "As for you mercenaries, if you hadn't already made war on Westerosi soil already, I would be willing to let you walk. As it is, you may retreat to Duskendale and leave these shores, if you leave everything you have taken in your assaults on those Houses."

The Golden company commanders scowled, seeing the contempt in Ranma's eyes, the hate in more than one lord's faces. Even Viserys was sneering at them. He had long hoped to woo the Golden Company to his side, and had spent hundreds, thousands of gold dragons trying to woo them. Yet the men now backing this false Aegon had eaten his food and drunk his wine then laughed in his face.

Stannis stood up as well, sneering at young Aegon and Viserys before glaring across the table at Ranma. "I agree with Lord Stark on you foreign scum yet I will say the same to you pretender, and you Stark. Disband your armies and bend the knee to me. Only then will this conflict end Stark and we can turn our attention to more important matters."

The young man going by the name Aegon stood as well glaring at them all equally. "There is one more way, with your deaths. I too will allow any Lord to walk away from this, you don't have to die for the stupidity of others." He said staring at the lords behind Stannis, Ranma and Viserys. "Go home, take your men and go. Bow to the throne later, so that you don't have to die now."

Viserys simply scoffed. "But who will they bow to, pretender? You don't even have the true Targaryen hair! Your claim is nothing, your power is nothing, bought and paid for by the gold of the Iron Bank as my sister says! And it will run just as easily as the steel that made the Iron Throne under Balerion's breath!"

He then turned to Stannis and Daenerys. "I have nothing to say to you Baratheon, you and your brother rebelled, and will pay the price."

Arianne spoke up before he could go on. "And if you fight us, your daughter will pay the price. Lady Shireen has been in our care since we took Dragonstone."

More than one lord behind Stannis gasped, and Stannis paled for a moment before his face firmed. "No, i will not be bidden like that. If you wish to make my innocent daughter 'pay' for my fighting you so be it, my vengeance on you and your house will be all the worse."

In response to that and the look in his eye Arianne actually quailed for a moment while Elia and Nymeria shared a glance behind her. They had not wanted to bring up Shireen at all in this meeting, hoping to keep her, and the fact they had treated her well despite Viserys (or Petyr strangely enough) at times, in reserve to procure their own well-being if things went wrong. But that might not be an option any longer, if Viserys gave orders to the contrary.

Viserys however merely scoffed and turned to his sister. "As for you sister, you and your wolf, you whored yourself out to him so that you could have your own power base, but it is not enough! I have the greater claim regardless of what you or anyone else thinks!"

"I'm willing to take the test of dragonfire." Daenerys said smiling thinly at both men. "Are you? I have already been bathed in dragonfire once, proving my immunity. Have you? Who is the true dragon here?"

Ranma ignored the glaring between the three Targaryen members staring hard at the lords beyond Viserys and Stannis, who both stood up in preparation to leave was well. "Walk away from this field today my lords, lest none of you leave alive tomorrow." With that he turned, taking Daenerys's hand and moving towards Fenris while his lords followed grimly.

OOOOOO

Later that night Ranma bid Daenerys and Myrcella farewell with a kiss for both of them, before exiting their tent. Daenerys followed, looking at her dragons before sending Rhaegon into the sky. Dragons could see as well as direwolves in the dark and if need be Rhaegon would be joining the defense against the threat they all knew was coming tonight. Around the fire set outside the royal's tent the Wolfsworn waited.

Patrek was there too, helping the others into their armor while looking morose. His training had not yet reached the



point where he could use ki to empower his sword, so would be useless tonight. Ranma had actually thought about giving him Ice for the evening, but he wasn't trained on a greatsword, and he wasn't as fast or as strong as the Wolfsworn either. Sending him against the Shadow Warriors would be sending him to his death. Only the Wolfsworn had a chance against those creatures.

Ranma stood in front of them while behind him Fenris bumped his large head against Myrcella and Daenerys, receiving scratchings behind his ear before joining his bonded. "We all know what we're going to face. We're the biggest threat to Stannis, we'll face the lion's share of the witch's Shadow Warriors.

"You think he'll send any at all against the other two armies?" Smalljon asked, putting the finishing touches on his greatsword's edge. He closed his eyes for a brief second concentrating, and the edge began to glow blue gold, causing him to smile thinly behind his beard.

"Maybe, depends on how many the Witch has made. Stannis will want to overwhelm us and cause a lot of damage to the army, but we have to assume they know we can fight them, maybe not all of you, but me, Fenris and the dragons."

Roger grunted, leaning down to kiss Osha who while tall for a woman was still a head shorter than him. She was not joining them for this excursion. Not having any training with Ranma and no ki to speak of, Roger had jumped on that as an excuse to keep her from coming. He so very rarely could come up with one after all. Roger then turned away his new Valyrian sword in one hand. He had been trained on the longsword before taking up the battleax by preference. Thankfully Osha had not figured out that Valyrian blades didn't need 'ki', to be deadly to the Shadow Warriors.

He smirked suddenly. "I wonder what Jon and Arya will think when they hear they missed this party. Or even Edd! He might get a wife out of his trip, but I bet he'd give it over to be here now."

"I predict language they would not want our mother to hear." Ranma quipped, though inside he wished all three of them were here. For this battle he'd want the entire Wolfsworn here if he could get it, and he cursed himself once again for having sent Jon and Arya off as he had.

He exchanged a nod with Hathan, who stood up his heavy armor clanking greatsword sheathed along his back the same as Ice for Ranma. Then he looked around at the others and simply nodded. "Let's hunt, Wolfsworn."

They made their way through the camp, exchanging greetings with those who were still awake, while around them some 2000 irregular infantry were being armed with the little surprise that Ranma had prepared up in Seagard. Once they were armed they marched out along with the pike regiments as quietly as they could towards the west without any lights or anything else to give their progress away.

Patrek went with them as their commander until Smalljon or Ranma could join them. There was a small dip in the land about two leagues distance at the far end of the small forest they had been using as a source for wood. They would hide there for the rest of the night.

*They might not've been able to hide from Stannis if his army was north or south of us, but as it is, the Golden Company and Dornish will do our job for us and keep his scouts from seeing that force.* Ranma thought grimly as he continued through the camp.

Behind him Smalljon stopped, exchanging a hard hand clasp with his father before moving on, with Daryn, Roger and Dacey doing the same while Hathan did the same with Wendel. Everyone knew that Hathan was Wendell's half-brother, but they wouldn't acknowledge it, they owed the memory of Lady Manderly that much. Still, the hand clasp they shared before Hathan followed the others was warm and heartfelt.

Soon they reached the front line of the camp, where several dozen swordsmen were guarding the barricade, and 200 archers were stationed on top of each fort marking either edge. They all nodded at the Wolfsworn, the entire army knew what the Wolfsworn were going to face tonight. Knew that they were the only ones that that even if Valyrian blades had been made available to all of them, it would still have been an uphill battle to fight the Shadow Warriors.

"So how are we going to do this boss?" said Roger his fingers, twitching his eyes alight. He detested the tension before battle, and always sought to make light of it.

"Spread out, with Fenris and I in the center facing Stannis' army. Spread out until you can barely see one another, then wait for Fenris to give the signal to light up our blades. It is time for the Shadows to Fall lads, who's with me!?" Ranma's words were answered with a roar and the Wolfsworn walked on into the dark of night beyond the camp.

OOOOOO

The armies of Aegon and Viserys didn't have the Wolfsworn, and lacked any kind of magic of their own, but they did have two of the most capable spymasters in Westeros. So they knew that Melisandre might be sending out her Warriors, but also had ideas on what could face them.

Having no other recourse, Viserys set Balerion out on the edge of the army where he could see Stannis' army in the distance. Behind Balerion, Viserys had the lords who had Valyrian blades on guard, since Petyr, like Varys, had found out that such blades negated other magic, having been made by the fires of dragons, which was inherently magical. Yet such blades were extremely rare, and only two Houses had such. House Yronwood had one, called Steel Branch, and House Jordayne had another called Ocean's Call. But that was all.

Aegon did the same, but the Golden Company had more Valyrian blades in its possession. Such blades were slightly more common in Essos, where the Valyrian Freehold had held territory for so long. The Golden Company had seven blades, all longswords, though surprisingly the leader of the Company of the Rose, Rochland the Giant, had a Valyrian greatsword.

Despite their preparations both 'kings' were nervous, far more nervous than they had been during the day. The reports of the Shadow Warriors were horrifying and had made their situation worse than it already had been.

Balerion reared its head up, staring out into the darkness as movement caught his attention. He hadn't been fed yet, making him both hungry and angry, thrashing in its chains but not yet hungry enough or angry enough to try to turn its flame on the encampment behind it. Besides, the camp was out of his range anyway.

Out of the dark of the night came Shadow Warriors, five of them loping their way through the grassland towards Viserys' army. Seeing the dragon, they slightly changed course coming straight towards it.

Balerion's eyes narrowed, the red in them deepening into that of carmine as he reared up on his back legs. Flames began to appear around his lips, then Balerion opened his mouth, unleashing a torrent of flame upon the creatures. Three of them died screaming in that first attack, but the other two quickly spread out, coming at the large dragon from two different directions.

"RAAAHhh!" With a roar Balerion whirled, bringing its tail around to smash one of them. The blow flung it back unharmed while its blade cut into the dragon's tail near where he been injured in the battle against the Royal Navy. Balerion roared again, its flames engulfing the fourth Shadow Warrior before it turned, and a fireball destroyed the last. For a moment all was silent, then Balerion roared a third time in triumph. "RAAAAGGGHHH!"

Hearing that sound in the camp Viserys smiled thinly at his wife. "You see my dear, even magical creations cannot withstand dragonfire!"

Arianne nodded, then gestured to a few camp workers nearby. "Prepare some of the food and take it forward to Balerion, he's earned his meal tonight."

"I wonder if my dear sister and her paramour will be able to handle this...." Viserys mused. "She has two dragons true, but I'll warrant neither have the fire or combat mentality of mine. But Stark does have his own skills and Ice. Hmm...."

Despite their advantage in having more Valyrian blades, the Golden Company fared far worse. Again five Shadow Warriors were sent against it, but they attacked slightly later than the attack on Viserys. Melisandre had learned from their fellow's demise, and her mental commands had this group spread out. Only two of them engaged the smaller Dragon. The other three attacked the camp itself, slaying more than a hundred-and-sixty men before they were felled by the men who carried Valyrian blades.

But Ranma and Daenerys were right, the main blow fell on them.

OOOOOO

At the same time that those attacks were occurring, Ranma and the others had spread out, waiting nervously in the dark well away from the torches of their own army in an effort to bring more of the attack on themselves even if the Shadow Warriors spread too wide for all of their number to be caught on the line.

It was a very nervous time for most of them, waiting there in the dark with your friends only slim silhouettes in the distance. Not wanting any of them to ruin their night vision they hadn't brought along torches. Thankfully the moon was high in the sky, and it and the stars provided enough light to see for the most part.

To ease some of the tension Ranma addressed Hathan in a loud voice. "So Hathan, have you decided on the words of your House yet?"

From his far right Hathan shouted back, his voice carrying to the rest of the Wolfsworn present easily. "I've narrowed it down to four choices. "Our shield for your back', 'shield of the North', 'our honor is our shield', or simply 'honors shield'."

"The fourth one." said several voices through the night. "The others are too wordy." Roger went on shaking his head. "You could've told me you were having trouble with that you now, I would've helped you out."

"I've heard some of your poetry Roger." Said Hathan, and even though he couldn't see it Ranma could easily picture Hathan's smile. "Your wife's not interested in you for your ability with song and verse, my friend."

"Was that a joke?" Smalljon asked incredulously. "It was almost funny. Keep at it, we might make a jester out of you yet!"

"Old Gods forfend!" said Ranma and Hathan together, causing them all to laugh.

Then the time for jokes was over. Fenris suddenly sat up from where he had been lying beside Ranma. He sat up sniffing at then wind, howling aloud and snarling his teeth suddenly gleaming blue and gold in the darkness. "AWOOOO!"

Ranma link his senses to that of his direwolf for a moment, seeing the Shadows rising coming towards them. "Here they come!" he shouted aloud breaking the connection, pulling out Ice and holding it above his head while his fist began to glow blue gold. "Light them up boys, it's time to show the shadows the light can fight back! **Winter is coming!**" He howled aloud and then charged towards the incoming clumps of Shadow Warriors.

For a moment his friends could only stare in shock at the image of their leader charging forward with Fenris at his side then concentrated for those brief moments it took to bring out their ki into their weapons and howled after him. "The Wolves, the Wolfsworn for the king!"

OOOOOO

Back in the camp Daenerys stood silently in the tent, her eyes closed as she concentrated on her two dragons both of which were now aloft and flying around the camp staring down into the darkness. *Good luck my love.*

Next to her Myrcella took her hand squeezing it gently. Daenerys squeezed back thankful for the girls support, while she continued to watch the evolving action through her dragons' eyes, both of them at once despite it being a very disconcerting feeling. If the Wolfsworn failed or were flanked too badly she would have to send her dragons in to aid them, but if she did that she would put the Wolfsworn in just as much danger as their opponents. *Unless I see a clump of them breaking off or something...*

OOOOOO

The sudden howl of the Wolfsworn's raised voices along with Ranma's charge seemed to startle the Shadow Warriors coming towards the Stargaryen camp. But after that brief moment of hesitation they charged too silent as always, though they were not the uniform mass Ranma had expected.

A few of them were the giant, more solid looking types that Rama had battled with Fenris a few weeks back. Others looked almost half finished, as if the substance that made them up was losing power, their swords nonexistent only using their claws as weapons. Others were the more normal sort, with swords which looked like carved ebony in the darkness, drinking in what little light there was. All of them had the breeds fell red eyes, all of them stood taller than a man, moving with an unnatural loping speed that was disconcerting to watch as they closed through the moonlit landscape. Their limbs didn't quite move correctly, but it was obvious they were in full control of their bodies even so.

But worse was their numbers. There were over 120 of them streaking straight towards the Wolfsworn.

Ranma and Fenris slammed into the center of their advancing force like a hammer. Their bodies were entirely covered in blue-gold armor for a moment, blazing in the night visibly from the watchmen back in the forts before they were inside the Shadow Warrior's formation. They cut, hacked, bit, clawed at the Shadow Warriors all around them, downing ten in as many seconds.

The Shadow Warriors advance folded around them, trying to envelop them, but then the Wolfsworn hit. Daryn cut

down a Shadow Warrior from behind his sword stained blue-gold with the light of his life energy, before he batted aside another Warrior's sword, leaving that Shadow Warrior open for an attack from Hathar which cut it in twain.

"Riding Free!" Roger roared nearby, yelling his family's battle cry and cutting to either side of him with his blade, which he had taken to calling Roan for the color of its blade. Next to him Dacey stood, guarding his back and hacking at the unholy creatures with her own glowing blue-gold blade, while Smalljon simply bellowed wordless defiance, his massive greatsword whirling around him.

For a moment again the Shadow Warriors seemed to hesitate, something about those glowing blades and the fact that they could be harmed by them penetrating what little thought processes the Shadow Warriors possessed. But then they attacked with renewed vigor spurred on further by the urge to kill.

"Back to back!" shouted Ranma over the din of battle and the screams of the Shadow Warriors, who always screamed when they died, the only noise they ever made in battle. Ice took one Shadow Warrior in the gut, then Ranma leaped into the air, kicking out with feet that suddenly glowed with ki fire. Both feet impacted other Shadow Warriors in the chest, crushing them and sending them flying backwards screaming as they dissipated from what would've been shattered rib cage and burst internal organs on a man. His heightened position however allowed him to see that the Shadow Warriors were now all concentrating on them.

"Form a circle, now! They're all focused on us!" So saying Ranma landed on an upraised tower shield of one of the larger Shadow Warriors.

He quickly thrust Ice deep into its skull, the Valyrian blade bursting out the back of its skull before Ranma ripped the blade sideways viciously, slicing into another Shadow Warrior's shoulder as the first dissipated. Launching himself off the barely there substance of the shield Ranma landed near where Fenris was fighting snarling and ripping and tearing at the shadow monsters.

Rather than forming a wall in front of the army the Wolfsworn now formed a forward position, pulling all the Shadow Warriors who were supposed to attack the camp down upon themselves. It was working to protect the camp, but the battle was fierce and hard-fought. While they all had a speed advantage over the creatures, it wasn't as much as Ranma's and the Wolfsworn for all their skills were mortal.

Only a few minutes into the fight Hathar grunted, teeth clenched over a scream. A Shadow Warrior's claws had just punched through the plate armor over one shoulder piercing through as easily as if it was made of paper to dig five holes into his shoulder. Luckily the wounds weren't deep. In response Hathar brought his greatsword down in an overhand strike, cleaving that warrior in two. "Why is it always me?"

"It's not just you this time, you big whiner!" growled Dacey, standing beside him to his left. She was limping badly, having taken a slash from one of the Shadow Warrior's swords to her thigh.

She didn't even look up as Fenris leaped over her head to land in the center of the circle of Wolfsworn. He stood there while his ki strengthening technique faded for a moment. He panted, his tongue lolling, before licking at a wound along one forepaw.

In front of the Wolfsworn's circle Ranma continued to fight, leaping here there and everywhere, occasionally using the Kijin Raishin Dan to slaughter a particularly large batch of Shadow Warriors and making certain to intercept the few larger of the larger types he saw. The attack however didn't seem to work well on them. Only the front ranks of them dissipated entirely, while the others would somehow reform in a few seconds. Ranma was not at all certain of the mechanics of that, nor did he care right now. It was still doing damage, but it was wearing him out quickly.

Behind Ranma, Roger overextended on a lunge, letting his body open for an attack from his side. A Shadow Warrior pounced on the opportunity, its claws raking his side deeply causing him to cry out. "Aghh old gods damn you and the bitch that spawned you!" The glow of his sword went out for a moment as he lost the concentration needed to keep ki funneling into the blade for an instant. Daryn's blade caught the creature in the side of the neck, killing him instantly while Roger got his feet under him again.

"Are you all right?" Daryn asked. Beside them Smalljon hacked and roared laughing loudly drawing a bit more attention than the others for a moment while Daryn saw to Roger.

"I'll be fine eventually I suppose." Roger said but his voice was filled with pain. "These bastards are tough!"

He waved off Daryn, standing up again despite grimacing in pain but still game enough, though his sword no longer glowed with his ki. Roger instead had to rely solely on its Valyrian steel. It was well he did, because two more

Shadow Warriors came at him then and he raised his sword, and he met them with a roar, hacking them both down in a series of slashes and thrusts. "Come on you fuckers!"

OOOOOO

Daenerys grimaced angrily. Seeing the level of combat through her dragon's eyes, she sent them towards Stannis' army. *If there are anymore Shadow Warriors coming, my dragons have to intercept them. I know it's a risk, with the damn Red Bitch and whatever powers she has, but it's one I have to take. Or else none of the Wolfsworn might through the night.*

Through Sunfyre's eyes she saw them, another column of Shadow Warriors. *She had no idea how many there were, but there looks to be at least half again the number that was already fighting the Wolfsworn. If they join the fight, even Ranma might be overwhelmed, or worse, they could ignore him and our friends entirely to attack the army. That would be disastrous!* With that thought she sent her dragons down, attacking.

OOOOOO

In the enemy camp Melisandre had waited for this moment. **Yes!**

Staring into the fire that she was currently using as a focus Melisandre thrust her hands out towards the images of the two dragons that only she could see flying through the flames. She grabbed them both, laughing maniacally as the fire inside the dragons called to her and R'hllor. *Yes, the fire within you is still under the control of a higher power, foul, debased creatures. Now you will feel it's true might!*

The moment the dragons opened their mouth, the unique magical and alchemical reaction creating their flames at the back of their throats she grasped it, turning it on the dragons themselves. Instead of roaring out of their mouths, it began to turn on its creators, beginning to crawl around their mouths and down their gullets.

OOOOOO

"No!" Daenerys said aloud and in her head. Feeling her little ones in pain she desperately told them to stop, mentally ordering them to rise into the air and come towards her and away from the witch's influence. They both obeyed quickly, soaring higher into the sky and away from whatever was somehow turning their own fires against them, but the pain in their mouths persisted.

OOOOOO

Melisandre grimaced, extending her willpower, losing some of her control over her Shadow Warriors. The second group, instead of heading towards the Stargaryen camp, now made towards where their fellows were still battling. That first group had been whittled down to half strength now, if that, with more dying every second. *But if I can kill the dragons, then even if all of my Shadowbound die this nights wo, work...*

Her attention suddenly wavered, her limbs beginning to feel heavy. She stared into the fire, her eyes opening wide as she looked around wondering where the exhaustion was coming from. "W-what?"

As she came out of her trance Melisandre noticed her two attendants for the evening had collapsed where they had stood. One looked as if she had been in the process of moving toward her, while the other had simply fallen. One of them, the larger of the two, was still alive, hacking and clawing at her throat, while the other was still and dead.

Even as she took in this surprising sight, Melisandre fell to the side shaking and shuddering. *Some kind of, of poison, but how, where did it come from and how did I not see this attempt on my life in my visions? No, deal with it then worry about the how.*

With an effort of will Melisandre reached out, grasping the dying life force of her acolyte and forcing it into the holy flames. The fire roared up, and she grasped it's power, pouring that power through her own body. She convulsed as it struck her, beginning to sweat profusely, burning whatever poison was within her out before it could complete it's fell task.

From the back of the tent someone entered through a tiny, almost invisible rent made there. It was a man, his features were nondescript, in fact they were totally nondescript far more than any normal person. There was nothing whatsoever about him to mark him out as an individual, he was quite literally the face that could be lost in the crowd.

*Interesting, I will have to make a note for our archives, that with magic coming back into the world R'hllor worshipers can apparently burn poison out of their bodies. And are much tougher than they should be toward it in the first place,*

*this woman should be dead several times over now. Now I have to kill her with my blade, pity.* With a faint, almost unheard sigh the man picked up a tiny incense burner that had been hidden directly behind the fire pit, its smoke joining that of these sacred fire that Melisandre had been using.

Melisandre stared at the man, knowing him for what he was. "Faceless!"

Now the man spoke, a single word. "Indeed." He stood above her, the dagger ready as he knelt down. There was no last minute gloating, no apology or banter, simply a professional going about his business.

Seeing that blade ready to plunge into her chest Melisandre groaned, pulling back all of her concentration from the fire, her spirit once more fully inhabited her body, and she began to conjure fire from one of her palms. Before the man could do more than gawk the fire impacted his chest, throwing him backwards. But to her surprise it didn't burn him, rather he was able to pull off his clothing and tossing it to the side to reveal an almost unburnt chest.

But that still gave Melisandre enough time to raise her voice and cry the alarm. "To me! Assassin!"

Five of the Fire Guard burst through the tent flaps, their blades already out, but the Faceless man was faster. Dodging another fireball from Melisandre he was already in the back of the tent. In another second he was out and through it, running out into the rest of the army and mingling with the men.

"Two of you stay here to guard me inside the tent!" She ordered, moving around the sacred fire and grabbing the incense wrapping it in some of her clothing to keep the smoke from escaping any further. "Another one of you dispose of this, bury it somewhere!" She turned to the last two. "You rouse your brothers scour the entire army! Find him!"

With that done, she turned back to the sacred fire scowling angrily. The moment she once more sent her sense into it however she realized it was too late. The dragons had destroyed the second column of Shadow Warriors before retreating back into their camp, their fires doused for the evening. **Dammit!**

OOOOOO

The battle against the Shadow Warriors had continued throughout Melisandre's difficulties, and that battle had been just as hard fought as the one she had faced. Every Wolfsworn now sported injuries. Daryn could barely walk on a wounded leg, his thigh having taken several slashes from a Shadow Warrior's claws. Hathar had his helmet smashed in by a blow from one of the giant warrior's tower shields along with the injury to his shoulder. Roger's back had been opened by a slash from a sword, and his leg gauged. Dacey had lost her little finger and index finger from her offhand. Her lower leg was also bleeding profusely from a cut made there.

Smalljon however was the worst injured. His helmet had been opened up by a Shadow Warrior's blade which had taken out his eye, leaving the socket a bloody ruin. His side had been opened as well, though not as bad as Roger's, by the sword of another warrior.

But even so Smalljon was still fighting, roaring challenges, hacking and slashing with his greatsword, which continued to glow blue-gold. The intervening time since they had left the North had been good for Smalljon's ability to use ki and it was serving him well here. "The Giant's Rage will claim you all, you misty bastards!"

Outside the circle Ranma and Fenris were still going strong. The both of them had sustained cuts and bruises. Ranma's lizard-lion armor looked as if someone had taken a hammer to it, with dented dings and scratches everywhere. Fenris was bleeding from several dozen cuts along his massive frame, and he had lost one claw on a back foot.

Ranma looked up after hacking down another Shadow Warrior, and suddenly there were no other warriors around him. A few were still around the Wolfsworn, and he attacked them from behind, before staring wildly out into the night merging his senses with that of Fenris. Fenris too looked around, sitting on his haunches and staring out into the darkness. After a moment he threw back his head and howled in victory, a sound that echoed for leagues in every direction, causing many of the horses and other animals in the camps of their enemies to stir uneasily even at this range. "AROOOOOOO, AWOOOOOO!"

"We did it!" Ranma shouted. "We did it!"

The Wolfsworn answered with a weary but heartfelt roar while Ranma quickly moved to aid Roger as he nearly collapsed, the adrenaline leaving his body with a lurch and the agony of his leg. To one side Smalljon and Daryn leaned on one another, shaking their heads wearily.

With Fenris carrying Smalljon and Roger while the others all leaned on one another they made their way back to the camp. Daenerys and Myrcella met them with over a dozen of Myrcella's helpers, who quickly went to work while around them the guards began a low cheer, mindful of not waking up their fellows since battle might begin the next day. King in the North! Stark! Stark!"

Most of the commanders however were still awake despite that knowledge having known about what was going on. They all moved forward, congratulating Ranma and his friends on their victory until Myrcella shouted aloud "will you lot get back!? Let me and my helpers do our work!"

Greatjon guffawed, but his humor faded as he saw the severity of his son's wound. Then he shook his head laughing quietly. "Your uncle Mors going to be pleased my son, he's not the only one-eyed fool in the family now."

Smalljon laughed weakly, leaning heavily on Hathan's solid form while Myrcella began to work on his ruined eye socket.

To one side Daenerys hugged Ranma to her, watching their lover go to work on their other friends while Daenerys told her part of tonight's tale. "The worst part is, I don't know if the Red Bitch's power failed because we got too far away and she couldn't reestablish whenever connection she was trying to use, or something on her end interrupted the attempt. I, I honestly don't think my dragons will be able to attack any of the armies tomorrow, we'll try to keep the other two off our collective backs Ranma, but..."

She shrugged her shoulders, shivering. "It was the most useless feeling I have ever felt! I couldn't do anything, my connection to my little ones is through their minds and hearts, I can't do anything about their bodies. All I could do was tell them to run, and it, it...."

"I know." Ranma said with a sigh, his eyes closing in weariness before he opened them again, concentrating on her face. "She's a danger to us all, but I think we can match her."

"Are you certain we can win this Ranma? With the training you've given the army on moving silently, we could all be out of here tonight, not just Patrek and his force." Daenerys asked worriedly.

"No." Ranma shook his head. "Remember the time limit. We're dangerously close to a time when none of us could get up north, let alone the full army. We need to finish this now."

Daenerys looked at him for a moment then nodded kissing him lightly on the cheek. "All right. I'll get my little ones to rest for the rest of the night, you do the same. I'm afraid however..." she said looking over at the Wolfsworn, "that the Wolfsworn will be sitting out this battle."

OOOOOO

The next morning as dawn broke Viserys smiled grimly. Everyone in his army, and probably all the others knew that something had happened last night. Specifically something major between where Stannis' army was encamped and where his dear sister's army had fortified up. Who won or who lost that engagement Viserys didn't know, but he judged that his sister had since the guards on duty later that night had reported flashes of dragon fire in the distance. Yet whoever one or lost was immaterial, taking advantage of any weakness in either opponent was much more important.

In front of Viserys two thousand-men bands of horse archers rode out of the camp heading towards where the Northerners and Stannis' camps were. Lord Allyrion and Lord Ladybright led them, their families making up nearly the entirety of the units. Both men bowed their heads from the saddle to Viserys as they passed, while the rest of the army was forming up quickly. They would attack both camps in the habitual style of horse archers, hitting and running, thought their main task would be to see if either army had taken much in the way of casualties last night.

The rest of the army was also breaking camp, the process under Lord Fowler's command. They would attack whichever army had been weakened the most in last night's action, with the Levy forces from Gulltown and the rest of the infantry from the Vale that they had picked up leading the way under Ser Jorah's command. The remainder of the army, the pikemen, the light horse, horse archers, and light infantry which made up the larger portion of their army would follow them in allowing. The plan was to have the more expendable levy troops and better armored Valemen create a hole in the enemy's lines, which the rest of the army would then exploit.

"Keep at least half the horse archers and all the pike forces in reserve." Viserys said again, not acknowledging that he was actually speaking advice he had taken from Elia Sand. "If our infantry make any headway we can send them then to flank whichever of our enemies has been weakened, but the northern entrenchments are too good, and the Baratheon army's numbers too much for us to attack all out without letting them and the Golden Company battle first."

Arianne and the other lords standing around Viserys nodded fervent agreement. Every lord was very aware of the fact that they couldn't take that many casualties, and all of them were self-centered in a way. This battle might well settle everything, but they all wanted their own Houses to still have some kind of military force after it was all over.

OOOOOOO

At the same time Viserys was setting his army into motion, Aegon was doing the same. He was angry, last night's assault had slain several hundred men but it was also obvious that the attack on his army had not been the main target. Aegon was infuriated at this sign that he wasn't important, that he was somehow merely a sideshow to the main event.

However his advisers were much more capable of talking him around than Viserys' were. Therefore instead of splitting his strength and probing like Viserys was the Golden Company formed up into a massive column its spear phalanxes bristling as the men in them marched in step showing off the discipline that made the Golden Company what it was. In front of them the elephants, their massive bulk festooned with chainmail from head to toe, moved forward trumpeting loudly to one another. On top of those mobile siege weapons sat small towers, each of them holding 15 archers.

Their target was the camp of Aegon's aunt. The Golden Company commanders felt Stark had won last night's clash, and that the Northerners remained the most potent threat particularly after Daenerys' show of being able to control other dragons even if for a short amount of time. In fact Aegon had insisted on the assault because of that, worried that she could somehow take Calixares away from him. That was something he would never allow.

Strickland might have objected to this, thinking that Daenerys and Rannar were the most reasonable of their enemies and could possibly be reasoned with after the other two were dealt with, but his fellow commanders had argued against it. They saw that the fortifications facing them were the weakest the Northerners had, which was an opportunity they could not overlook. And the Golden Company, whose belief in their discipline and unit tactics was imbued into their very bones, believed that if they could get in among the Northern/Riverlands camp, they would be able to slaughter the numerically superior Stargaryen army.

However Harry, Lysono and his other commanders were not blind to the dangers that Stannis' army posed. Even if they had lost whatever magical battle had taken place last night the combined Reach and Stormlands forces retained numerical superiority over any other the other three armies in the field, if somewhat thinly, over the forces from the Riverlands and the North. To combat this threat the Golden Company had sent the Second Sons and the Company of the Rose out to guard its flank, aided by light cavalry and a few screening out elements. It also kept most of its archers and two thousand of its spearmen back as a reserve, under the command of, against most of the commanders' better judgment, Jon Connington.

The Second Sons and Company of the Rose's job would be to only slow down any attack from that direction, allowing for the reserve, which would follow the main spear phalanx slowly, to turn and prepare itself.

OOOOOOO

Rannar stood on top of a single large wooden pole in the center of the army's camp. It was simply a series of planks set into the ground, with Rannar standing on top balancing there with ease to the awe and amusement of most of his army.

Using a Myrish spyglass Rannar stared towards the north first, seeing movement. "Signal the army to be ready for an attack, I want **all** of our lines ready to receive."

Turning to the south he saw similar signs of movement, only this was much larger. Coming from directly west from Stannis' army, another column of dust began to appear. And another column, this one seeming more concentrated was coming from the south. "We're about to have company."

OOOOOOO

Lord Allyrion crested a hill, from which he could see the outskirts of Stannis' camp in the distance. Putting spur to his horse's side he urged it into a gallop, pulling his bow off of his back as he did. Two sentries fell to a few arrows from Allyrion's men before they could raise the alarm but as they passed by those posts, they saw the entire army was already ready to march.

A light cavalry force would've turned away immediately and raced off, but horse archers had the advantage of both speed and the ability to keep their distance thanks to their horse bows. Those bows were not as powerful as long



bows, but they fired far faster. And the horse archers could move, even retreat, while still firing at the enemy.

Around him men began to fall out of their saddle here and there from defensive fire, but Allyrion noticed it was quite light in comparison to what he had feared. Evidently the Baratheon army didn't have much archers for its size. A second later however, Allyrion saw what the enemy's response to his probe was, and raised a long whistle to his lips, blowing on it four times in quick succession.

In response his men began to peel off in orderly groups moving sharply away from a force of heavy cavalry that had charged from the Baratheon army's lines towards them. Arrows flew from their bows, impacting among the heavy cavalry, but every man among the Dornish force knew not to aim for the knights themselves, but for the horses. Even those horses which had armor had to keep their legs free to run, making them vulnerable. And that armor was never as thick as the armor that the knights themselves could wear.

Hundreds of horses went down, while Allyrion's men wheeled away only to nearly run smack dab into another force of light cavalry that had circled around from the back of Stannis' army try to catch them in a pincer with the first. Neglecting his whistle Allyrion bellowed "Full retreat, straight north!"

His men obeyed with alacrity, pulling on their reins and turning their horses around so hard many of the horses nearly lost their footing. But still more than a few of them were caught in close quarters with the light cavalry. Even so their arrows and the arrows of the retreating men still fired, sending dozens of men crashing to the Earth. Among the light Calvary they didn't have to bother aiming for the horses.

Another force of light cavalry, about, a thousand strong joined the chase quickly. At the same time the first force of heavy cavalry that had tried to chase them down, more to grab their attention than anything else, wheeled back to their fellows.

Stannis nodded grimly from where he sat astride his own warhorse. "Excellent. The light cavalry will continue to screen our northern flank, along with the cavalry under Lord Staedmon, who will be in total command of that part of the action."

He looked across at his horse's head at Mace. "You and your echelon will advance directly against the Stargaryen lines, but you are not to be bogged down attacking them head on. I don't trust how simple the defenses facing us look. Ranma is a devious character, he no doubt has something ready. I want your cavalry to swing around them, see if you can find any openings, while your infantry attacks the front at range. There must be some opening or else they wouldn't be able to sortie either. If you see any unit out in the open however, feel free to attack it, whatever it's allegiance."

Mace nodded eagerly, his face cold and angry. Despite the battle going on last night, far too many of his lords had begun to question his leadership. The news of Loras' death, the fact his own children were rebelling against his choices, had acted like a rock from a trebuchet on the foundations of his power. More than one had voiced a desire to pull out, not wishing to back Stannis or Mace any longer, especially now that there seemed an alternative Lord Paramount back home.

In the end it wasn't Mace who kept them from doing so, but the fear of Melisandre and her magic. Even so, more than one lord was thinking of pulling out regardless, and Mace knew he needed to prove himself on the field of battle to shore up his authority. In the long run he'd still have to deal with his children in some fashion, but defeating the Starks would take away any hint of legitimacy from Margaery's actions, making that task much simpler.

Of course Stannis knew this, and had taken steps to make certain that key Reach lords knew they would gain more to continue to follow him, regardless of their opinion of Mace. Turning his head slightly Stannis turned to look at one such, Lord Ambrose, who was, not coincidentally, the second-in-command of Mace's echelon. Lord Ambrose nodded slightly, understanding it would be his job to keep Mace from becoming too engaged in the battle.

A moment later some 8000 men marched out from the rest of the army. The echelon was composed of slightly under 6000 cavalry and 2000 mixed infantry and archers. Watching them go Stannis nodded grimly before turning to his remaining lords. "Lord Buckler, you will take command of the third echelon, which will follow my own force southwest. Leave a few thousand more light cavalry behind to aid Lord Staedmon in protecting the camp and our backs, but your primary task will be to follow my own echelon and prepare to exploit any weakness in the Golden Company, or, if Mace finds a weakness in the Stark earthworks, to move in support of him."

"My Lord, why are we not concentrating on the most dangerous foe?" Asked Lord Buckler.

"Because doing so would leave us vulnerable to the weaker two. The Dornish are no threat in a pitched battle, we

have more light cavalry than they do horse archers, and their infantry is nothing to fear, certainly not enough to stop a charge from the Reach cavalry."

*Who will do the dying before my more loyal Stormlanders, he thought grimly. And if a few of their lords die in particular those lords who are chafing under Mace now and are leery of me, all the better.*

"But the Golden Company is a major threat in any kind of battle. Their elephants can wreak havoc if used well, and their discipline makes their spear phalanxes a threat to any cavalry or infantry unit. That's why we need to attack from their flank, while they are busy attacking the Northerners, weakening them in turn."

"Why do you think they will attack the Northerners?" Melisandre asked tartly from where she was standing nearby, waiting to bid the army farewell. She was not in the best of moods, still feeling weak from the effects of whatever had been in the incense that the Faceless Man had used on her last night, though it had not affected her magical abilities, which would allow her to offset any of the dragons if they attacked.

She was not going with Stannis for both those reasons, instead staying behind in the army camp. Five-hundred Fire Guard stayed behind to protect her, while Staedmon saw to the defense of the camp and the army's flank.

"The dragons," Stannis replied. "You saw the Stormborn yesterday, she was able to command the other two, if only for a brief amount of time. Viserys and Aegon will see that as the most major threat, regardless of the military aspects. Their ego will be their undoing. I will push at their flanks while the Golden Company pushes at the Starks then they'll be pinned between us, but if we do this well, and if the elephants are committed against the Starks, it will be them who take the most casualties."

With the tactics of the current battle explained to his satisfaction Stannis smiled grimly at her, before riding without another word, his bannermen following him.

OOOOOO

Lord Ladybright led his unit towards the side of the Northern/Riverlands triangle facing their army with some trepidation. Yes they didn't look to be finished on this flank, but those forts anchoring the triangle's corners certainly were. And there were some ditches that too from the looks of things, which would funnel his men into what he was certain were prepared defensive positions.

However, he was a horse archer, and had been trained as such since he was young. He firmly believed that their speed, range and maneuverability, could overcome any opponent. So he charged with the rest of his men, coming up out of a small bump in the land charging towards the northern lines, losing their arrows as they came.

Most of those arrows fell at first on the barricades, then they began to smack into the side of the forts or even the roofs, doing nothing. They raced on, and Lord Ladybright gestured to one of his men. "They don't seem to be awake yet, let's circle around them to the west, I want to take back as much information on their earthworks as I can."

He wheeled away now, following the line of trenches, losing arrows as they went. As the majority of horse archers turned however, a voice from one of the forts bellowed "Loose!" like the voice of the Warrior come to life.

From all along the bulwarks and the fortress they were moving toward came a hail of deadly arrow fire from the fortress, smashing into them from what was almost point-blank range for the Northern longbows among those archers. Dozens, hundreds of men were plucked from the saddle, and several dozen horses went down under the hail of those merciless broad heads, horse archers not having the armor to stop them.

Lord Ladybright flinched as his banner bearer fell with an arrow in his neck, which passed all the way through, showering his tabard with blood. Another man quickly reached over grabbing the banner. "Retreat, wheel and fall back!"

Despite the severity, and the oddly controlled manner of the enemies response, Ladybright wasn't unhappy with the way the battle was going save for the death of his banner bearer, a cousin of his. *Still, if they come out after us, we can pare them down in turn, and if they don't we'll just wheel back in and attack elsewhere.*

But when they began to turn away they heard a sound that none of them had ever heard before last night. Only this time, it wasn't far away, it was up close and personal. "AROOOOO!"

It was howl, but it was unlike any desert wolf Ladybright had ever heard. Those were short, sharp barks in the night, and could be disconcerting to horses and men alike if close. But this one, this struck all of them with a fear that went straight to their bones.

Ladybright's men lost control of their horses which all whinnied in panic, bucking and rearing tossing men to the ground all around. As one the horses turned to try and race away from that horrifying sound, much like the Reach and Stormlands horses had responded to in Stannis' attempted ambush.

"The sun of winter!" Rickard shouted, leading a column of light cavalry out through the three pathways that had been left open in the segment of the defensive triangle facing north. They fell upon the Dornishmen, killing dozens in the next few moments.

Only a few of the Dornishmen, Lord Ladybright among them, were good enough horsemen to have retained their saddle. They raced off back and away from the direwolf who was loping along behind Rickard's horse.

Yet Viserys had already set the Vale portion of his army in motion, with the rest following quickly, and he was not in a position to change his attack plans, even if he had wanted to. Because above the front ranks of Viserys came him and Balerion.

Back in the northern camp Ranma stared down at Daenerys. "Get in the air my love, your opposite numbers are coming."

Daenerys nodded grimly, leaning forward in her saddle on Sunfyre's back, whispering into the dragons ear. "Climb the sky." At the same time she reached out, opening that door between their minds and began to give orders to Rhaegon. At her command Rhaegon sprang into the air flapping heavily growling irritably as he began to ascend straight up rather than in a spiral as was a dragons natural mode.

Under Daenerys, Sunfyre moved into a spiral quickly, ascending faster but going around in a spiral that soon carried them over the lines of the army below and out into the areas between the four opposing armies.

This brought her close to where columns of cavalry were appearing to the naked eye. But Melisandre didn't seem to be with them, or if she was there was no feeling of her magic trying to reach out as it had last night. Daenerys breathed a sigh of relief, affectionately rubbing Sunfyre's neck for a moment before turning back to business.

Soon after she had reached the height that she wanted Sunfyre at, with Rhaegon still trying to gain altitude above the northern camp. With a thought and a small tug on the reins, which Daenerys used more as a handhold than to direct her dragons, she sent Sunfyre towards the Dornish army.

Behind her Ranma leaped down from his position on the tower, landing neatly as Rickard came up leading his force back into the camp. His sword and lances were but both bloody, and one of his legs was bleeding slightly from a nick there, but he held his head high. "We routed them Ranma, I don't think there is more than a dozen left heading back to their camp."

"Well done uncle." said Ranma smiling grimly. He looked at both him and Greatjon. "The Reach forces are coming. Frankly I bet Stannis is going to sit on the defensive with most of his men, large scale probing attacks maybe but not his full force. I don't think they'll be stupid enough to charge our frontline, but if they are you know the surprises we've set up there."

Both men smirked evilly at him and he nodded. "You're in charge here, keep the defenses up keep the lines defended and the arrows flying. If you see a chance to sortie against the Dornish take it, but don't get bogged down beyond our own lines, and keep one eye on the sky just in case."

"Go ahead lad." Greatjon said clapping Ranma on the shoulder. "Spring your trap, and we'll still hold here."

To one side Smalljon stood nodding his head grimly. He was now wearing an eyepatch over his mangled eye but even injured he was still game, and would be in charge of the camp's emergency reserves. Dacey, and Daryn commanded the three forts, something they could do despite their injuries.

Myrcella had forbidden Roger to move, the wounds to his leg being so bad he was in danger of crippling himself if he walked on it for a time. His wife Osha however sat on a horse beside Smalljon, with Roger's sword Roan in its sheathe at her side. Her eyes were ablaze, and she was eager to get stuck in herself, having been sidelined the evening before.

"I'll get right to that big man, just make sure you're all here when I get back." Ranma laughed, before racing off through the camp towards the back most point of the triangle.

He smiled at the shouts and cries of "Stark!" all around. Despite knowing that battle was at hand most of the men

were upbeat about their chances, and greeted him heartily as he raced through before he leaped over the small parapet and ditch near the westernmost point of the triangle. Landing Ranma raced on, and even as the people behind him watched he sped up, racing out of sight.

OOOOOO

Mace laughed delightedly, his banner crackling in the breeze over the head of his banner bearer. This was what it meant to go to war, riding forth to slay one's enemies gloriously in open combat! No political maneuverings like his grandmother so loved, none of the back room dealings that had so fascinated Margaery. No tactics or the need to remember about supplies or strategy that everyone always harped.

No, what mattered was the charge, bringing enough men to the fight to win it, presenting a martial attitude that could overawe your enemies. And with the might of the Reach behind him, Mace knew that he presented such an image. He pointed ahead with his lance, shouting laughing. "Look at them, they cower behind their fortifications, not even daring to challenge us!"

To his left Lord Ambrose rolled his eyes. *Of course they aren't going to come out to challenge us, they don't have the cavalry to do so. And if they stay behind those defenses, they can shoot us full of arrows, Stannis is right, that line of defenses worries me.* "Should we move left or right?"

Mace growled, wanting nothing more than to rush in right ahead and get involved with the cowards hiding behind their pathetic earthworks. But mindful of Stannis' orders he thought for a moment. "Send a few hundred horse straight at the line. If Stannis is right, they'll run into whatever trap is there and spring it so we know it's there. But the rest of us will skirt around it to the north!"

OOOOOO

At the same time that Mace was beginning his assault the dragons were pushing for altitude, that most important aspect of any aerial duel. The vanguard of the Dornish army had also appeared on the field, marching towards the Stargaryen encampment. Or at least the levy forces and the infantry of the Vale were.

Viserys had pushed out another thousand horse archers to his western flanks to bolster the assault force there, which had fallen back, but he was also keeping a set distance between the Dornish horse, what little infantry they had and the Vale forces in an effort to keep them back until the others had forced a crack in their enemies defenses.

A fact that Lord Grafton was well aware of as he led his men forward. They were only supposed to probe the defenses of the Stark's army, but even that was a chancy business. *But those Stranger-damned Dornish lords will sit back there until we have. Worse, we're not leading off with our real assault troops save my own trained armymen. Not the southern pikes, but the Gulltown levees. That's amateur warfare! Why did I ever follow Petyr anyway?!*

Of course Lord Grafton knew why. Petyr held two strings over his head. One was the fact that Lord Grafton and his family were deeply in debt to Petyr to the tune of some 700,000 dragons. And second, Petyr's knowledge of certain discrepancies in the bookkeeping of Gulltown. Lord Grafton personally also knew that Petyr knew and had proof about some of his own personal indiscretions, in particular a certain married lady who he had slept with some years back. If the lord in question learned of it, Grafton was doomed.

*And of course there's Balerion and Viserys and his entire force to think of* Lord Grafton thought sardonically as he marched along with his men. His horse had fallen lame a few days ago, nearly killing Grafton in the process when he was flung from the saddle. Just as Grafton had thought that he and his men had survived the attacks on the foraging parties, only for him to nearly die because of a small foxhole in the path his horse had missed.

In front of him a few of the horse archers that had been supposed to find of the weaknesses of the northern line for him and his men pulled up. Lord Ladybright stared at him, his face looking a little shocky. "I lost most of my men to the arrows from that line, but the Northerners seem mostly content to remain on the defensive, they only sortied with a small force of light cavalry and that blaster monster of a wolf! If you can keep their archers attention on you, Balerion might just win us this fight!"

Lord Grafton nodded grimly, and both men turned their heads upwards to stare up into the sky where two dragons were circling one another.

OOOOOO

Daenerys stared over the raised head and neck of Sunfyre towards Balerion and Viserys, who was charging straight

at her through the air. It was larger and also more powerful than either of her own, and its wings beat easily pushing it along a straight course. She tried to reach forward again to touch the other dragon's mind, only to be thrown out quickly. Balerion was now deep into battle madness, what little seed of sanity he retained gone for now.

Yet even so she was able to get an inkling of its desires, and an inkling of his next action. Quickly she acted, ordering Sunfyre both mentally and aloud, as well as pulling lightly at the reins. "Dodge down and to the right! Fire incoming!"

A long tongue of flame shot out from Balerion's open mouth, passing through the area where Sunfyre had just been flying. In response Sunfyre roared his normally sunny disposition in abeyance now as his eyes began to tint to red his claws twitching and flames appearing at the back of his throat.

Daenerys sent another command, aiming the dragon's head around slightly trying to where Balerion would go. Gone was all her thoughts about not wanting to be a kinslayer, this was a battle to the death, and she could not afford any more thoughts along those lines.

At her command Sunfyre's own slightly smaller and far less powerful tongue of flame shot out, forcing Balerion to bank wildly to the right. It responded quickly, turning its head angrily and shooting out another fireball. Sunfyre dodged that too, but Balerion had continued his turn, and suddenly the two dragons found themselves almost within claw range.

Balerion lunged, his mouth gaping open trying to bite through Sunfyre's wing. But at Daenerys's mental command Sunfyre banked to the left again avoiding the bite. In response Sunfyre's back leg lashed out, along with its tail, while Sunfyre continued to corkscrew in place for a moment before righting himself.

Viserys squawked in agony when Sunfyre's tail smashed into his leg where it was squeezing Balerion's side and for a moment he thought the blow had shattered the bone. At the same time Balerion roared in pain as one forelimb was raked by Sunfyre's claws.

Even so the two of them turned quickly to follow Sunfyre who had continued his downward lunge. Now they were behind and above Sunfyre. In dragon on dragon combat, this was the kill zone. Daenerys turned her head to look back seeing her brother on Balerion's back now laughing wildly, staring at her. "You should never have turned against me sister, now you die!"

But to Viserys' surprise Daenerys simply smirked back and pointed over his shoulder.

Having been guided by Daenerys' mental commands Rhaegon had stayed well above the battle, not out of sight but out of mind for now. Then he had swooped down, using the higher altitude to gain speed as the flames in his belly began to churn. Then Rhaegon blew out a tongue of flame that was even larger than Balerion's.

Viserys looked behind him almost derisively only to seem Rhaegon incoming, his mouth already open, and the flames appearing within. Desperately he sawed at the reins "Bank! Danger!"

That last second invasion saved man and dragon from immolation. Rhaegon's tongue of flame shot through the airspace that they had recently been flying through, close enough to sear Balerion's side, low enough that it missed the all-important wing on that side.

"SHhhssssaaaaaa!" Balerion whistled in agony, thrashing in the air beating its wings desperately to stay in the air and moving away from the two enemy dragons who were now circling behind it.

Viserys yelled aloud in panic and fear, having just pulled his own leg out of the steer up on that side to avoid the limb being charbroiled but having lost much of his control on his mount doing so. "Back! Back to camp!" He ordered desperately pulling the dragon's head in that direction hoping that Daenerys would not follow. He had been outmaneuvered entirely here, and those two dragons were certainly not the pampered pets he had expected!

Flying low over the infantry that it already been forced forward towards the northern lines Viserys was pleased that the scattered archers below began to fire up into the air behind him, keeping his sister from following as she winged his way towards the army, Balerion snarling and crying aloud in agony from its wound. It was a wonder he hadn't flung Viserys from the saddle yet, but Viserys knew he had to get down to the ground before Balerion became too crazed from its wounds to do so.

OOOOOO

Below the aerial combat Lord Grafton and Lord Ladybright stared aghast at their side's dragon retreating back to the rest of the army while the enemy dragons began to circle.

For a moment the men of the Vale men halted there around Grafton and their other commander Lord Moore, torn by indecision whether to attack and get mixed in with the Northerners quickly so that the dragons could not attack them, or turn back hoping that the added bows of the army behind them could turn the dragons away. Then they watched as the two dragons banked sharply southward, leaving them behind breathing heavy sighs of relief.

That moment of hesitation and their inattention to the noise of battle in the distance however doomed them. More than one man stared to their right and ahead, then paled, shouting aloud "Ware, prepare to receive!" But it was too late.

Because in the next moment Lord Mace and Lord Ambrose led their heavy cavalry units around the northern edge of the stark front lines, only to see the infantry stuck there for a moment not moving. Mace had lost some two hundred or so cavalymen to the archers of the entrenched army and had yet to find any kind of break in the defenses. The four hundred or so heavy cavalry that had charged straight at the side of the triangle facing their assault directly had disappeared into heavy ditches.

Those ditches didn't seem to be lined with steaks or anything, but they too wide for any horse to leap, and far too deep for any horse to survive if they fell into it. Killing the men and horses that had fallen into that trap however had kept the archers of the forts and the front line from concentrating on the rest of the heavy cavalry under Mace as they skirted around it.

Mace laughed, his good humor coming back with a vengeance now that he saw a real target for his cavalry. Pointing his lance forward at the southern infantry he shouted "Charge!"

Before Grafton or the others could gather up their scattered wits enough to decide what to do, the heavy cavalry of the Reach was upon them. In disarray and with their leaders unable at this point to give out any commands the levy forces from Gulltown broke. They had been basically forced onto the ship at sword point and were only barely trained. They threw their weapons down and ran, racing westward and away, disrupting the lines of the better trained armsmen.

The heavy cavalry smashed into this disorganized force, killing and trampling with impunity every man that didn't have pikes able to hold them off. But even there, the pikemen were not heavily armored. Nor did their unit cohesion come anywhere close to matching that of the northern pike regiments. Here and there a man went down, opening up a hole which was exploited by more heavy cavalry following behind.

At the same time that was going on, Greatjon stared across the barricade at the Stormlands infantry of that was just beginning to pull up at the far edge of bow range. Fire arrows began to come out of that force impacting the forts anchoring his line, while his own archers began to fire back. He turned to Rickard nodding at him. "I think that Daryn and Dacey can handle things here, I'll take command of the southern line, you take command of the northern."

The other man nodded, and they both turned away. Rickard arrived on the southern diagonal to watch the battle, watching as the Reach cavalry began to split, portions of it reforming after its magnificent charge against Viserys' Vale infantry, moving once again to circle around the encampment. More archers from the westward most fortification began to fire on them, along with more archers on the line.

Here and there clumps of heavy cavalry charged the defenses mostly towards the obvious breaks in it, but in those breaks they ran into small units of pike. Taken from the 600 men that Lord Manderly had raised these men had not started out as well trained as the battle ax or stark regiments, but they had made up for lost time since.

Each break in the line was defended by 200 such men over an area where only fifty of them could fit in a line. Four rows of pike showed a front bristling with weapons that even the most insane (and most cavalry horses were bred to be somewhat insane or suicidal, horses after all are not predators) refused to face. The cavalry bunched up there, only to be continually raked by archers from behind the barricades or up on the nearest fort.

Behind them about eight hundred more heavy cavalry broke off entirely from the main battle, chasing down the levee units that had fled eastward. While Lord Ambrose and of another portion of the army was completely bogged down now in trying to get through what it appeared to be weaknesses in the defense, Mace disdained such. Instead he rallied his own men and more than half of the rest of the force he had initially led, continuing around the eastern point of the Stargaryen encampment.

OOOOOO

Surprisingly Viserys was able to land Balerion safely, if barely. He leaped clear of the saddle as the dragon hit the

ground, squalling and breathing gouts of fire in every direction. Viserys scabbled away, shouting aloud "get some food for him!"

Quickly a few nearby soldiers raced in deeper into the Dornish camp, while every other soldier nearby backed away, staring at two men who hadn't been quick enough, their bodies burning as their screams began to fight Balerion's pained bellows to be heard.. Eventually Balerion subsided, turning its long serpentine neck to look at the burn marks along its flank.

A carcass of an ox was brought forward, 'and the dragon turned quickly at the smell. Leaning forward and grabbing it out of the hands of the four people who had been carrying it, Balerion dug into the still bloody carcass. With food keeping its attention for now Viserys and two other men snuck forward, clamping a heavy chain around its neck. Before Balerion could rear up and attack other men pulled the chain taught from the other end, forcing it back down.

Realizing he could still eat Balerion simply huffed, glared around before biting down voraciously. Other men moved forward clamping similar chains down onto its limbs. With that, and a rope tying Balerion's tail down in place, several dozen men who had been filling in as healers for the men and horses of the army moved forward. After making sure Balerion couldn't harm them, they quickly went to work on its side.

Viserys stared at Balerion's injury from a safe distance, his eyes wide, and his body trembling with anger and remembered terror. *Those were not pampered pets, nor were those dragons moving separately, that, that was a prepared maneuver! How did Daenerys do it? Last night I was prepared to put her ability to command Balerion and that upstart's small freak down to her Targaryen blood, her personality and fearlessness. But this? Two dragons one without a rider working in concert in the air!? That's impossible! She truly is the most dangerous threat! If Daenerys can somehow control the second dragon without being in its saddle or even verbalizing her orders, she really might be able to do the same to Balerion! That is, if she's not able to just kill us!*

His ever increasingly fearful thoughts were interrupted when Arianne moved towards him through the camp. "My king, I fear this battle is lost. We should retreat, husband our remaining strength for another day."

Viserys looked at her, his mind still more than a little shell-shocked. "I, but, but the infantry, the rest of the army, it's ready to march we..."

"The infantry have already been practically wiped out, we've lost everything we gained from going to Gulltown my King. They were so concerned about covering your retreat that they missed the Reach forces, they were caught in the open and unprepared by heavy cavalry." Arianne replied quickly staring out towards the southwest. "Remember, we must husband our forces! The Baratheons and the Starks have more men than we do, and I don't believe either of them have been bloodied as much as we have already. Let the two of them fight it out with the Golden Company without us for now."

"Very well. Viserys said, shaking his head. "Yet we can't retreat too far, I want us close enough to react if we see either of them taking enough losses to give us an advantage."

Jorah spoke up from where he had followed Arianne. "We'll need to stop at least the Baratheon army from sending men after us. "I saw a glimpse of the Golden Company moving into attack the Starks, but that leaves the Baratheons to come after us."

"They've already committed some of their cavalry, that's who destroyed our infantry my king, not your sister and her dragons." Arianne tried to keep any tone of recrimination out of her voice, having actually agreed with Viserys about how Daenerys would have ruined her two dragons through coddling them.

"Yes, those dragons thankfully won't be coming after us at least, they'll be busy dealing with the upstart dragonseed and his runt." Viserys said now finally regaining his mental equilibrium. "As to the Baratheon army, how many horse archers do we have left?"

"Around 3,600 my Lord. Were already using the remainder' to screen our flank from the Stormlands-Reach Army, and you remember we sent off 1000 under my cousin to see if they could skirt wide around the Baratheon army and attack their camp.

That had actually been Elia's idea. Given the events last night, she hoped to finish the Witch off before she could once more use her powers. She hoped a direct assault on her would work..

"Good, send half of the remaining horse archers to back up those guarding our right flank. Then get some servants to coat a pig with sleeping spices, Balerion won't be able to refuse a pig even if he's gorging now.. The moment he's

asleep, we'll begin to retreat."

Next to Arianne Nymeria nodded before running off to relay Viserys orders to his lords, though inside she was wondering if they should possibly ditch Balerion, and if he objected Viserys too. And up until she had seen Aegon the evening before, she would have pushed the other lords to do just that, whatever Arianne might think. But Aegon wasn't any better than Viserys, whatever her uncle Doran might have hoped, and Nymeria refused to change from backing one sadistic maniac for an idiotic boy with delusions of grandeur and a barbarian's feelings toward women.

*Still if we pull back now before we're attacked, we are still a formed force, one that can inflict a decent amount of casualties if attacked. With that we might be able to sue for peace with whoever won the rest of this battle.*

Nymeria had no illusions how this battle would go, whatever Viserys thought. The army under her father had not drawn enough of the Stormlands and Reach lords off, and even if they had she wasn't certain they could've matched the Northern and Riverlands army. *No, we need to survive for now. Ambition can wait until later. Makes me very glad Arianne has been smart enough to drink moon tea on a daily basis. No child leaves no permanent connection between our houses if Viserys dies suddenly...*

OOOOOOO

Aegon had taken longer than Viserys or Daenerys did to get Calixares into the air, having to coax him up and override his petulant mood that morning. Once they were in the air Aegon watched from a distance the battle between Sunfyre and Balerion for a moment as he wondered where to strike first. *I wonder where are my aunt's other dragon is? Or can she only use one in battle at any given time? That makes sense I suppose. Regardless, I have to thank my uncle for taking her attention away from me.*

Moments later Aegon was past the front of his own army moving forwards, aiming towards the Stark encampments southernmost fortification and the line of balustrades moving from it on a diagonal. "Attack my Dragon!" At that command Calixares roared, the roar turning into a gout of flame that shot down at the fort below.

Thanks to the roofs on top of the fort, none of the men inside could shoot straight up, and that was where Aegon began his assault. The wet mud and dirt that had been heaped up onto the roof saved the fortification from going up like a torch, but even so the blast began to cook the wood underneath the mud.

Aegon didn't spend much time on that fortification, moving on quickly, Calixares continuing to assault the defensive line with his flame. Yet at the same time, the archers below and behind them in the fort began to fire up at him. Calixares could not shoot his fire far enough to remain out of arrow range, unlike the larger dragons, and this cost him now. Arrows hit Calixares' underbelly bouncing off the scales there, but one ripped through the membrane of one wing.

This caused Calixares to squawk, beating his wings to ascend higher away from the northern lines. Even so a little under 900 men had already died under his assault. There were also little fires here and there along the line forcing other men away from it to begin efforts to put them out. And that first fort was still smoldering, the mud on it cracking and drying off from the heat of the fire.

Calixares cared nothing for that, simply panicked by the arrow punching through his wing. It almost threw Aegon off doing so but he clung to his , his legs tightened around its neck, while his hands jerked on the reins, urging Calixares up and to the right. "All right, so the Northerners aren't panicking as I hoped."

Almost immediately after they moved out of bow shot however, Aegon saw the Reach cavalry coming around the eastern tip of the Stark encampment's triangle, and grinned evilly. "If the Starks are such a tough target, then maybe we should go for a softer one Calixares." Aegon Pulled Calixares further around before forcing his head down to face directly towards the cavalry circling the Stark encampment. "Attack!"

Calixares roared, moving down and raking the cavalry with his fire while the cavalry tried to break and run. Dozens of banners fell, including the largest one which had been leading the charge and hundreds, thousands of men burned alive in their armor in those few moments.

Then Sunfyre and Rhaegon pounced from higher above him, their own bolts of fire almost bracketing the smaller dragon. A desperate dive towards the ground and a bank westwards saved it, but even so it's squawking and pain at his tail was caught by Rhaegon's attack, and one of its wing tips by Sunfyre's.

Daenerys stared at the smaller dragon as he tried desperately to get away from her little ones, racing southward ignoring the Golden Company for a moment as they marched into position to assault the Stark encampment. Now



through panicked and facing two enemies that had the altitude advantage Calixares was simply trying to get away, trying to flee. *No way can that moronic pretender control him now. In that case, I should do what I can, see if I can bring Calixares to our side.*

Closing our eyes and trusting Sunfyre to fly safely her Daenerys concentrated, sending her mind outwards. But not along in the worn and well-known paths between her mind and those of little ones, but towards the very tenuous link she had created last night.

But Daenerys couldn't get through like she had the evening before. Calixares was panicking, fearful, scared and angry all of which interfered in his thoughts, which made him much harder for Daenerys to influence.

Worse, Calixares wasn't as intelligent as her own little ones, and the one time she got through and tried to reason with him failed. It occurred to Daenerys that more than a years' worth of warging with her little ones had affected their intelligence. Certainly Fenris and the other direwolves were much more intelligent than normal animals. *I can't reason with him, I have to force my way into Calixares' mind and I can't do it when he's so terrified!*

Just then Calixares turned its head sharply around still flying straight but with its head facing almost backwards. With a desperate roar Calixares aimed past his rider's shoulder and head, trying to hit Rhaegon with a blast of fire.

"By the Seven!" Aegon yelled loudly, diving down and hugging the dragon's neck for a moment to get out of the way of the blast, while Rhaegon twisted aside, snarling angrily. Even so Calixares kept retreating, unable to get away from Sunfyre even as Rhaegon fell back slightly before reclaiming his position above the other Dragon.

Aegon shivered a little at the nearness of that escape, smacking Calixares on his neck angrily, speaking aloud in common rather than Valyrian such was his fear-induced anger. "Don't do that! You nearly killed me!" Aegon had never tested his ability to withstand fire, Griff had never allowed him to, saying that had simply been a tall tale perpetrated by the Targaryens, and he was in no hurry to see if it was true now.

But his dragon wasn't listening to him whatever language he used. Calixares was in full flight now, simply trying to get away from his tormentors, scanning the forest below them for a place he could hide.

Just then he Aegon saw something, a hidden dell between two medium-sized hills about five leagues away from the battle behind it wasn't the small forest in the dell that startled him. No, that was the army that was marching out of it as he watched. Their banners marked him out as house Stark and its allies.

"What, what, in the... There have to be thousands of men down there, why aren't they with the rest of their army?" As he watched those men began to march out of the forest, heading somewhat south. "They're going to attack the Golden Company from the side!"

That was as far as Aegon's thoughts went before a blur shot up from the army, climbing one of the trees and leaping into the air directly below him and his Dragon. A reflexive pull on the reins as someone shouted "Dodge away Daenerys!" saved Aegon's life at least for the moment. Something, unseen slashed through the air where he had just been as that same voice, which Aegon suddenly recognized as Ranma Stark's shouted "Direwolf's Claw!"

Ranma had aimed to cut off Calixares' head and possibly the rider behind him, Ranma obviously hadn't tested this technique on magical creatures like dragons, so didn't know if they had some kind of immunity to an attack like the vorpal blades of the Kijin Raishin Dan, though he doubted it. This guess was proven correct, though he didn't actually hit the target he aimed at. Instead, the ki-based technique ripped through one of Calixares' wing, cutting it into pieces in a welter of blood, bone and sinew from the shoulder to the tip.

"GYAARRHHHHHAAHAAAAH!" Calixares screamed in pure agony, falling to the side immediately as its ability to stay in the air ended abruptly. And they were falling near the ground in any event that they slammed almost immediately into trees, crashing through them like a boulder from catapult but this catapult's boulder wasn't a rock, no it was flesh and blood.

Aegon didn't even have time to shout in astonishment at what had occurred before he began to scream in pain, bits and pieces of the trees Calixares smashing as it fell smacking into him in turn. One tree limb caught him right in the neck breaking his neck and thankfully ending Aegon's life relatively quickly while Calixares continued his screaming descent toward the ground.

Ranma grimaced as the feeling of weariness hit him from using that technique again, but he landed easily enough on the ground waving up at Daenerys and her 'little ones' who were now circling above. He turned quickly shouting behind him at the army slowly moving out of the tree line. "Get a move on double time it, that dragon might start

spewing out fire any moment, we can't get caught in the woods if they go up!"

Above him and Daenerys and the two dragons circled, as Daenerys leaned over Sunfyre's side shouting down "Balerion's turned aside and retreated! Do you want me to attack their army?"

Ranma shouted up at her while the army moved past quickly under Jason and Patrick's orders, their shouts encouraging the man to doubletime it. "No, remember we said we can't be seen using your dragon's too often on humans, and besides they probably still have too many archers for me to be happy with you putting yourself in harm's way like that. Just return to camp, but keep one of your dragons in the air to watch the battle!"

Her hair whipping in the air around her face Daenerys nodded. "I will! , Just make sure you return in to me one piece!" She would have said her and Merry of course, but in public like this that was impossible.

"I will." Ranma laughed then started off into the woods while the stragglers of the army raced past him. They slowed down considerably the moment they were out of the woods, after all pikemen weren't exactly sprinters, nor was the irregular infantry given the equipment Ranma had ordered them to carry and train with over the past few weeks. But they were all out of the woods, that was the important thing right now. He waved his hands at Jason who had moved back to him as the irregular infantry began to form up on either side of the pike regiments. "I'll join you in a bit, I'm just going to make sure that dragons dead."

Jason nodded, reaching over to grip Ranma's shoulder. "Be careful, we still need you alive, and a wounded animal is a dangerous one." Ranma nodded grimly at the older man before racing off.

He moved through the woods warily, moving from one tree to another listening for anything moving. All he heard was a low moan, a groaning peal of agony echoing through the trees. Soon he came upon where Calixares had crashed. The dragon was obviously dying, bleeding copiously from the stump where it's wing had originally been. Several bits and pieces of wood were also sticking into his body, the most prominent of which was a massive splinter from a tree which would've done well as the weapon of a scorpion. It had slammed into and through one of its back legs deep into its main body right by the pelvis.

Nearby Ranma saw Aegon, flung from the saddle at some point during the dragon's crash, his neck at an unnatural angle and his body perforated by several splinters. Ranma knelt down, closing the youth's eyes and shaking his head. "Poor fool,you were fed on lies your entire life and then used by the Connington, Varys, the Iron bank or both. You were just their weapon, just their tool. If only you hadn't invaded, if only you had been willing to stay away, or at least not assaulted the houses of Massey's Hook, you might still be alive."

He looked over at the dragon, moving behind its head, where it was weaving side to side, the pain of its wounds too much to let it do anything but groan in in agony. Before Calixares could see him, Ranma rammed Ice into the back of its head, putting it out of its his blade out Ranma cleaned Ice on the grass nearby shaking his head sadly. "And you were just a weapon too, just a tool."

With a final sad shake of his head Ranma closed Calixares' eyes patting the dragon's head once before turning and racing off to rejoin his army. He had a war to win.

OOOOOO

Back at the main battle, no one had really noticed or cared about the bit of drama going on well to the west. The Reach cavalry under Lord Tyrell had been slaughtered, horses and men burned alive regardless of their armor. But the rest of that initial cavalry force was still assaulting the northern side of the encampment, probing here and there while the force that had been assaulting the western line had retreated, coming around in support.

At the same time, Calixares had created a bit of a weakness in the southernmost flank of the Stark encampment. And the Golden Company moved forward to take advantage of this.

Now Harry Strickland led the elephants force along with the first two companies of the Golden Company forward, the elephants leading the way. The men on top of those elephants in their protected forts began to fire at their fellows in the Stark's fort, unable to win any kind of force superiority for now. However the elephants kept on going, ignoring the pinpricks on their own armor staring through the extremely expensive chain mail that was covering their bodies at the line of earthworks that was their target.

The first few elephants reached the line, smashing through the dirt mounds and the men behind them, while the archers from on high fired down into the men under Greatjon, who had pulled back most of his men rapidly. There had been a few ditches on the southern flank however. The elephants had found them stepping on the wood covering

them so hard that it broke, forcing the elephants to back away bleating angrily before moving under their rider's directions to join their fellows.

But then the elephants were met with something they had never seen before. Fenris leapt towards them, landing on the side of one elephant and ripping at its chainmail with his blue-gold covered fangs and claws. The elephant trumpeted, standing on its hind legs and trying to get away from this monstrous predator. The men inside its covered fort shouted as many of them fell out the side, others hanging on for dear life.

The elephant tried to turn its head and grasp its attacker with its trunk, but Fenris ducked aside, leaving a long slash down its length. Then Fenris found and found one unprotected place right behind the elephant's head where the driver had previously been sitting. The direwolf bit down there, sinking his fangs deep into the elephant's neck, seeking its spine.

The elephant bellowed in panic, turning and trying to fling the attacker off. But even now it was beginning to lose energy, its lifeblood spurting out from its wounds, and then it fell, spine severed directly behind its neck.

There was a tremendous booming thump as the elephant's carcass slammed into the ground while Fenris grimly held on. A moment after it landed Fenris pulled back licking at his bloodied fangs and howling in victory. "AWOOOOO!" Then it looked at the other pachyderms, snarling, his bloodied fangs bared as he moved over the carcass ignoring the men that had ridden the elephant all of whom were now dead by the swords of the defenders or falling off their animal.

The elephants panicked. They had of course dealt with wolves, or at least their ancestors had. But it was a very foolish wolf who would attack an elephant let alone a herd. But this, this was something else. This was a wolf larger than any ever seen, and it already proven that it could get through their human made armor, which all of the elephants had learned protected them from practically anything.

With a monstrous bellowing they stampeded back the way they came crushing and killing anyone in their wake. Even the people in the small fortifications on their backs weren't safe. At the speed the elephants were going the howdahs were being shaken apart, but more importantly were listing from side to side. More than one of them fell entirely to one side or the other as the elephants raced on, dragging them along before the straps meant to hold them in place tore apart.

Fenris howled again and went after them. Several hundred of the Northerners all around him roared in turn. "The Starks, the Starks, the wolves of the North!" And went to follow him.

But that wasn't the plan right now, and Greatjon knew it. "Back into position! The first man that leaves his place on the barricade will get my greatsword up his ass!" At that threat more than one man paused, battle lust giving away to confusion or humor, and more than one man bellowed ribald replies. Yet they also all returned to their place on the mud and wood barricades.

Greatjon knew that they couldn't afford to charge out into even the first few columns of the Golden Company messed up as they were. And he was right. The Golden Company reforming quickly from the damage the stampeding elephants had done to it, the front ranks coming together once more behind the stampede while the ranks in front of the stampede opened up to allow it through. Seeing this even Fenris pulled back, retreating back into the camp.

*That coordination is something else! Their total strategy might now be shot to hell, but each individual commander over there knows what they're doing.*

Above him, Sunfyre and Rhaegon were returning, landing neatly in the center of the camp. Greatjon was tempted to pull back for a moment to go and talk to her, but before he could, Sunfyre was moving into one of the tents, and Rhaegon was leaping into the air again. He watched as Daenerys raced through the camp, running despite her lizard lion armor, until she was directly next to him. "Well done Greatjon. I'm sorry I couldn't stop that dragonseed's assault on your lines before this, but I had to concentrate on Balerion."

"No worries lassie." Greatjon rumbled, turning from her to watch the Golden Company attempting to reform, pulling what few units had come forward back out of bow. His normal low esteem for social niceties was even lower now that they were in a battle, but he smiled internally when Daenerys once again didn't seem to care. *Now this is a real queen, one who doesn't need all that bowing and scarping crap.* "Shit happens in battles, and ones like this even more so."

"I've sent Rhaegon up so I can use his eyes." Daenerys went on, uncaring that she was sharing the fact she could warg with her little ones with Greatjon, who had never actually been fully brought into the confidence of the Wolfsworn

on that point about her, or about the Starks and their direwolves. As she expected however the Umber lord didn't even blink. "With that we can see what's going on elsewhere. I think my brother's army is done, and the Golden Company has lost its puppet, but frankly, given our stance on mercenaries, which they know after yesterday, they'll choose to continue to fight anyway."

Greatjon grunted and the two of them fell silent, watching, waiting.

OOOOOO

It wasn't only the elephants stampeding, or even Aegon's death that had caused the Golden Company's total battle plan to come apart however. It had taken a few hours, but Stannis and his army had at last overwhelmed the skirmishers of the Company of the Rose and the Second Sons. The survivors were in complete disarray as they fell back to the Golden Company's reserves.

Two companies of 1000 men each formed up along with half the company's archer unit, waiting for Stannis' charge. The rest of the Golden Company had fully reformed now, and Franklyn Flowers had taken overall command.

The spear companies hadn't taken many casualties yet. The Elephants had done more damage to the horse units directly behind them than the spear phalanx, which had time to react to the charge. Now they finished forming up, but Franklyn was debating with Tristan Rivers on if they should continue to attack the Stark encampment or turn and reinforce their fellows against Stannis' assault.

But before any decision could be reached, the fangs of the direwolf struck again this time from the west. Jason, Patrek and Ranma came marching into view from the trees several leagues distant, well westward of where their camp had been. With them came the Tully and Stark Pike Regiments, along with two thousand irregular infantry.

By the time they reached the Golden Company's advancing column, it had turned to face them. Say what you would about the mercenaries overall strategy, or its command of the total battle, but every unit commander knew what they had to do and worked well together. Seeing the spear phalanx facing him Ranma almost felt admiration for that, for their courage and coordination. But then he remembered what these men were, and his lips formed into a snarl. "Charge!"

With the pikes now up right as the pikemen behind him marched forward the irregular infantry charged with Ranma. Yet in their hands they did not carry swords or axes or anything of that nature, no they carried the surprise Ranma had ordered made all those months ago in Seagard, two to a man save for Ranma who carried five. They were long throwing spears, with their shanks, which had a hard pyramidal point and were about 24 inches long, was made of soft iron rather than steel.

In another world these would've been called pilum. Here they were simply strange throwing spears. Very few among the men issued them understood the point of them, though Rickard and Greatjon had, as had Jason. They understood that if used well enough, they could aid in opening up a spear phalanx or any other formation.

Ranma was the first to hurl his forward. He hurled it forward with such strength that it slammed into a man's shield, going through it and into the man himself. He fell screaming, but this place was quickly taken by another man, as the Golden Company began to charge forward as well.

Many of the commanders understood the overall situation, and knew they were now caught between two opposing forces. But even so they were confident. The Golden Company's tradition of unit cohesion, its organization and coordination had always proven beyond practically any enemy. And indeed against Stannis' force that was proving the case. The Reach cavalry under Stannis charged but fell back broken and bleeding.

Against Ranma's group however things began to go differently the moment the rest of the regular infantry was within throwing range. Their pilum were hurled as one at Ranma's bellowed, "Loose!" Fully 2000 spears were hurled in that brief moment, then again as the line of irregular infantry continued to charge forward.

Those pilum however didn't penetrate as Ranma had. Instead they penetrated the shields, then the pig iron warped, the spear shaft and the iron stuck into the hole into the shields of the men of the spear phalanx. Each of those spears weighed those large shields down further, pulling them out of position and wearing the men who were behind him down.

Seeing this Ranma grinned slowly skidding to a halt. "Now lads, split and retreat!" This maneuver was why he was with this portion of the army at all. He had drilled his men in difficult maneuvers like this, but this was the first time that they were under fire as they were doing it. Archers had claimed dozens of lives already as they charged forward, and

it was going to be tough to pull his men back from completing the charge, the act going against all their previous understanding of warfare.

About fifty yards away from where they would've impacted the Golden companies spears as they came forward his men split, fading to either side of the center of his charge, moving backwards and away quickly. Ranma lost even more men, arrows impacting their backs and sides as they turned, but soon after he gave that command all of his irregular infantry were out of the way of the Stark Pike as they charged forward.

"Winter is coming!"

"The King! The true King and queen of Westeros!"

Some of the pikemen even shouted the chosen words of the new royal house. "Honor Above All!"

They were answered by the warcries of the Golden Company. "Beneath the gold, the Bitter steel!"

"Gold above the Gods!"

"Gold is our word!"

Such were their cries as pike met spear on that battlefield. Two organized, disciplined and coordinated units which prized working together over individual prowess, smashing into one another with death or victory in the balance.

On the one side roughly 4000 pikemen, 2000 from House Stark and 2000 from House Tully along a front of only 500. House Stark's pike held that front with its full 2000 complement, while behind them the Tully regiment continued to march forward adding their weight to the press. Their pikes were upright for now while they waited for when they had to bring them down to defend the flanks.

On the other side was a little over 6000 spearmen. The Golden Company's cavalry had died, trampled or broken by the elephant's madness or gripped by the same. But the spearmen had reformed, their discipline unwavering. Each spearman held a spear of oak, longer than a horsemen's lance but not as long as a pike. They also held shields, and were decently armored though not nearly up to the standards of the pikemen.

If either of these forces had been on the defensive, either one could've broken the other. After all, the tactics of both spears and pikes lent themselves to defensive formations. But this was not defense against offense. This was offense against offense, the Golden Company having charged towards the Northerners intent on breaking their mobile force before turning to aid their fellows against Stannis.

The pilum had also muddied the waters a bit. The shields of the spearmen in the front few rows were now heavily denuded with pilum, the weight of which was pulling them out of position. And the pikes had both greater range and greater depth along their front, which proved decisive.

To get to a pikemen, a spearman had to block his enemy's pike bearing it down to the ground or up above his head and continue forward. But in an organized pike charge you would have to deal with another pike head almost immediately. Get past that, and the third would find you. It was only after you got past the third row of pike that your own spear would be able to range on your enemy's body.

None of the Golden Company's commanders had ever dealt with a pike formation that was this densely packed, this well drilled and trained. Pikes were of course used in warfare elsewhere, but not like this, not as organized as this. The tightness of the pike regiment's lines were unlike anything they had dealt with before, and their armor was better as well.

Here and their men were able to break through that third line of pike, stabbing forward viciously with their spears but more often than not their spears simply didn't have the penetrating power at that far a range, they'd have to get a step or two closer to get more thrusting power behind their spears to get through the plate armor that the pikemen wore. And more often than not, those men died before they could take that step.

At the front of the first line of pike Patrek stood with the Stark, shouting encouragement. "All right men, this is what you've been trained for! Raise those pikes high and get it stuck in!"

With that he thrust his pike forward again, watching it smash into an enemy's shield, watching it bear the shield to the side, allowing another man's pike into stab. That man went down, and more spearmen took their place and more besides. Men began to go down around him, but far more of the enemy were going down. "We're winning this, men! We're winning this!"

He was answered with a roar, the words that Ranma and Daenerys had decided would be the motto of their house now being taken up by every voice not just a few. "Honor Above All!"

A spear caught Patrek along the side of the face, ripping open his helmet there and causing a gash to appear along his cheek, but his pike took another Golden Company man in the throat, his tip cutting into his throat hard enough to almost penetrate to his spine. Two more men fell, but others took their place.

It was a grinding, deadly affair, but the pilum had done its job, weakening the shield wall of the spear phalanx enough for the pikes to get in those first kills, opening up the spear phalanx further. Someone on the other side realized this, and drums began to boom calling for the retreat.

The spear phalanx gave ground now, stopping its charge and pulling back. But the pikes continued to press forward, and here and there the Golden Company's men began to die in clumps.

Behind the pike regiments Ranma and Jason had reformed the irregular infantry. "You take command here Jason," Ranma ordered, gesturing to the pikes. "I'm going to take these men and flank left."

Lord Mallister nodded grimly, hoping that his son was still alive at the front of the pike regiments. But before he could answer aloud Ranma was already gone, marching off to the left and around the current battle slightly. Jason sighed watching him go with a faint smile, then ordered the Tully regiment to spread their men out to defend the flanks of the Stark pike while they continued to batter their way through the spear phalanx of the Golden Company.

OOOOOO

That same spear phalanx was performing far better against Stannis' Army than it was against the pike. Barely 2000 Spearmen were holding at bay something like seven or eight times their number in infantry, the forces swirling together and smashing into the spear line again and again.

Where elsewhere it had been the Reach cavalry that had taken the brunt of the battle, here it was the Stormlands infantry. Knowing that cavalry would've been next to useless against the spear phalanx, Stannis had reformed his army, taking Lord Buckler and the other Stormlands men from the second echelon adding them into his own. Then he sent in the majority of his remaining infantry to tie up the reserves of the Golden Company, while he kept the remainder of his cavalry and the Fire Guard in reserve in two different units, with the second under the command of Lord Cordwayner.

There was no comparison whatsoever in terms of training, armor or weaponry between of the Reach infantry and the Stormlands infantry, yet even so, they were not having much success in breaking the Golden Company's line. They simply lacked the ability to reach the spearmen, and when they could break through the spear lines, found themselves most of the time alone and without any backup against the line of shields, which turned most of their weapons away.

Knowing this would probably be the case, Stannis had kept back his archers, now sitting in all of them at once to hammer at one specific area of the Golden Company's line. Yet for a time it seemed as if this ruse would fail. While the Golden Company did not have many archers, their numbers making up a bare thousand or so of the total 10,000 plus strength that the company was supposed to have under arms, all of them were trained to a very high degree.

Moreover their weapons ranged wildly in size and therefore range and speed. Some of them used the massive longbows that were favored in the North. Some of them had crossbows, smaller and lighter than most found in Westeros. Still others used smaller double curved bows made of horn and sinew from the far east of Essos, which could fire both rapidly and with penetrating power, which had caused hundreds of deaths so far among his infantry. And the last were 50 Summer Islands men who used great bows of Golden heart. Those bows had greater range than even the great bows of the North, and were being kept back purposefully to target any dragon that tried to attack the army.

But what the Golden Company lacked was magical defenses. Melisandre had not been slain by the Faceless, and knew two things: one, who to blame for the attempt on her life, and two, where Stannis was concentrating his forces. And while most of her attention had been centered on the dragons, now that they were no longer fighting and the Dornish army in retreat, she had attention to spare for the Golden Company and a bit of personal revenge.

Near the front of the spear phalanx Jon Connington laughed raucously as the Stormlands infantry all fell back. Yes, yes the Stormlands men would pay, they would all pay for Rhaegar's death, for killing the one man Jon had ever really loved. After a moment under Balaq's eyes his laughter faded into a smirk. "We've got this, Baratheon can't break our lines, and when he finally retreats we'll be able to concentrate on the Stark's forces outside their

encampment. Then Varys should be able to talk the Dornish to our side after watching Viserys lead them into ruin."

"If it is all the same I will keep to watching the skies yes? I still wonder why the Stormborn queen has not set her dragons on us." The Summer Island man said in his accented Common. "I also not be counting my gold until after... the... battle..." Balaq's voice trailed off and he snarled angrily, pulling his massive Golden Heart bow off his shoulders and readying a large arrow. "I be thinking that the eunuch's Faceless failed to kill the witch. Pity he not be near, least I could have shown him the price for failure."

Jon turned in the direction the man was looking only to gape. A massive fireball had grown from a small flickering light in the air, ignoring Balaq's arrow, which he had tried to use to disrupt the fireball somehow. It grew and grew as the men below it began to look up then fell on the spear line in front of them before Jon or any of the others could order their retreat. It hit with a massive "BOOOM!" sound, engulfing several hundred men, immolating them where they stood.

Sitting on his horse well back of the battle Stannis was waiting for this moment. He pulled out Lightbringer, holding it up high as the blade erupted in flames. Then he pointed at the area Melisandre's fireball had cleared. "There! Push them **there** now!" With that he charged forward.

Around him the 2,000 men of his Fire Guard charged with him, all of them on horseback, while his reserves did the same, followed quickly by his horded cavalry.

Or some of them anyway. In the midst of battle Stannis did not notice that several of his lords were keeping their men back from the action. Or that the second column, comprised of 7,000 men of the Reach, had not joined the main Stormlands and Reach component he was leading. News of Mace's death had reached them, and most of the lords of the Reach had decided that they wanted no further part in this battle.

Stannis had started the day with around 28,000 men. Though he did not know it, he had already lost a little over half the Reach cavalry he had sent to harass the Stark encampment, with the rest embroiled in a battle there. Now more than 8,000 men had quietly bowed out of the battle. And even as the battle turned against the Golden Company more than two-thirds of the men he had left to guard his camp and flank against the Dornish horse archers had also pulled back. Not returning to camp once they heard the news of Mace's death, they moved away from the battle entirely, out eastward. And Lord Staedmon and his house's men, pulled out of position from the horse archers, hadn't even noticed.

At the moment, he barely had 12,000 men, all of them embroiled in this one portion of the battle. Stannis had fallen into the same trap Renly had, though not quite as badly. He had concentrated on one aspect of the battle, losing sight of the bigger picture and trusting his lords to be doing their jobs. A mistake given the quality of those lords whatever his opinion about their loyalty, especially in relation to the lords serving Ranma and Daenerys.

OOOOOO

The spear phalanx could not stretch itself to the sides to protect its flanks very well, and Ranma and his men were in and among the Golden Company's camp quickly. As his men went about the business of pillaging, Ranma sped through the camp looking for the most garish tents he could with a band of 10 men behind him. They killed several armed servants and Golden Company men before they came upon the tent Ranma was searching for.

Dashing inside, he found not the commanders he had been hoping to ambush and kill, thus taking away any remaining strategic cohesion from the Golden Company, but a young girl tied to a bed. Her face showed tearstains both old and new. Her wrists and ankles were rubbed raw from where she had tried to break her bonds. In her mouth she had a gag, and she was wearing some kind of silk chemise, which was much too large for her spare frame.

Scowling angrily Ranma ripped off his wolf-fur coat tossing it over the girl's body and moving to one side of the bed while he barked orders of his men. "Spread out! Find me the command tent!"

One of them had already ordered the others to do so, and came back with a prisoner. "This was trying to get away my Lord! We caught him by the horses. Ranma spared a glance at the man's captive. "Varys! Excellent, keep an eye on him, he's got a date with the hangman or my sword, and I'd hate for him to miss it."

The men laughed, while Ranma ripped off the gag in the girl's mouth tossing it at the man who was holding Varys' arms behind him. "Stick that in his mouth for now too. Everything that comes out of his mouth is poison."

The men chuckled grimly, while Ranma turned back to the girl working on her bonds. "And who are you, milady?"

The girl shivered, but the weight of the heavy fur coat on her shoulders and the kind, understanding look in Ranma's eyes caused her to answer honestly. "I-I'm Glinda of House Massey I, I suppose the Lady Massey now unless, unless my brother and father still live."

"I can't help you there, milady. I'm Ranma Stark, and I'm afraid your brother and father are currently fighting against me and against these bastards. I haven't seen your House colors yet, but I saw your father at a parlay yesterday, so there's some hope at least. Don't worry, you'll be treated as a respected guest by my men so long as you're with us, and I won't try to use you against him or anything like that. Can you ride?"

The girl nodded, while Ranma pulled the fur coat around her more tightly before lifting her out of the bed, grimacing angrily. She was but a slip of a girl, barely Myrcella's age! Yet the way she twitched and trembled in his grasp, the wounds she had and the way she had been tied to the bed told Ranma all he needed to know of the ordeal she had been going through.

Within moments upon exiting the tent both Glinda and Varys were placed on horses with Varys tied there, his hands tied up to the shoulders around the horse's neck so they met by his wrists only to be tied together there. Ranma turned to the man who had taken charge of the 10 men unit that had followed him. "Sean, take these two and about forty others and head back and around the battle. I want them back among our encampment soonest!"

"Aye my Lord." the man replied, nodding his head quickly and moving off, grabbing more commandeered horses from among the few horses left in camp by the Golden Company. All around him the looting continued, but Ranma had made certain that his men understood his orders. If any of them tried to take liberties with a woman, be she a camp follower or not, they would die. And there was no drinking or burning going on either, simply killing and looting.

Another man ran up, one of House Blackwood's man named Barnabas who had remained with the rest of the army. According to Tytos he couldn't move silently to save his life, so was useless as an ambusher, but he was a decent enough swordsman. "My Lord!" he said bowing his head quickly. "We found the commander's tent, but it was empty save two. We killed them both as they were trying to escape. I think the rest of the Golden Company commanders are out with their men."

Ranma nodded then both men paused as a distant 'BOOM' grabbed their attention. Looking around for something to climb so he could get a view of the total battle Ranma spotted a spare howdah. Racing over to it he motioned Barnabas to follow him. There he leaped up easily landing lightly and staring out around the battle.

He couldn't see all of it from his vantage point of course, it wasn't nearly high enough to give him that kind of view of the battle which spanned five leagues in every direction. But he could see that the Golden Company had been stuck between two fires. Stannis had flanked them from the west with his main force and he and his men had flanked them from the east, pulling their attack column away from engaging his camp even though it looked as if the elephants had done a number on his southernmost defenses.

He could see the fractured spear phalanx his own pikes were facing falling back continuously now, one or two men panicking as the vaunted discipline of the Golden Company began to fray. But that was a slow process, and the commanders on that front seemed to have a better grasp of their men than the ones facing westward. Those were a bare league away, and they were breaking as he watched, one entire flank of their formation gone for some, possibly magical, reason. *Is that Stannis leading them? With that flaming sword it has to be.*

He shouted down to Barnabas. "Get the men formed up, we need to pull back from the camp! Stannis is coming!"

It took some time for Barnabas and the other sergeants (as Ranma thought of them in his head) to bellow the men back into order, sending off another four hundred men with laden horses with their purloined loot, which would be distributed among the total army later on, with some of it possibly returned to House Bar Emmon and Massey after the war.

As his irregular infantry formed up to face the Baratheon forces, that scene in the tent was replaying in Ranma's mind. The look on the girl's face when he and his men entered, the fear he saw there. *Why do some humans think they need demons and devils to create hell, when so many are so good at creating it right here on earth?*

Seeing the might of the Baratheon army coming towards him Ranma frowned, getting his head back in the war. *I wanted to husband my own strengths just in case Melisandre was able to do something more today despite what happened last night, but it looks as if she shot her bolt already. Fine, that lets me shoot mine, and maybe we'll be able to get out of this, or at least hold until the pike is finished with the Golden Company.* He looked at Barnabas. "Prepare to sound the charge."



"My Lord?" Barnabas looked worried at the massive force of infantry and cavalry coming towards him now. The spear phalanx that was holding them back had broken, shattering now. The cavalry of the Stormlands and Reach were now fully engaged slaughtering the Golden Company men as their phalanx, the cohesion which had spelled life-and-death broke a bare bow's range in front of where they had formed up right outside the Golden Company's camp. "Shouldn't we try to retreat back to the pikes?"

Ranma shook his head. "No, the spear phalanx on that side is still holding strong. They're breaking too slowly for us to think we'll have much aid there, we'd just lead this bunch straight to them. No," Ranma cracked his shoulders for a moment rolling them under his lizard line armor. "It'll be up to us to hold, and that means we should get in among them now before the Baratheon forces can reform after smashing the Golden Company. That kind of melee will play to our strengths."

"Follow me in!" With that he charged forward, his hands falling to his side as he gathered his ki. About a hundred yards away from where the melee was occurring Ranma stopped. An arrow from a Summer Islander with a massive bow slammed into his chest, bouncing off his lizard lion armor. Before the other archers could try their luck Ranma brought his hands forward. "Direwolf's Claw!"

The blades slammed into the ferocious melee, slicing through men, armor, horses, weapons, everything. Screams of fear and agony erupted from both the embattled sides, and Stannis stared in shock as two of the Fire Guard directly in front of him were ripped in two by the odd technique that Lord Stark used. *So that magic has a slightly longer range than I thought, though it seems to spread to all sides equally*, he thought grimly, seeing that the entire back of the spear phalanx had been gutted, along with his own men who had begun to encircle them.

With that, what little cohesion the Golden Company had still retained disappeared. Men began to run for their lives turning this way, northwards and southwards to get away only to run into the onrushing Stark irregular infantry.

Stannis himself was about to shout to his men to try and reform them, but a spear thrust up catching his horse directly in the stomach. The beast whinnied shrilly, standing on its hind legs suddenly and throwing Stannis off.

A few of the Golden Company infantry made for him, but his Fire Guard formed up quickly about six men dispatching the Essossi before one of them pulled Stannis to his feet. "Your Majesty, we should retreat! The second cavalry units, it, a-a few of the Reach men are saying said that Lord Tyrell has been killed, and the Reach forces are all pulling back!"

"What about Ambrose, Costayne and Cordwayner, or Appleton?"

"Lord Ambrose and his men are still engaged on the far side of the Stark encampment. Lord Costayne's missing my lord, possibly cut down by the other lords with him, and the other two are dead! Appleton just now and Cordwayner took an arrow to the eye!"

Stannis grimaced angrily. With those four men dead or not available he had lost his most powerful proponents among the Reach Lords that he could trust to stay loyal to their oaths to him. "Very well, signal...."

That was fought as far as he got for a voice intoned "Honor Above All!" A single fusillade of oddly shaped spears hammered the melee still going on than the Stark Irregular infantry charge slammed into them.

The infantry of the northern and Riverlands had been trained on the march, with the Northerners having been trained for months now to work together, to form small shield walls here and there, to watch each other's back. Stannis had tried to do the same to his own men with differing levels of success.

He had taken the marines of the Royal Navy and forged them into a land-based force, but they had been hammered badly in the battle against Renly. His Stormlands infantry had taken the blunt of the battle here against the Golden Company so far, and their cohesion had never been the best even before that. And his cavalry and reserves that had broken through and encircled the Essossi had been mauled a moment ago by whatever strange magical skill Ranma Stark possessed. Thus numbers was on one side, cohesion and training the other.

It was anyone's guess how this battle would go now. All the maneuvering, all the planning, all the strategy no longer mattered. Chaos had played all the cards it could, and now it was down to numbers, blood, courage, and steel.

Stannis grabbed a nearby horseman, pushing him out of the saddle before leaping up into it. "Rally to me! Rally to me! We can still win this, rally to me!"

OOOOOO

Melisandre stared into the fire, her mind unwilling to focus easily, it took an effort of will to not give in and not look away. *Whatever that Faceless did to me must still be in my system somehow despite the cleansing of R'hllor.* She only been able to conjure up a few fireballs so far, one of which had hammered the northern encampment somewhat, and the other which had shattered the Golden Company's spear phalanx. But Melisandre could not, no matter how hard she tried, bring enough willpower to bear to take control of the dragon flame and turn it on Daenerys' creatures, despite the one still in the air being within her range.

With Calixares dead and Balerion heavily injured and retreating with the entire Dornish army, Daenerys had achieved air superiority, but instead of using it to ruthlessly wipe out her enemies, she had retreated to her encampment. Only one of her creatures now circled the battlefield, not taking part. That was the one Melisandre was trying to attack magically, but it wasn't working. Somehow whatever had been in that incense greatly impacted her ability to use the sacred fire as a medium even now, and it wasn't going away.

It never occurred to Melisandre that the Faceless might have attacked her in two different ways since she had seen the man hold up the incense burner. But the Faceless were not known for failure, and this one had prepared a second bow to his quiver. After all, the logs of wood Melisandre used for her pyres weren't anything special, and its supply was unguarded. And in autumn in the Riverlands, who would ever notice the logs being coated with something a little slimier than normal rain could account for.

*Why is the dragon circling like that anyway if it isn't going to attack? And by R'hllor's breath, how is the Stormborn wench controlling it when she isn't in the saddle? Surely her power of voice and eye cannot remain after the beast leaves her presence?* Melisandre didn't understand how Daenerys was controlling the beasts, not understanding the warg connection. *Could they have been trained to such an extent that they can act on their own without a rider, is that even possible with dragons? Wait... No!*

What had caused Melisandre to turn away from her attempts to attack the flying dragon was the glimpse of the Stargaryen cavalry sortieing, passing under the dragon in her vision. They had been husbanded up until this point but now they rode out, moving in such a way to flank the battle between Lightbringer and the Golden company's infantry. At the same time the Wolf-who-walks-like-a-man had used his odd magic to break through the remainder of phalanxes among the Golden Company, his infantry charging behind them to pin the Azor Ahai and his army in place. It wasn't a planned assault, there being no way for the two groups to communicate, but it would work as well as one.

*Where is the rest of the army? Have those cowards forgotten their oaths to the Azor Ahai? If they have, they will burn no matter how far they run! But that is for later, right now, I cannot allow the Azor Ahai and his men to be pinned between two foes!* Wearily Melisandre concentrated, her hands moving into the flame again clenching the flames between her fingers, before, she began to concentrate, sending them into the image directly above the charging cavalry.

She looked up sharply as a scream from outside and bugles sounding broke her concentration. Standing up she weaved dizzily on her feet for a moment, before pushing the tent flap open and staring out. One of her few remaining acolytes turned to her. "My lady, the Dornishmen thegahh!"

An arrow took the woman from behind, and Melisandre glared angrily at the sight of hundreds of horse archers pelting into the cake encampment. They were being met by the portion of the Fire Guard had been left behind to guard her, but where were the screening elements?

She shouted that question aloud, and a Fire Guard who was racing through the camp on foot stopped for a moment to answer her. "Overcome we think my lady, they were pulled out of position and flank from both sides by this new stronger force of horse archers, Lord Staedmon is dead, and his men were routed! The Reach forces..."

That was as far as he got before Melisandre turned, conjuring up a fireball and sending it whistling through the space between two tents, impacting six horse archers that had been charging towards her. *Hmm, that was much easier than trying the same with the sacred fire, odd.*

"I know not why the Reach have fled, but there will be a reckoning! Azor Ahai will see to that! For now to me!" She held up her hand, conjuring a bright green flame for a moment sending it into the air above her position. Then she gestured, and another tongue of flame shot out, igniting several dozen horse archers, man and horse screaming as one as they were immolated. "It is the time to fight and die, but by the grace of R'hllor we will prevail!"

OOOOOO

Greatjon bellowed in laughter, pointing his sword ahead. *Daenerys was right!* They had been able to get the heavy and light cavalry out of camp and flank Stannis' force, almost coming in from directly behind but not quite, without any

of his other forces interfering. Daenerys had predicted that, having seen the Reach forces pulling back from the field of battle through Rhaegon's eyes. She had supposed that Mace must have died somewhere, not having seen the banners of the unit Calixares had immolated.

*The Reach units really have mostly fallen back! Damned cowards, but it works well for us! Now, even though Ranma's irregular infantry was out-numbered heavily they had friends coming, and they would catch Stannis' force between them. "The Giant's Rage! The Giant's Rage for the true King and Queen!"*

His lance slammed into a Stormlands horse, the colors of the man on it indicating he was from house Buckler. A second later his greatsword was out, cutting the man almost in half despite the chainmail he wore. His next opponent wore heavy plate, but that didn't avail him any better than chainmail did his fellow. Behind Greatjon's massive strength his greatsword crunched into the heavy plate armor, shearing off the man's sword arm.

All around him the carefully cavalry of the Riverlands and the Northern cavalry that had remained with the Army charged into the disorganized and force of Stormlands infantry and what little cavalry remained under Stannis' command.

Stannis saw this, and shouted again "Rally to me!" before pointing at Greatjon and the chained giant banner flowing behind the man. He looked to his side, noting that he was surrounded by Fire Guard grimly. "Slay that one, slay the giant under the Umber banner, and we'll demoralize their assault, force it to retreat and we can pull back!"

The man all around him nodded grimly then moved forward as a unit, their lances down. Their horses trampled their own men to get to grips with the Stark cavalry.

From his own place in the battle Ranma kicked out, lashing out with hands, feet and Ice, leaping around here and there causing havoc and carnage wherever he went. Behind him the irregular infantry pushed forward, hacking and slashing at their fellows, dozens of men dying but taking hundreds with them. The effect of Ranma's first assault had shattered the morale of the enemy, which had been on the high after taking advantage of the fireballs that Melisandre had conjured into the Golden Company's ranks, and now both sets of enemy's were fighting just as hard to get away as they were to kill their opponents.

Standing on top of a horse's rearing head for a moment Ranma lashed out from to the side with Ice, killing the horse's rider and six other men around him while he looked around. Orienting on the fiery blade of Lightbringer where it was forging through the battle he saw the banner of the freed giant had appeared with the rest of the cavalry. *Greatjon you magnificent bastard!* He then led to another horse for a moment, staring past and his own men and smiled grimly.

A few moments later he had made his way back and stood next to Barnabas for a moment, leaping out of the melee to land where the man had paused. His own shield had been smashed to pieces, and he threw it to the side before reaching down to a dead man picking up his shield. He jumped a little when Ranma landed next to him. "GAH, um your majesty? Er, how are we doing?"

"We're doing fantastically Barnabas!" He shouted those words to be heard by the nearby men. "Greatjon and the cavalry have come from the side! And the pikes are nearly finished with the Golden Company phalanx. Hold here until they arrive, be the anvil to the cavalry's hammer, then tell Jason to press forward when he arrives with the pike!"

From what Ranma could see that phalanx hadn't broken like the one that had faced Stannis. It had simply died. Here and there a few men had run, some had even surrendered once they realized that their camp had been sacked. But the majority had fought, giving ground only grudgingly against the pike, doing more damage to the pike regiments than the entire war had done so far but losing five or six men for every one man they slew.

"And yourself, Your Majesty?" Barnabas asked, flexing his shield arm for a moment getting used to the weight of the shield he had taken from the ground, a Golden Company shield rather than one of his own men's.

"I'm going to cut off the Stag's head." Ranma replied grimly.

"More power to you milord!" said more than one man around him, shouting over the din of battle having heard Ranma's statement over the same. Ranma laughed grimly, then turned and leaped out over the heads of his men where they retained a semi-cohesive shield wall.

Landing, Ranma found himself surrounded by Stormlands infantry, some House he had never seen the colors of before, purple and dark blue for the most part with a small stag on a black background run through with a red chevron in the flew in an arc decapitating two men, before Ranma kicked out smashing one man's chest so hard that he flew backwards into another man taking them both down. Then he was leaping on, stopping here and there to attack but

mostly heading in the direction he had seen Stannis moving through the battle.

Greatjon's horse went out from under him, its head practically sliced off by Lightbringer. "Old Gods' damnit!" Greatjon bellowed, but kicked loose of the saddle, rolling and grunting irritably as his plate armor took the weight of the landing. But he was on his feet quickly, greatsword whistling around to smash aside one man's mace, before coming back in an economical movement with a bare twist of his wrists to slice that man's throat open, cutting through gorget and jugular with equal ease.

An instant later he brought his blade back up and over to block with both hands a blow from Stannis' own greatsword. "Stannis Baratheon!" Greatjon rumbled grinning behind his beard. "That's a fancy blade you've got, let's see how good you are with it."

Not a Wolfsworn, Greatjon had still been reckoned a fell blade not only in the North but among those of Westeros who had heard or seen him. He was huge, monstrously powerful even for his size, one of very few men who could have reasonably gone toe to toe with Gregor Clegane in a strength contest and while not win not be humiliated either. He was also fast, and had trained with the Wolfsworn on and off again since this war began. His blows were economical, swift and certain.

Stannis however could also have been marked as a great warrior, not the swordsman Jaime or others of that level but still a renowned blade in his own right. And Lightbringer was a magical blade, its flames gave it some of the properties of a Valyrian sword, making the greatsword light in his hand allowing him to match his opponent's speed. And Stannis was too canny a man to try to match the larger Greatjon strength for strength.

The two large men exchanged about six or seven dozen blows in the next few moments. Greatjon was pressing Stannis hard, while around him the men of his house dueled with the Fire Guard. For the moment their contest was even.

Osha too was there, stabbing out repeatedly. She attacked horses and men alike, using her unhampered speed to great advantage, though she paid for it. One of her arms was hanging limply at her side, and she had a bruise developing along her cheek, from where a mace had caught her at the tail end of its swing. The helmet Roger had forced her to wear had saved Osha's skull, but she'd gotten some new scars for her collection today.

Nearby Greatjon had gotten Stannis into a position where he had to block an overhand blow. Bringing his greatsword down, Greatjon bellowed. "You're mine!"

Stannis swung his own blade upwards, and the Umber lord gasped in dismay as his blade was cut in two by Lightbringer. He dodged back rapidly as Stannis brought his blade back down and around, almost slicing Greatjon across his upper chest. His last-minute dodge had saved him, though his armor was opened right along one pectoral, the plate no match for the tip of that enchanted weapon. And the fires of the blade burned his chest, causing Greatjon to bellow in pain. "GAH-damn magic!"

He stumbled over the dead body of a Stormlands' infantryman, scrabbling one-handed for a blade for a moment, but knowing he would be too late.

Stannis made to thrust down with the point of his sword but before he could complete the thrust, another sword interposed itself, smashing Stannis' blade aside. "Tag in my friend." Ranma said nodding his head at Greatjon respectfully. "I believe this fight is mine."

Greatjon nodded wearily, pushing himself to his feet and holding a long sword, the blade looking incongruously small in his massive hand for a moment. "More power to you lad, just beware that blade of his. Although I suppose you have an advantage there too." He guffawed, bellowing in laughter while hacking at a few Fire Guard men who had been about to attack Ranma from behind. "The Giant's Rage, the Giant's Rage for the King and Queen!"

Behind Greatjon Ranma smiled grimly raising his blade to his face in a gesture of respect towards Stannis. "Lord Baratheon, I believe it's time we end this."

"Aye Lord Stark, I believe it is." Stannis did the same, and the two men charged one another.

OOOOOO

"By the sands, gahhh!" Elia dodged frantically, leaping out of the saddle and rolling through the thankfully muddy ground to rest for a moment between two tents of the Baratheon army as the ten man group of horse archers she had been personally leading was immolated by a ball of fire. The overall battle was going their way, but Melisandre was

costing them grievously, smashing them here there and everywhere.

The Witch conjured up shields of flame blocking any arrows coming towards her. Long tongues of flame shot out, incinerating man, horse and anything else that got in their way. Most of the Fire Guard were down, and what camp followers the army had, had long since fled, and the battle was going against Melisandre and her forces quickly. But the woman didn't seem at all dismayed by this.

She stood in the center of the camp staring all around her as the horse archers pressed in, forcing the Fire Guard back deeper into the camp. There were only about 100 of them left now, the rest having fallen to the arrows of the horse archers but even so she still stood there arrogant and unmoving.

Then a new wrinkle was added to the battle. From behind the horse archers, arrows began to fall among their own warriors. Men appeared, dashing forward with spears, makeshift spears for the most part but still deadly, attacking the horse archers from behind. "The Riverlands! The Roots of the Tree for the true King and Queen!" shouted a voice, and the skirmishers of House Blackwood came out at from behind, striking here, there and everywhere.

And several hundred men also aimed arrows towards Melisandre from several directions. This caused her attacks to stop as she desperately conjured up her flame shields to burn the arrows midair.

Elia absently noted that the gem on the Red Witch's choker was glowing so hot it almost hurt to look at, before her attention was taken by something closer to her. Beside where Elia had landed in the mud, a hand appeared. Suddenly a short, yet well-formed girl was there, where she hadn't been before, her body covered with mud and grass, having somehow blended into the ground so well Elia hadn't noticed her. Or the trident she had just pulled out of the mud beside her.

For a moment the two women stared at one another then the girl was off, moving quickly and silently through the camp towards Melisandre, pausing whenever the increasingly frantic Melisandre was looking in her way. Faster than Elia would have thought possible the girl was crouching behind a tent directly behind Melisandre, her trident ready.

The instant Melisandre turned her attention away, the girl struck, her trident's tines stabbing into the witch's back.

Melisandre gasped in agony. For all her powers, for all the strength of magic she possessed, Melisandre was still but a mortal woman. The trident had stabbed into her back, piercing her intestines from the back and nicking her spine. It wasn't a immediately killing blow, but it was a fatal one.

She screamed, turning. Her hands glowing red as she reached for the girl, but the trident pressed on, the girl keeping her away from the range of the witch's hands. "You, you foolish girl, you, you've doomed us all, the Great Other, without the Azor Ahai, they, they..."

"Just fucking **die** witch, Westeros will be a better place without you!" Thrusting hard again the girl bore the woman down to the earth, holding her there pinned until Melisandre gasped her last. With that the girl pulled her trident out, raising it high in the air in victory.

Elia couldn't take your eyes away from the sight of this young girl the short, almost petite girl having downed that Witch who had claimed so many Dornish lives today. She did however look around when a naked blade tapped her on the shoulder. "Would you mind surrendering? It would be a shame to separate that gorgeous head from your shoulders." Asked an almost jovial voice by her ear.

She turned to stare at a young man behind her. He had wide shoulders, dirty armor and hair as black as night with a tanned face and lively brown eyes, which at present were locked on Elia's own. Around them her men were surrendering or dying, the trap having enclosed them from all sides.

Almost in a daze at this sudden turn of fortune, Elia raised her hands above her head, going to her knees in submission. "I am Elia Sand, daughter of Oberynd Martell, and I formally surrender."

OOOOOO

The duel between Stannis and Ranma was rather anti-climactic. Tired as he was from using the Direwolf's Claw and the battle against the Shadow Warriors the night before, Ranma still had strength and speed beyond any normal human. Unfortunately for all of its magical abilities Lightbringer could not aid the physical abilities of its wielder.

Stannis did his best, parrying some of the massively powerful slashes and cuts of Ice. But the greatsword was glowing blue, and it was a Valyrian blade, forged in dragonfire long ago, more than a match for the flames of Lightbringer. Stannis desperately tried to get some distance, tried to defend himself as well as he could, hoping that

Melisandre would somehow come through with another magical assistance.

She didn't.

A few bare minutes into the duel Stannis tried to block a slash coming in from his side, holding Lightbringer in such a way as to redirect Ice into the ground only for a fist to catch him on the chin shattering his jaw and throwing his head back. He saw stars for a moment, but gamely brought Lightbringer up in a desperate attack.

But Ranma ducked underneath it, and then thrust upwards with Ice taking Stannis in the center of the chest, punching through his armored chest and out his back. The blow lifted Stannis off the ground for a moment before Ranma pulled Ice out, moving away slightly.

Stannis went to his knees staring hard at his killer him as he gasped. "Well, well fought Stark, well fought."

Ranma nodded his head respectfully to Stannis. Then without further ado Ice came around, decapitating the last Baratheon brother. With that he held Ice above his head and shouted aloud 'Stannis Baratheon is dead! Surrender, or join him!'

OOOOOO

Myrcella had gone to work long before the battle actually began. Knowing that she would face more burn victims than any normal battle would see she and her helpers had built up a large supply of burn cream and anything else that could aid them. In fact from the perspective of medical supplies the army had never been in better shape than it was before the battle of the Shadows Fall began. Myrcella had also doubled her helpers, added two new Maesters who specialized in healing, one from House Charlton, and a student of the maester from Riverrun.

The moment that Calixares began to attack the Dornish lines casualties began to flow in and several hours later they were still getting them.

Merry wiped blood from her hand, sighing as she stood up again nodding over at the maester from House Charlton who nodded back wearily. Tristan Ryger would never be able to walk without a cane ever again, one of his legs had been crushed by an elephant's hoof, almost literally flattening the leg. But thanks to the two of them, his life was no longer in danger.

*I wish I could say that for most of the other men we've seen,* she thought grimly as she moved to help a few of her aides in dealing with a screaming man who had horrendous burns covering his upper body. One glance at the man told Merry he wouldn't live out the day and she quickly shook her head at her two aides, motioning them away.

One of them went her eyes tearing up, while the other simply mechanically nodded, leaning down and giving the man a small pellet, saying it would help with the pain. The pellet was a fast acting painless poison. It would deaden the pain from the burns for a time, and then would gently ease the man into death. Far better than the hours of screaming agony he would have to put up with from his wounds.

The man, a Northerner who had been with her from practically the beginning of the campaign named Luft shook his head. "Running low on t'ose." he said, his accent thick. He was a smallfolk from house Glover land, one of the few men from that area of the North that had joined the army at Winterfell.

"I know, we're running low on practically everything now." Myrcella sighed. "Still, we do what we can."

Patting the man on the shoulder and telling him to do his best not that he wouldn't otherwise of course, she left that tent and hurried over to another. A few hours later, she looked up irritably as someone called her name. Motioning to one of her aides to come forward and start wrapping a man's chest up with bandages after resetting several of his ribs she turned with a snarl on her face.

Her expression softened slightly as she saw her bodyguard standing there. "What is it, Eric?" she asked wearily.

"Prisoners are being brought in my lady, several dozen of them from the Golden Company's camp. Apparently our boys sacked it. One of them's a young woman, was sent here by the Young Wolf and a force of guards. Think you should look her over, personal." Eric said.

Myrcella frowned but nodded and followed the man.

In the next tent over, several beds had been cleared, two from walking wounded and one of a man who had succumbed to his the pain of his burns. In one corner stood Varys, under guard of four men. She scowled at the

Master of Whispers, then ignored him moving towards the young woman who was laying on one of the cots. "Hello, I'm just going to give you a bit of a checkup okay?"

Then she paused and the woman cocked her head, looking at her quizzically. "Princess Myrcella?"

"Yes, I recognize you, but I'm sorry I, you were at court once, with your father and brother yes? Some Narrow Sea House I think?"

"House Massey, milady, I'm Glinda Massey. Until recently I was the personal..." she frowned and looked away, her eyes filling with tears. "T-the personal..."

Myrcella quickly reached across hugging the girl, stopping her from speaking. Glinda stiffened for a moment then began to sob quietly into her shoulder. Eventually she ran out of tears for now, and meekly allowed Merry to work on her.

Eventually the story came out, and Merry was quick to tell her she was safe with the Royal Army, and that Aegon was apparently dead along with his dragon, a statement that made the girl smile viciously. Luckily the young woman wasn't suffering any major physical damage. She had rub marks on her wrists and ankle, some malnourishment, but that was all. Yet it was very obvious that she was scared of men, shrinking whenever one of the guards moved around them.

Leaving the tent Merry gave orders to the nearest aide. "Only women are allowed into that tent, in fact, find Dacey if you can. Maybe the offer of getting some martial training when she's up to it will help Glinda calm down a little. Remember, no men, if I see a single man try to enter that tent I'm going to feed them to Fenris!"

She turned her face furious and staring at the guards who had come out with Varys at an abrupt, imperious gesture from her. "That means you take that **thing** to another tent!" She ordered pointing a trembling finger at Varys. "I imagine his execution will come soon."

At some point during his capture Varys had been able to work his bonds a little, and he now pointed up to his mouth indicating he wanted to say something, staring into Merry's green eyes. Against her better judgment Myrcella nodded her head, indicating that the guards and Varys himself should follow her into a nearby tent. "What do you want?" She barked staring at the eunuch as one of the guards removed his gag.

"You have changed quite a lot since the last time I saw you, little Princess," Varys said after a moment spent working his jaw, looking at her with calculation in his eyes. "Tales of your healing prowess spread far and wide, but my agents neglected to understand that with such would come the courage needed to deal with harsh truths."

"If you're just going to flatter me, put that damn gag back in your mouth." Merry replied coldly.

"That was not the only reason I wished to speak to you, no. I wish to ask you to intercede on my behalf with Ranna Stark. Perhaps get me in touch with Daenerys herself? I'm certain that she will be pragmatic enough to see I am worth more alive than dead."

Behind the eunuch Myrcella saw a flash of platinum hair, and Daenerys stopped in the tent flap, raising one eyebrow and motioning with one hand to Myrcella indicating that she should let the eunuch talk. In one hand however she held Dark Sister, its blade still red with blood and her shoulders drooped wearily. Behind her Ser Barristan and Rickard Karstark stood, with Rickard leaning on the older knight's shoulder, a very makeshift tourniquet tied around one shoulder and his neck.

After sending off Greatjon and their cavalry, a fireball had struck the northernmost barricade, opening a hole for the Reach Cavalry under Lord Ambrose. Daenerys and Sunfyre had gotten involved in defending the center of the camp, where Merry's hospital had been situated, from them and the assault had been a bloody one. She had killed four men, and Fenris and Sunfyre had slain more than a hundred in her defense.

The sight of the injured Rickard made Merry want to simply push Varys aside and start work on the man, but even Rickard was looking on with interest at what Varys thought he had to trade for his life. So she sighed and replied to Varys. "And what exactly do you know, oh Master of Whispers, which would make up for your treason against my father, against the throne? What could possibly make up for backing what amounted to an **invasion force** of Westeros?!"

"Several things," the 'man' replied, smiling thinly. "I know what and where bodies are buried of course, my network of little birds is still intact for the most part. How is young Alayaya doing by the way? I have listened to the twittering of

my little birds about her with interest. Nonetheless she is young, and her 'network' a bare shadow of mine."

Varys smiled almost condescendingly as he went on. "The smallfolk backing you is... nice I suppose, but the merchants in the cities and the surviving lords are where the power truly lies. I also have the names of several of the small banks where Petyr stored his ill-gotten gains scattered here and there. Would that not be a major boon for a new Royal house, whose control of their crowns is not nearly as solid as they might think. Particularly in realms which have not felt their efforts personally."

"Not enough of one to keep your head on your shoulders." Myrcella replied bluntly. She absent-mindedly noticed that Ser Barristan had left, leading off Rickard, which she was happy to see. "Frankly I'm inclined to take it myself."

"But you won't. You see, I know something about you, something that many of my agents also know. If they don't hear from me in over four months, such secrets can regrettably be leaked."

Varys was trying to establish some kind of control over the girl, he desperately needed her to go to bat for him. From the information he had, it was obvious that Myrcella wielded significant influence over Daenerys and Ranma.

How else to explain the fact that the former Queen had been seen riding north recently along with Jaime both of them still alive. Yes his reports indicated that Cersei's mind had shattered after the truth of the Vile One came out, that she was now a mental invalid and that Jaime had lost his sword hand but even so, letting them live was distinctly odd considering who they were.

"And what do you think you know that could ruin me?" Myrcella asked coldly.

"The name of your true father, and the facts about your birth." Varys said with a shrug. "That Stannis' claims were correct, that you and your older brother are children of incest between Cersei and her twin, and that this can be proven."

Myrcella stared at the man then, rather than become angry or frightened as Viserys had thought, she began to laugh. "You, you honestly think that anyone will believe that? God, that's been bruited about so much, I hardly care anymore when someone brings the idea up. It's disgusting to think of, but even if true, I am not my mother, Stranger's Hells, I'd rather not link myself to House Lannister at all!"

"Yet it would ruin your reputation still. You might not care but the smallfolk will. The same smallfolk who love you now will turn on you in a heartbeat. Or what of Ranma? What will he and Daenerys think of your origins, once they are proven fact rather than false propaganda?"

"That is only if your agents themselves will believe your lies, or would be willing to attract attention to themselves after your death." Myrcella scoffed. "In any event, I believe I've built up more of a rapport with the smallfolk over the past few months than you can imagine Varys. That 'lie' will never be believed now, I am Myrcella Baratheon, even if I can no longer carry on the name." She smiled then, staring over his shoulder. "As for Ranma and Daenerys..."

"For my part," said Daenerys's voice from behind Varys who whirled towards her only to pale significantly as he saw the blood splattering her armor, and Dark Sister in her hand. "For my part, even if it was proven true I believe that it would be hypocritical of me to look down on Myrcella for her origins when my own family practiced such for so long. And Ranma wouldn't care less. He would blame the people who did the act, not the girl magnificent young woman who came from it."

Though understanding that this was not going the way he had wanted it to Varys smiled, convinced he could bring Daenerys to his side of things. "I apologize for seeming as if I was trying to browbeat the princess your majesty. If I had known you were here I would never have resorted to such tactics. I simply wanted an audience, and the chance to prove that I am loyal to your family, and to the prosperity of Westeros."

"You're loyal to yourself." Daenerys interrupted him with disgust clear on her face. "If you were loyal to the crown, you would've done all you could to keep Cersei from starting this war. You would've done all you could to keep House Lannister's power at a minimum in the court. Or you would've worked to make certain that it was Eddard Stark rather than Robert Baratheon that took the throne after the war. And if you were loyal to my family, you would've backed my older brother or myself rather than some dragonseed you and the Iron Bank found somewhere."

Daenerys held up a hand as Varys went to speak. "No, I don't care about your reasons, about what **twisted** chain of logic makes you think you're loyal to my house or care for the welfare of Westeros, despite all evidence to the contrary. You have proven untrustworthy; you are always scheming, always hiding things and only sharing them when it can benefit you personally. You, Varys, represent a threat to Westeros, not a resource. We cannot afford



such threats any longer."

Daenerys turned without another word, shouting outside for the guards to enter and tie the eunuch up again, binding him tighter and gagging him at the same time as he tried to speak again. "Enjoy these last few days of peace in silence, eunuch." Daenerys replied over her shoulder as she and Myrcella moved off with Daenerys sheathing Dark Sister after cleaning it and looking at Myrcella. In the distance they heard the horns roar out in victory and shared a smile. It seemed as if victory was theirs to stay, though dearly bought.

OOOOOO

The battle continued for the rest of the day despite the Stormlands and few remaining Reach units surrendering wholesale, because no surrender was offered to any of the Essosi at Ranma and Daenerys' orders. Any mercenary who fought that day was put to the sword. They had ravaged the land of two Narrow Sea Houses, they had pillaged and raped their way along the road from Duskendale up to the point where Dacey and her scouts began to intercept them. No mercy was to be given to these men, though Ranma and Daenerys left that to their lords.

Not that there were many of them left. The Company of the Rose had numbered around 1,600 men, mixed infantry and cavalry, the Second Sons, another 900 all mounted light infantry. Stannis had smashed them, pulling their attempts at screening elements out of position circling and annihilating them in small groups. Ranma doubted that there were more than a dozen men of those companies still alive, but even so he designated 600 men under Lucas Blackwood to hunt them down.

Those men and the shattered remnants of the Golden Company were all that was left. The once vaunted Golden Company, the largest and inarguably most powerful mercenary company to ever exist in either Essos or Westeros, had been annihilated. They had started the battle with a little over their supposed ten-thousand man complement. Now, if there were more than a thousand men wearing the Golden Company colors left alive Ranma would eat his greatsword.

None of those left alive included any of the commanders or knights. Harry Strickland had died with the elephants, trampled under the beasts he loved so much as they tried to get away from Fenris. A few of the elephants had actually survived the battle, and would later be rounded up, taken down to Duskendale to be used to aid in the repair of that unlucky city.

Jon Connington was dead, he and Balaq had both died from Ranma's ki attack while trying to lead a fighting retreat. The other company commanders had died with their units against the pike, in the command tent, or with Harry. Most of the knights and cavalymen were trampled by the elephants.

Aegon was dead, along with his dragon, both deaths Ranma regretted but had not shirked from. Aegon had proven too far gone, fed words about his 'rightful place' and had destructive level of entitlement which would have cost far more lives in the long run if he had been allowed to live. As for the dragon, it could have been saved if it had let Daenerys talk it down, but as it was, a dragon was too dangerous to let live in the wild.

The Stormlands army was utterly crippled there was no other way to put told, of the might of the Stormlands that had marched off to war under the Baratheons, only 3,700 men would return home, spread out in small packets to the houses that had taken part. Not a single House that went to war would survive as powerful as they had been.

Of the lords who had originally backed Renly, only Lord Murrigen, Ser Horpe, and Ser Donnel Swann had survived to surrender to Ranma. Of Stannis' original backers, Lords Buckler, Bolling, Errol, Bar Emmon and Massey, three were dead, Buckler, Bolling, and Bar Emmon.

Lord Massey was also dead, but his son survived, and Ranma, smiled gently at the man as he surrendered his sword. "Ser Massey, I believe I found someone that will be very happy to see you when we sacked the Essosi pretender's camp. Your sister Glinda was Aegon's personal captive." Ranma scowled. "I don't have to tell you what she went through, but I sent her back to my army's camp, and nothing bad will happen to her under our protection."

Justin looked at Ranma for a moment, his eyes wide under his sweaty slick hair. "I, thank you, your majesty. I would very much like to speak to her in the near future. Thank you."

"I am a brother too you know Ser, and I cannot imagine what I would do if my sister had to go through something like that." Ranma gestured to a nearby Lord Grell. "Lord Grell will take you to see her now if you wish."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Ser Massey said with a tremulous smile. "Um, and can I congratulate you on a magnificent victory?" Stannis was marked as a great general, and you not only beat him, but two other enemies on this day.

Ranma shook his head. "I didn't beat Stannis, I let him be himself. If the Reach lords had more respect and trust in him, if they hadn't pulled back, this aspect of the battle would've gone much worse for me and mine. We might have won in the end regardless but it would've cost us thousands more dead, and I'm still wondering what the hell happened to the Witch to stop her using her magic."

*Besides that, I had Lords, commanders I could trust to act in the best way they could. And I sat on the defensive with most of my army, which allowed me to let the other army's fight it out in the open as much as possible. Other than that, I let the chaos of the battle work for me in a way that Stannis couldn't.*

"Honestly, if I had faced Stannis alone this battle would've been much harder, but with him having to split his forces to defend against Viserys and take on the Golden company as he did rather than simply pinning us in place and letting the Red Witch's magic weaken our defenses this battle would've been much different."

Ranma shook his head, smiling slightly. "In any event, Lord Grell will take you to see your sister now."

While the other young man was led away, Ranma turned back to taking more surrenders. As he did, his mind went back to going over what they had already learned about the makeup of the remnant of the Stormlands army.

The men of Buckler would return and serve a distant cousin who had been left behind in Bronzegate. One out of four had survived the war, too small a force to really matter to anyone. Bolling had never had that many men or members, and was now practically extinct. Lord Errol had lived, but was more than willing to be sent to the Silent Brothers. His younger brother had not agreed with backing Stannis, and would take over the lordship easily. Their men however had been mauled, and only a bare hundred would return home.

This level of destruction spread to those Lords that had personally backed Renly and survived the battle of the Blackwater. Of them, Swann and Rogers were the only Houses that could still field more than a thousand men. Rogers had taken some losses yet while Lord Rogers had died, most of their men, led by a grizzled armsmen named Robal, had survived by surrendering at the top of their voices and throwing down their swords while hiding behind their shields. It worked, something which Donnel Swann was quick to emulate.

As his thoughts reached that point Ranma looked up to see Daenerys in the air above him, coming down swiftly. She landed Rhaegon nearby, quickly getting out of the saddle but before she could, Daenerys found herself in Ranma's arms, pulled into a very fierce hug. The two of them stood there beside Rhaegon for a moment simply basking in one another's presence. Ranma frowned however as he pulled back, looking at the blood splattered on Daenerys.

In response to his wordless query she shrugged. "The Red Witch threw some fireballs at our camp's defenses, breaking them along the northern line for the Reach cavalry that were still trying to fight us there. They nearly got into the main camp, and Sunfyre and I were forced to fight against them." She smiled checking her head. "Sir Barristan was beside me every moment though, don't worry."

Ranma nodded, kissing her forehead gently. Then he pulled back one eyebrow raised. "Do we know what happens to the Red Witch yet?"

Daenerys laughed. "Yes, actually! We got a runner from Lord Blackwood, Tytos and Meera led a assault on the Baratheon's camp while the camp was under assault from Dornish horse archers."

She laughed again. "Melisandre was killing hundreds of them, but both sides were blindsided by our own assault. Yet the most amazing thing is, Meera somehow snuck up on her. It was Meera who killed her."

"We're going to have to call Meera Witchslayer now." Ranma laughed as well, shaking his head.

Then he sighed looking above Rhaegon's head at a rider coming towards them under a flag of truce from the west. "I bet this has to be about the Reach forces. I'll leave them in your hands for now; I've got to get to the rest of this mess organized."

Daenerys nodded. "The Reach were Targaryen loyalists in Robert's Rebellion, they'll probably take talking to me alone better than you. But I'd like some more bodyguards." Ser Barristan, who had just ridden up behind them, nearly sagged in the saddle in relief of his charge showing some sense.

"I was going to insist anyway." Ranma laughed. He turned, looking over to where Greatjon was kneeling down next to a dead body whose colors Ranma didn't recognize for a moment until placing them among the men who had followed Aegon that weren't from the Golden Company, obviously some other mercenary band or other. As Ranma watched Greatjon pulled out a Valyrian greatsword, with a very odd looking hilt. "Greatjon! Could you gather some of

your men and go with Daenerys to talk with the Reach lords?"

Greatjon looked over at him from examining the blade and nodded, before moving to join Daenerys who pulled herself into the saddle of a horse Ser Barristan held for her, while Rhaegon leaped up into the sky once more.

OOOOOOO

Ironically despite the Reach's losses to their lords, more of the men of the Reach survived, though their leadership was shot to hell. While Ranma was dealing with the Stormlands lords and men, Daenerys talked to the remaining lords and knights. The senior of these was Lord Fossoway, who Daenerys put in charge of the others for now. A decent, honorable man who was not a very forwardthinker, he was respected by the others and could keep them in line.

The Royals would need to take their oaths of fealty later, but the wording would need to be worked on a bit, considering that Willas, their lawful lord Paramount, which no one could argue now, had yet to swear his own oath. Margaery had given herself up to them, but that didn't quite translate to the same thing.

Talking about it a few hours later, she and Ranma decided they were too battered mentally, their morale shot to hell and back, to be of much use in the North. "And none of those pretty chargers of theirs would survive the winter up north anyway." Ranma stated bluntly, which ended that discussion.

But the battle had not been won without a price in blood. The pike regiments had paid for their victory, with the Stark Regiment having taken 800 casualties and the Tully Regiment having taken around 600, though thankfully as many as half might eventually be on their feet again.

Tristan Ryger had been crippled, his legs smashed to pieces by a trampling elephant as it turned away from the southernmost flank of the encampment. His men had also been hammered badly. House Seagard had also taken heavy losses, though both Jason and Patrek were still alive. House Wayn, Shawney, and Blackwood had all taken losses, though not as much.

The Northerners had suffered as well, men of Hornwood, Ryswell, Umber, Karstark, and Manderly. House Manderly had the worst of it, losing four hundred and sixty men of their pikes to Melisandre's fireball and their being subsequently overrun. Hundreds of families in the North and Riverlands would face their father's not coming home, their brothers and nephews and uncles never returning.

In total, the army had upwards of 3,000 men dead or crippled, with the numbers still being added to the next day. And it would have been even more without the forethought and effort of Merry, the Maiden of Healing or Ranma's decision to sit on the defense with most of his army. But the war wasn't finished, not yet.

Ranma and Daenerys pressed north after the Dornish army within a few hours, while sun was setting. They took about 12,000 men, the remaining light cavalry and heavy, along with the majority of the irregular infantry from the Riverlands, which had not been as bloodied during the battle, as well as most of the army's archers. They left Jason in charge of the rest of the army, and in particular the prisoners.

They pressed the pace somewhat, hoping to catch up with Viserys, though not so hard as to exhaust themselves or their horses. Greatjon and Silas asked Ranma why he was not pushing the pace harder, and he laughed. "Because I don't want us to tire ourselves out. Those men are running after a lost battle, fear is driving them far harder than I would ever drive ours. No, we'll continue at this pace."

"But at this rate they'll possibly reach Maidenpool before us, and maybe have a full day to fortify it. I thought you and Daenerys were against using Sunfyre or Rhaegon against towns and such." Silas Shawney said. He fully agreed with that policy too, after seeing what dragons, even ones so young as these, could do in war.

"We are." Daenerys said with faint smile having been let in on a final little trap Ranma had set. He hadn't expected Aegon, but he had never really expected his idea of getting Stannis and Viserys to fight one another to work perfectly either. No, he had planned ahead of little, planning on something given her word that there might be another force available that could come to their aid, at least in a roundabout fashion.

Deciding to give their lords a hint she elaborated. "My lords, my brother and his army have been away from that city for over two weeks now. What makes you think that they will find it as they left it?"

Greatjon rolled his eyes. "Out with it!" he ordered punching Ranma in the shoulder.

Ranma laughed, smacking the larger man's hand aside playfully. "What, you don't want to wait for the surprise?"

"This has been a long war lad," Silas said shaking his head. "I think we've all had enough surprises."

Ranma sighed but nodded seriously. Aegon and the Golden Company had caught them all by surprise, though they had been able to roll with it and even deal with the problem eventually. And Stannis had come close to winning the war at least three times since he and Ranma's forces had begun to battle weeks ago. If not for the Reach forces pulling back after Mace's death, he could still have won the main battle, especially considering the fact that Meera's attack on Melisandre would never have been possible without that.

"All right, it was the Crackclaw Point Houses. Do you remember me asking Daenerys whether or not they would be loyal to her or her brother? I sent them a message with an order and an offer..."

OOOOOO

Karhold was a good-sized castle, a five-story keep surrounded by walls with two of them further defended by a moat that was made up of the Sun Stream, a river that came in from the Narrow Sea. The walls weren't as tall as Winterfell's, and the keep wasn't as well made, but it was still a decent defensive position.

Looking at it through the intervening trees, Theon just hoped it would be able to hold out the White Walkers. He grimaced angrily, his good hand moving up to his opposite shoulder and touching it gingerly. The fisher's wife had mended it, and had actually fought back the gangrene that had begun to plague his shoulder, so he hadn't lost the limb. *Wouldn't that've been ridiculous, a one armed bowman?*

But what really worried him was the fact the trip to Karhold had taken so long! There were no roads or paths through to the Karhold from the Bay of Seals. And going through the woods of had been slow going in comparison to even normal travel in the North, made worse by the snow slowly building on the ground and the debilitating cold.

He nodded at the leader of the Karstark men around him, who he had met a few weeks ago while they were patrolling through the woods of their lands. Since then they had been able to speed up their journey, though not nearly fast enough to make Theon happy. The fisher-folk had broken off then, determined to head back to their boat and sail down the shore to the Bite. "How much longer?"

"Will be there in another few hours my Lord." said the man.

"Good," Theon said with a nod. "I just hope Torrhen listens to me."

In fact Torrhen did listen to him, leaning back in his father's chair his fingers tapping a thoughtful staccato on the armrests. He was not a normally thoughtful young man, in fact he was brash, outgoing and quick to think with his fists. But he had been left in charge by his father, and he and his mother had between them kept Karhold running along with the lands around it. After Theon stopped speaking, he exchanged a glance with his what mother, who was standing next to him, frowning all the while as Theon spoke.

Torrhen desperately wanted to make a joke. He really, really did. Something about Theon's dick getting him in trouble, or whether or not the White Walkers pussy was as cold as the rest of her. But with his mother standing right next to him, that just wasn't going to happen. And frankly the rest of the news Theon had shared killed any enjoyment he had about the Greyjoy lush's libido getting him into trouble. "So what you're saying," he said slowly, is that the White Walkers are definitely on Skagos?"

"If you have a better explanation for what I saw, what I experienced, I'm all ears." Theon replied coldly. "I don't know how they got there, I thought that the old legends said they couldn't cross the ocean, but they seem to have figured out a way."

Torrhen nodded already thinking about what he had to do. "I'll order my men out to scour the holdfasts on our land. Our people have already begun to gather in those in preparation for winter, but against something like this the holdfasts won't... hold." He smirked a little at his word joke but went on seriously. "I'll also have our own men start cutting back the forest around Karhold itself. We've already got it cut back somewhat for a safe zone, but we should probably cut it back even further."

"The wood will be necessary too." Lady Karstark said thoughtfully. "We should send a raven to house Umber, see if we can get in some more coal before these White Walkers fall upon us."

"We'll have to send raven's out in any event, To the Last Hearth, to Eastwatch-By-The-Sea, and of course to Winterfell." Torrhen replied.

"Winterfell first." Theon said firmly. "I'll write that message. **Everyone** needs to be warned."

Torrhen nodded and stood up. "Get yourself warm, get some food in you, and write that message Theon. We have some preparations to see to."

OOOOOO

"Say that again?" Petyr said sharply looking at Osney Kettleblack, who surprisingly had ridden out to the Army rather than wait for their arrival. But the news he brought was such that Petyr was thankful the man had done so.

Osney shrugged his shoulders angrily. "House Brune and the other Crackclaw Point Houses have taken the city. They moved up along the coastline, there's a series of small roads there, infiltrated the city over a series of days then took it! They've got Mooton locked up, only his daughter has leave to exit the keep now, and they rounded up all of his men and anyone else that could possibly side with him or the king."

He shrugged laconically. "Few even bothered fighting them honestly, the smallfolk of the town were on their side almost from the get-go when they declared they were claiming the town for House Stargaryen, Seven's Hells, I had to get out before someone recognized me! Though they haven't raised their flags on the walls yet for some reason."

Petyr stared at him then frowned as he pictured the walls of Maidenpool, still a full days' journey ahead of them tomorrow. They weren't very high walls, but they were decently durable ones made of stone, and had towers dotting them here and there. Nothing a siege or a truly persistent army couldn't break through, but their army lacked that willpower at this point.

The men that Petyr had brought to the cause were dead or scattered along with more than half the army Viserys had started with, the horses archers sent against the Baratheon camp lost to a man, and the force sent against the Starks badly mauled. The Dornishmen were shocky, fearful, the morale extremely low at the sudden turn around. Balerion was wounded and nearly mad from the pain of it, un-flyable and almost unapproachable entirely. The beast had been carried on a cart sedated for most of the journey.

*Yet they aren't putting their flags on the wall to declare their allegiance, why? Petyr's thoughts shuddered to a halt. They're not trying to hold the city against us, they're trying to lure us in. Smash us between the walls and the Army behind us.*

He shook his head. *It's over. Viserys and his faction are done. Even if I informed them of this, what would they do? And what would I gain from it? I backed Viserys because I had to, because his force caught my ship, it is now time to cut my losses. And perhaps, just perhaps...*

"I think..." he said aloud, "I think it's time for us to go. Oswell, you have our disguises, and the list of lords in charge of the guards on duty tonight? " *I may not be able to sit on a king's counsel anymore, but I might be able to salvage something.* "We make for the shore tonight, then from there..."

OOOOOO

Petyr's disappearance was found out the next day as the army came within shouting distance of Maidenpool, and Viserys and his wife both scowled angrily. *A rat leaving a sinking ship*, Arianne thought angrily, though she had anticipated this. What she had not anticipated was that Petyr and his sellswords would have been able to bypass her own preparations. She had hoped the man would be caught, the hatred Ranma Stark bore for Petyr could've made handing him over a good bargaining chip, at least enough to get Ranma to parlay with them again.

"It matters not my dear," Viserys said though he scowled as he said it, staring at Balerion. His wounds had healed somewhat, and Viserys felt he could fly with Balerion once more, but the rage and fury in the dragons eyes dissuaded him from attempting it at the moment. "We'll still be back in Maidenpool within the hour, and with its walls and siege weapons, we can hold for now while Balerion continues to heal. I won't be caught by surprise..."

He trailed off staring at the walls. "Those banners, they weren't there before, were they?" Seconds later the front ranks of the Army began to come under sudden fire from the walls and he glared up at them. "Traitors!"

Arianne gaped at the walls as well. "The Stark Army is only a day behind us! What are you going to do?" She was beginning to panic now, all of her dreams of vengeance, of becoming Queen of Westeros had slowly but surely segued into disaster, and this seemed to be the final straw.

Viserys glanced over at Balerion, who had roused itself, staring ahead at the screams of the dying. "Get those chains off him!" He ordered, before turning back to his wife. "If I can reclaim those walls, we can get into the town. We have

to do it quick, I'd wager my sister's army is closer than we think."

"If you can clear a section of the wall, we've got grapples enough to get a force up on top of them." Arianne nodded, getting a grip on herself.

As Viserys made his way over to Balerion, a saddle was brought forward, but he shook his head. "No, that will aggravate the wounds on his side. I'll have to ride without them. Fit the reins, that's all!"

Balerion moved its head wildly, but eventually the men got the reins in place, but not before it had bitten the arm off one of them. With his mouth still bloody, Viserys moved to Balerion's back getting on top of Balerion right in front of its wings. "Climb the Sky!"

A moment later they were in the air.

Nearby, Nymeria scowled, knowing this entire affair had become a simple disaster. Now it was time to make certain that she at least made it out of this alive. While Arianne raced off to get in the way of the lords trying to from up the army Nymeria grabbed several men of House Martell. Without speaking she led the way towards the 'special prisoners' tent.

Within they found Shireen who looked at Nymeria coldly as she pushed the tent flap out of her way. Nymeria didn't speak to her simply ordering, "Grab her, but be gentle. We'll need to then head to the cart Balerion was transported in."

OOOOOOO

Behind the Dornish army Ranma and the portion of the army he had taken with him on this chase had also come within sight of the walls having pushed hard throughout the night to close the gap. Sunfyre and Rhaegon were both up in the air as was Daenerys, this time on Rhaegon's back.

Below Ranma stared ahead, but it was Fenris' hearing which made him nod, hearing that the battle had begun. "They've come within bow range of the walls. The army will advance!"

All around Ranma the light and heavy cavalry were switching from their horses, moving to relatively fresh mounts. The small number of infantry had already dismounted and was riding away in two columns, with Greatjon leading one and Patek the other while Silas lead the light cavalry and Ranma the heavy.

Meera had taken charge of the archers, and was following the infantry in two mobs, which spread out as they went forward. That way when the archers joined the battle, they would be attacking from all sides and would not present any single target for a countercharge from any remaining cavalry among the enemy.

Within moments the cavalry was within charging range, and Ranma raced on with Fenris beside him and the heavy cavalry charging in his wake as the light cavalry spread out to start attacking the flanks of the Dornish Army, which had begun to spread as well, though slowly.

OOOOOOO

Viserys soared above Maidenpool, aiming his dragon down at a portion of the wall. "Attack, attack there!"

However Balerion balked suddenly, staring over to one side and then began to flap its wings heavily, trying to gain altitude. Viserys looked in that direction and his heart quailed as he saw one of the dragons of his sister coming towards them. He could see his sister was riding on its back, and an irrational anger suddenly filled him at the site. Below that dragon, the army that had pursued them over the last two weeks from the battle of the Shadow's Fall was marching forward, almost within charging range as he watched.

*It's all over*, Viserys realized with a sudden wrench inside, and a building fury. *It's all over. All of my dreams of a triumphant return, all of my hopes for the future, my dreams of justice and vengeance, everything I worked for done in by a traitor sister and her stinking wolf of a paramour!*" But if I can't win my throne, I can at least make certain you never sit on it sister!" Viserys shouted, allowing Balerion his head. "Kill her." He shouted leaning forward along the dragons neck. "Kill them both!"

With Sunfyre still gaining altitude behind them Rhaegon and Balerion circled one another, with Daenerys directing Rhaegon with her mind far more than with her legs and words. It was an advantage, but it wasn't working so well now. Viserys wasn't directing Balerion anymore, simply pointing him in their direction and letting Balerion do the fighting.

And it was a massive beast, easily half again as large as Rhaegon, its scales also proportionately tougher. Its front scales along its neck and face turned aside several blasts of Rhaegon's flame as the two beasts closed, while the return shot forced Rhaegon to evade wildly. The two continued to circle for several minutes, neither one getting an advantage, while Sunfyre came closer all the time from above.

Balerion however had seen the smaller dragon coming, and pressed forward hard, his wings pushing him forward and to the side faster than Rhaegon had anticipated, nearly catching Rhaegon with a blast of fire dead on when Rhaegon ducked to that side, Daenerys and Rhaegon having anticipated an attack on their previous position.

Rhaegon was almost able to dodge the blast, but he squalled in pain when the tip of one wing was caught in his enemy's fire. Balerion capitalized, moving in quickly with another gout of flame causing Rhaegon to desperately duck down and away from his charge, but that gave Balerion the height advantage.

Roaring victoriously it reached down with its front claws ready to gouge deep into Rhaegon's back near where his sinuous body met his tail, hoping to kill this enemy before the second, smaller dragon could join the battle.

But it had neglected to think of Daenerys. Kicking out of her stirrups, Daenerys turned her body entirely around, grasping the saddle horn with one hand and pulling out Dark Sister. Crouching there on Rhaegon's back for a moment she readied herself to attack the black-scaled dragon when it closed. Realizing however that the Dragon would still maul Rhaegon she let go of the saddle horn, crouching there for a moment before thrusting Dark Sister up with both hands.

Balerion's own downward momentum carried it onto her blade, and the Valyrian steel sword pierced his chest going deep into it. he screamed in agony, a sound that sent a shudder through Daenerys as she fell backwards onto Rhaegon's back, desperately turning and scrabbling at the saddle, sending the thought *Away, down and away!* to her dragon.

Rhaegon obeyed with alacrity, almost throwing Daenerys off but one desperate hand grabbed the saddle-horn, and gritting her teeth hanging on for dear life while Rhaegon bank away, almost colliding with the ground they had descended so much during Balerion's chase of them.

Ignoring the other dragon for now Rhaegon craned his neck to look at Daenerys, crooning softly as he stared at her, and if a dragon could look incredulous and worried Rhaegon was that dragon right then. "I'm, I'm alright," Daenerys said softly, now pulling herself further into the saddle. "That's not something I want to do again though."

Nearby Sunfyre was banking downwards as well, his own voice a louder croon than Rhaegon's as he craned his head in to make to make certain that she was all right. Daenerys opened her warg link to both dragons, sending feelings of love and relief, while she turned her body to stare at where Balerion what was plummeting downwards towards the ground behind them.

Balerion fell like a stone. By the time the Daenerys had righted herself in her saddle, Balerion's corpse was slamming into the ground at a velocity to equal any catapult thrown stone gouging a bit of the earth out with its impetus. Viserys screamed desperately clinging to the dragons neck, cutting himself on its hard scales before the impact threw him from its back to land, still living but with the wind knocked out of him.

He looked up groggily, just in time to be ridden into pulp by Daryn Hornwood, leading a portion of the light cavalry around the main battle on this flank. Daryn looked behind him, then at a few of his men, shrugging his shoulders, a somewhat embarrassed but also vindictive smile on his face as he viewed the 'last true Targaryen's' ignominious, and all together ignoble, corpse. "Oops?"

OOOOOO

Tired, malnourished from the chase through territory they had already picked clean and now caught between the wall of Maidenpool and the approaching army, the Dornishmen stood no chance. Hundreds of them surrendered, throwing down their arms rather than fight, with Nymeria Martell urging the lords to do so, standing on the cart and shouting it at the top of her lungs while at her feet Shireen Baratheon sat, the two of them guarded by House Martell men. Nymeria hoped that the girl and her own family's connection would be enough to see her through.

Arianne however tried to rally some of the lords to keep fighting, until one of them ordered his men to take her into custody. Jorah Mormont at first tried to rally their men as well, but died from an arrow from an unknown archer of House Locke, one among many arrows in that particular assault.

Later that day Ranma and Daenerys received Nymeria in their tent. They weren't going to enter Maidenpool, not just

yet. The rest of the army under Jason was barely four days behind them, prisoners and all, minus a force under Wendel Manderly, who was still hunting down the mercenaries and the men of the force from the Dornish army that had broken under the Reach cavalry charge.

When the rest of the army arrived, the lords would all enter together, a triumphal parade for the smallfolk here which would quickly spread the news of their victory well beyond Maidenpool's walls. Then too, it would allow Daenerys and Ranma a few more days to hammer out several decisions they had to make before turning their attention fully to the North.

Ranma nodded at Nymeria somewhat cordially. "The two healers I brought along say that Shireen was not abused in any way, though she is of course showing signs of grayscale. Still they're old, and it's obviously been cured so no dishonor can accrue to you due to her treatment as your prisoner. I'm not going to turn a blind eye to the fact that your family wholeheartedly endorsed Viserys' attempt to return to power, or the acts of your father down south. You realize he's signed his death warrant leading that a mercenary army?"

Nymeria twitched, glaring at him angrily losing control of her tongue for a moment. "Are you certain you can afford that? I would think this entire war would show that my house takes vengeance seriously."

"I'm certain that by the time any order I sent down to try and take him alive the man would already be dead." Ranma replied bluntly. "As to your House, part of the reparations we will demand for letting the Lords still alive among your army and their men go, is that House Martell is removed from power over Dorne. Your family's time as Lord Paramount is done, just as the Lannisters. If I have to break Dorne just as we did the Westerlands I'll do it."

Nymeria quailed a little under Ranma's grim blue eyes. "I, I understand. What, what will be my fate?"

"You and your sister, who we captured after the battle a few days ago, will remain prisoners of our House. Until your own House is removed from power in Dorne, we cannot afford to let you go I'm afraid." Daenerys said, from where she was leaning against Fenris moving her shoulders wincing occasionally.

During that brief aerial battle with Viserys Daenerys had pulled something in her shoulders. Though whether or not that happened when she plunged Dark Sister into Balerion or after when she had to hang on to the saddle horn for dear life she didn't know.

"Of course your safety and well-being will be assured. As far as we know you and your sister were not involved in any atrocities. You followed your house into its war of vengeance, but we cannot in good conscience say that you personally did anything to dishonor yourself."

"We could've done more." Nymeria said, now staring away from the two, disarmed by this bit of generosity. She had fully expected to be put to death frankly, her, her sister, and cousin. "My sister and I, we knew Viserys was insane the moment, the moment he fed one of our own Lords to that freakish dragon of his! We hid Aegon's arrival entirely from him, and were prepared to convince our lords to throw off Viserys for him, yet he was just as bad, not as violent, but just as mad, just as cruel. After that, after that we were stuck."

"Sometimes all you can do is hold on." said Daenerys smirking a little at her joke, though her tone was serious as she went on. "Chance and the impetus of fate can carry you where you'd least expect to go."

"Your cousin is a different matter. Arianne will need to be executed for her part in this war. Without her, your family would never have joined Viserys, and he would never of had the strength to invade Westeros. Undoubtedly Viserys would still have attempted something, but the odds of him being as successful, without your House's intervention, is doubtful. Arianne needs to pay for that."

Nymeria nodded her head, knowing he was correct, sighing faintly. "My sister tried to play the game of thrones and lost. I could wish that you would simply exile her to the sisters, but I can't imagine that she would last long in one of their septs. She is not made for the hard life that such would demand. Killing her now might be a mercy frankly."

"There is one question I have though." Ranma said after a moment. "One that I need answered right now. Where... Is... Littlefinger?"

"Gone. He must have learned of your trap before the fact somehow. He disappeared last night."

Ranma growled, and Fenris did too, standing up from where he had been laying down dislodging Daenerys who grumbled but did not protest overmuch. The fact that Petyr was still alive bothered both of them, given the role he had played in the battle in King's landing, along with possibly aiding Joffrey in setting up Tommen's death and hiding the



bastard's identity as the Vile One, along with his designs on Sansa.

Ranma looked at his direwolf who looked back, and Ranma suddenly smiled. "Did he leave any articles of clothing behind?"

Nymeria shrugged her shoulders at the odd question. "I assume so."

Moments later some of Ranma's men had returned, with a few of the camp workers among the Dornish army, one of whom was carrying a large bag. He nodded his head at Ranma, opening it and quickly pulling out several articles of clothing. "All Lord Baelish's your highness, all left behind last night."

"Thank you." Ranma nodded taking some of the clothing from the man and holding them out to Fenris, who sniffed them, memorizing the scent.

"Hunt him down my wolf." Ranma said formally, laying his hand on Fenris' large head, which was even with his own at the moment. *Hunt him down, no matter how long it takes, unless he head out to the big water, though frankly I doubt he'll do that. I bet he's heading for his family's land in the Vale. Then find me in Winterfell,* he said mentally, envisioning Winterfell in his mind's eye.

Fenris huffed, nodding his head, his nose already going to work, separating the few particles of 'Littlefinger' from the background smell of the camp around them. With that the direwolf turned loping off out into the night.

Ranma watched him go for a moment, before turning back to Daenerys, while Nymeria was led out of their tent. "Now, I think we need to send a message down to the rest of the army, have them meet us up here, and let the Reach and Stormlands groups go. Then, I want a boat sent out to the Royal Navy. I've heard good things about Seaworth, and I'd like to meet the man in person. It could just be that his ships could be used return us to the North as quickly as possible."

OOOOOO

The water was frozen, and snow was everywhere. Piled here and there becoming deeper slowly, but it was more the pervasive cold at the moment that told every Northern man and woman that winter was here.

That was far truer here than it was anywhere else. The shore of the Bay of Seals had frozen utterly, from the shore out to several leagues to nearly five yards straight down. Upon this frozen sure arrived an army, though it was not an army as anyone else would understand the term. No, these were men and women, even children, the entire population of Skagos brought across slowly by the ships Theon had left behind and the men Theon had lost.

They brought other things as well. Creatures out of legend and nightmare, their eyes glowing blue each and every one of them man and beast.

Here were undead unicorns, their inherent magic making them unusable by the White Walkers in life, but not death. Here were massive snow tigers, as larger than even a direwolf, with two large serrated fangs and monstrous claws, their minds broken and cowed. No direwolf was among them. Like unicorns direwolves could not be broken, only killed, and they were too wily to be caught out even by White Walkers.

But there were others, creatures of ice and dead body parts, homunculi horrible to look upon, larger than even the greatest beasts found naturally in nature. The most terrible of these were five massive, skeletal dragons, which flew in some fashion that had nothing to do with normal aerodynamics above the army. Where they came from only the White Walkers knew, and of course they would never tell.

The transportation process took several weeks, but by the end of it the White Walkers had a sizable army within striking range of Karhold. At some unseen signal those that army began to march, heading inland.

The ships remained behind, and men were seen moving aboard one of them, dragging out what looked like a giant frozen crystal of blue ice. As dawn broke dreary and overcast the crystal had been transported into a cave near the shoreline. There several White Walkers moved, sitting down all around, it their hands touching it gently as they began to send out their power. It would take time, but soon their power would spread far beyond the shoreline of the Bay.

The invasion had begun.

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End chapter

Holy Bleeding Fuck. That battle was the hardest scene to get right that I have ever done, well in terms of combat scenes anyway. Normally those are a lot easier than others. But this one, with so many bits and pieces, so many sides, ye-gods it was really bloody hard.

This signals the end of really concentrating on the human enemies, at least in terms of full on warfare. Politics, Oberyng and the cleanup will take some time, but Ranma and his army are obviously needed elsewhere, so Jon and the allies he makes along the way will need to deal with them. The Others are here now, and Ranma and co. have to face them or lose everything, in time anyway.

## **\*Chapter 19\*: Chapter 19**

**I do not own GRRM's work, or Ranma, more's the pity.**

In regards to ATP, my ATP muse went head to head with my WW muse for what little free time I had this month, and lost. As such, I decided to postpone the ATP chapter until the Superbowl, or more accurately, the evening before (cross your fingers). While I have all of it's combat scenes written and the rest outlined that might be pushing it. And before anyone thinks of asking, no, the chapter for Horse for the Force did not slow me down, I had most of it written last month, there were just two scenes kicking my balls that had to be sorted out. Apologies to all those waiting for ATP, but that's the way the muse ran.

Thanks go to Antony444 for betaing, and for his work on finding grammar/minor mistakes.

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### **Chapter 19: Death's March, War's End, Wolf's Run**

Fenris sniffed the air, his eyes glowing slightly in the darkness of the rain swept night. It was raining again here in this too warm place, but not enough, nowhere near enough to impede his sense of smell. Despite his chosen humans understanding of the difficulty that Fenris faced in trying to translate smells into what a human could understand, Ranma didn't really understand how much he was missing out in that translation.

It wasn't so much that Fenris had the best nose in all of the animal kingdom, which Ranma understood. Ranma knew Fenris was also intelligent, but he hadn't quite made that leap to understand how that intelligence would affect the direwolf's use of a direwolf's traditional senses. Fenris could not only smell everything within five kilometers of his current position, he could understand all of those scents as well.

*A metal smell coming from a trap someone had laid in a farmstead nearby, the scent of human blood there mixed in with that of animals, the scent of fear and pain still wafting in the air.* A normal direwolf would have smelled them all, but could not have understood what had occurred. Fenris did, and his lips rolled back in a snarl. Killing people he could understand, even these giant battles of pack versus pack that the humans seemed to be so enamored of. But killing the young? It was a very foolish punter that killed all of the young, else there wouldn't be more to hunt later on. And why humans preyed on their own kind was beyond him.

Moving on, Fenris was a black shadow in the night. Unseen and unheard he passed through the Riverlands hunting his prey. Eventually the prey had made for the wide undrinkable water which led to the crab place, causing Fenris to stop for a moment. *The smell of tar, the smell of wood, wet wood from the rains and from the waters.* But, there was also this scent of his prey.

Cautiously the direwolf circled the area around where the prey entered the wooden man-thing on the shore of the undrinkable water, making certain that this was not a trap, his nose raised high in the air to smell anything that could be construed as such. Unfortunately it wasn't. His quarry really had taken to the water.

But, Fenris thought in the way of his kind, a state somewhere between that of human and will direwolf, he did not enter the waters or swim in it himself. Fenris could still smell him on the wind, moving away over the water in the wooden thing.

With a whine that was far too close to a whimper for Fenris to ever admit to in company he began to move towards the water, cautiously swimming out to where his feet could no longer touch the bottom. He hadn't swum often, but it was something his siblings and he had done occasionally. The waves were a bit of an issue, but Fenris was strong enough to deal with it for now. And the scent was still in the air, the betrayer, one of those responsible for his pampered sibling's death. Such needed to be addressed by family after all, and any hardship he had to face in doing so was worth it.

OOOOOO

It had finally happened, and Eddard still found himself quailing inside despite having prepared himself for this for over a year now. The forces of the Great Enemy had returned, and now they had to respond to this threat. He looked across his desk at Maester Luwin, whose face had paled considerably upon reading the message he'd brought in from the raven's tower. "So, they've completely bypassed the Wall."

"I did not think that was possible my Lord," said the maester. "From what little I've studied of magic, the White Walker's magic cannot cross water, so how do they do it?"

"In the end however how they got to Skagos is immaterial to the fact that they now have a forward base on the flank of our strongest defense against them, where, I don't have to remind you, much of our mobile forces have already been sent. The North lies open, and we need to prepare."

He leaned back for a brief moment, closing his eyes, suddenly happy that Sansa was probably leaving White Harbor at that moment, or might have already. She'd be down in the South in Riverrun well away from this soon enough, and distance might well protect Sansa better than walls or armies. It was an odd thought, but Eddard actually thought for a moment of sending his remaining family south, possibly to Lord Flint of Flint's Finger, or Lord Reed and Greywater Watch. But none of them would go, and it was but a fleeting thought.

With a shrug remarkably like his children's direwolves, Eddard the father receded, and Eddard Stark returned. He opened his eyes, staring hard into his maester's eyes. "Get out your pen and parchment my friend, we have orders I need to send out."

"I have them here my Lord." Luwin said simply, holding up the writing implements, and a small slate of wood behind the parchment, smiling thinly.

"These first messages will be for House Flint of Widow's Watch, Woolfield, Umber, Manderly, and Hornwood. The message is as follows: 'My Lords, the Great Enemy has risen once again, as my son and his friends warned us at the moot in Winterfell, but from a direction none could have seen. Somehow they have gotten around the wall, taken Skagos, and might even now be landing on the shores of the Bay of Seals.'

'Therefore you are ordered to pull all of your smallfolk back to your castles or send them further south. I care not if they want to move, they are to be forced if necessary. Abandon their farms, their holdfasts, anything! Remember that these enemies will not feel pain, will not fear death, and may well keep coming in the face of casualties that would break any human army.'

'Furthermore we do not know the full extent of the Great Enemy's own magical abilities. On a similar vein, you are to be on the lookout for any particularly handsome man or beautiful woman whose skin is pale like porcelain and cold to the touch. They have apparently used the same trick they used on the Night's King in days of yore, and may use it again.'

'I want it understood my Lords, that we are trading land for time. Until sufficient weapons arrives in White Harbor, we must give way to this attack, holding those castles that we can without them, but giving ground everywhere else.'

"End it there and give it to me to sign for the Lords Flint, Woolfield, Umber, and Hornwood. Then add an addendum to the one for Lord Manderly, telling him he is to use his own discretion in the distribution of the dragonglass weapons when they come in. I expect that by the time the Lysene pirate arrives the places those weapons need to go will have shrunk." Eddard finished grimly.

"My Lord, what about a message back to Karhold?" Luwin asked, frowning slightly at that oversight.

Eddard sighed deeply. "Torrhen knows his duty, and Theon is there. I don't think they'll be able to hold, but I trust both of those young men to realize that, and began to retreat as they can. Besides, they have the river Sunstreamthere. They could be able to get all the way down to Widow's Watch or further by sea."

"No, Nothing I can say or do will affect that battle, I will simply send Torrhen a message in my own hand entirely, commanding them to do what they see best, and may the Old Gods aid them." He sighed deeply then shook his head. "Set those aside now if you finished with that, you can copy the messages later. I have more orders."

Maester Luwin nodded his pen in his hand, and Eddard went on as the man pulled out a fresh piece of parchment. "This is to go to House Mormon, House Ryswell, House Cerwyn, House Glover and Tallhart. 'Attached to this message my Lords, you will find the message relayed to me about the events on Skagos. If the Great Enemy was able to get to Skagos, Bear Island is also a target, or even more so since your House Lady Mormont, is known as a true vassal of the North, whose loss would weaken us all."

He went on, trusting Maester Luwin to remember not to send that last portion to all the other Lords without being told. "'To that end, I Eddard Stark acting for your Lord Paramount my son Brandon, and our King Ranma Stark, command House Ryswell, and Glover to send half your remaining infantry and archers to reinforce Bear Island. It cannot be allowed to fall if it is attacked.' Correct me if I'm wrong, but that should give Maegh Mormont around 4500 or so to add to her own forces?"

"Hmmm... less my Lord, remember House Ryswell doesn't have that much infantry, and Glover and Tallhart are

masterly houses for a reason, their lands can't support as many men as a great House." This was because Tallhart was based in a Torrhen's Square, a fishery and lumber center, and Glover's property was situated on the shore of the Bay of Ice between it and the Wolfswood, a hardscrabble area that couldn't produce enough food to maintain a large population. I think at best 2,900 my Lord, and that will leave Deepwood Motte and Torren's Square without infantry at all. But Lady Mormont should be able to make up the numbers."

"It will have to do, and the Mormont clan knows Bear Island better than any, I imagine they will make any invasion pay dearly. However, make a note that they are to receive at least half of the first shipment of dragonglass arrowheads and weapons once they arrive in White Harbor."

"My Lord, transportation from Winterfell to Bear Island will be atrociously slow, I am uncertain that that is a wise move." Luwin cautioned.

Eddard thought for a moment, calculating travel times. It was true that if he sent those weapons that way, the North might feel the need for them on the other front well before they arrived at Bear Island. "Very well, you're right travel time would be bad."

"The next part is for Lord Ryswell alone." Maester Luwin nodded and Eddard went on. "My Lord I ask you to send half of your remaining light cavalry to reinforce Lord Hornwood. I myself and House Cerwyn will be sending men to reinforce Hornwood and the Last Hearth."

His own and his direct neighbor's forces Eddard had a much better grasp of than those of the other noble Houses. House Stark had barely sent fifty of its trained armsmen with the army, having instead sent the Pike regiment, which had been raised from the smallfolk for the most part, with only its officers and troop leaders coming from their armsmen. This meant that House Stark retained around 1,600 men here in Winterfell despite having sent men up to the Wall. And most of the minor Houses from House Stark lands had also not send their men away. With them he would be able to raise another 1,800 or so.

He looked over at the Wull, who had been silent up to this point despite Eddard having included him in this conference. "Will you send some of your men with mine my friend?"

"To hold the Last Hearth or Hornwood? Aye." the other man said with a grim nod. Since he and most of his people had arrived in Wintertown, they had been treated like honored subjects, and all of his men had received the steel weapons that House Stark was making now.

"Good, but we won't split your men. I think that the Great Enemy will strike first at the Last Hearth; Hornwood is far much further south than the Last Hearth or Karhold. We can't get to Karhold to aid House Karstark, but, we can use the White Knife and the canal from Long Lake to send aid to House Umber. I want 1,400 men on the road within the week, half of which will be your men and mine, the rest will be made up of men from the nearest minor houses. I'll be sending messages to my minor lords and telling them to pull back from their holdfasts to join us here with their people at the same time."

The Wull frowned for a moment. He was not a man at home with numbers, but some numbers were important to the survival of his people, and paramount among those was the number of warriors on hand at any given time. "I can send around 400, that'll leave me here with 300, but that's the most I can send. If I try to send more my warriors will object, fearing that we won't have enough strength on hand to defend our womenfolk."

"Understandable," Eddard nodded. He knew that wasn't an insult to his House or their generosity, since guest rights was inviolate. It was simply a bred in the bone response from the clans: they needed to keep enough men home to defend their lands and their families. "Besides, I wouldn't've wanted you to send more. Sooner or later, the Great Enemy will attack here as well, and we might need all the help we can get by that point."

"My Lord," Maester Luwin asked hesitantly. "What of warning the Houses south of the Neck? I have ravens trained to all the Lord Paramount Houses, as well as a few more in the Vale..."

The Wull scoffed, waved his hand at Eddard who nodded and watched the man leave before turning to Maester Luwin. The Wull of course did not care for any southerners and that was without taking into account the fact that a war down there had pulled most of the North's strength well out of position to deal with the real threat.

"We will send such messages yes, but I doubt that anything will come of them. Still, send a message to Riverrun first, mark it as urgent as you possibly can. I'm certain the maester there can get a messenger to my son wherever he and his army is. We need that army back here as soon as possible, whatever is going on south. For now however, there are other messages to send to Locke, Reed, and Barrowton."

Later that day Eddard composed the last message to be sent out that day, the one copied and sent south. This was a much shorter message as long distance ones had to be, composed of only four sentences. 'My fellow Lords Paramount, my son, and any who receive this message, the Great Enemy has returned and found a way around the Wall. Even now their forces march on the lands of men. The White Walkers are here my Lords, it is time to set aside our differences for Westeros must stand as one lest we die separately.' Attached to the message sent to Riverrun was a copy of the message Eddard had received from Torrhen Karstark.

One last raven left late that night, leaving Winterfell's Maester's Tower emptier than it had been in centuries. But this one was sent to the Wall and the commander of the Night's Watch, warning them to prepare for attacks from behind, especially at Eastwatch-By-the-Sea.

That evening while his wife fell asleep after spending most of the day in the sept praying, Eddard left, heading into the godswood. He remained there for some time, sending his thoughts out to Jon and Ranma. "We have run out of time my sons."

OOOOOO

The White Walker's influence spread from their new stronghold on the shore of the Bay of Seals. Undead began to rise as far south as the start of former House Bolton lands within two weeks of their arrival on the shore. Cemeteries and former battlefields became disturbed as the dead clawed their way out of the earth, answering the call of the Great Enemy to once more take to their feet and deal death to those still living. But this was a mere sideshow for now to where the true power of the Great Enemy would land.

OOOOOO

In his reading room Rodrick Harlaw sat silent for the most part while Asha relayed all that she had seen in the battle of the Straits, as well as what had happened to her since. Asha held nothing back, including what she had seen and found in that hidden cave, the proof of what Lord Kenning had only hinted at.

While Rodrick was a skeptic about anything smacking of the mystical realm he had not interrupted her, nor had he called in the guards to have her thrown from the tower as worshipers of the Storm God should be according to the Drowned God followers. In truth there weren't many of those, most of the Ironborn espoused views that followed the Drowned God's ways, but what they really worship was the Old Way itself rather than the god.

*Yet even that has taken a pounding recently,* Rodrick thought to himself smiling sardonically, though carefully hiding the expression from Asha. She was in no mood to see the humor in anything, the loss of her beloved ship of every man aboard it weighed heavily on her.

*The Iron Islands have lost so much manpower, there aren't one in twenty raiders left alive, and without them, the tradition of raiding, of paying the Iron Price may well fade, at least in its present format. If we can retain some of the islands it might grow again, but that's doubtful. Our longships themselves have been shown to be inferior now to the war galleys of the Greenlanders, so much for our pride.*

"So I want you to pull your ships back from anything but defending Harlaw. Even the Straits between Harlaw are to be left to the enemy. Those shorelines are cliff faces so we can post a few archers there and use the ships that were patrolling that area to reinforce elsewhere."

Hearing that, the Reader came back to the here and now shaking his head slightly. "I'd already pulled back my few remaining ships to guard the ports of my island Asha," He said mildly. "There aren't enough left of us to fight the Westerlands war galleys. They're never separate, they always move in groups of four, and their captains have learned to keep the range open no matter what tricks ours try to employ. They patrol the ports they've taken on Pyke, and they guard the troop ships coming from Banefort. That trip is too short and too well guarded to let us raid them."

"I haven't heard anything about what's been going on the mainland, are we facing the entire Westerlands army invading us now?" Asha asked sitting down at last as she ran out of energy to pace.

"We are not. My few remaining factors on the mainland say that there isn't a real Westerlands army left, at least not one that represents the totality of the Westerlands. Indeed, from the latest bit of news the Westerlands as an entity might also be gone. The Starks destroyed the Lannisters in the open field, and smashed the Westerlands cohesion. I'm not certain how they did that second, but the March of the Wolf King has become a rather popular song in the bars down by the port."

"I heard it when we came in, I thought it was propaganda! Who would've thought that old bastard of a lion would be

killed by the young wolf? Still, that doesn't answer my question. If those troop transports aren't bringing in troops, what are they doing?"

"Bringing far deadlier goods my dear. Weapons and food."

Asha frowned for a moment, but the Reader did not enlighten her, simply staring at her silently. Eventually she nodded her eyes widening at the implication. "They're arming the thralls aren't they? By the Storm God's spleen and fury, they're going to arm a thrall rebellion!"

"Pyke is gone." Said Rodrick shrugging his shoulders. "Your father didn't leave many fighting men behind across its entire length, and what there was gathered at Lordsport in an attempt to stave off the invaders. Now that news has spread throughout the rest of the island that the invaders are willing to arm the thralls and help them gain some revenge, Houses on every island are rebellion now, which will only get worse when the Lannisters transport their new allies from Pyke on to the others."

"And what about here?"

"Harlaw has never had that many thralls, not in comparison to Great Wyk, where they are treated as disposable thanks to the mines of House Goodbrother. We were the bread basket of the iron islands as you well know, and farming is at least somewhat less deadly than mining. The fact my father and I passed laws forcing thralls to be treated well, and that their women could no longer be used as salt wives, have also helped, as have our treatment of blacksmiths and other tradesmen whose skills make them valuable. Alas, that simply became one more reason for the other islands to look down on us as soft." Rodrick smiled thinly. "The Lannister will never be able to gain popular support here, but the other islands?"

"So we sacrifice them." Asha said grimly nodding her head.

"Agreed, as I said we don't have the ships or the troops." Rodrick barked a laugh. He'd never forgiven Balon Greyjoy for exiling Alannys back to Harlaw when her mind broke after the deaths of their two oldest sons. Both young men, poisoned by Balon's faith in the Old Way, died in Balon's first attempt at rebellion. Balon had never treated her well, and sent her home after her mind cracked, and had been rutting with any woman he could capture since. "I find it the height of irony is that your father's adherence to the Old Way has possibly destroyed it for all time."

"I can't say I'm entirely unhappy about that outcome either." Asha said. "But you realize that leaves me with not much in the way of power base? Frankly I bet many of your minor lords will question why you're even listening to me, at least until I bring out my little present."

"You have me and my House." Rodrick replied simply. "You're not your father, you have never acted preciously, and you have always been far more intelligent than the average captain of the Ironborn. You would make a good queen."

"Lady Paramount." Asha said with a shake of her head. "If that. I'm afraid our independence will be at an end whatever happens. Still, I am happy that I have your support."

"Always my dear." Rodrick said smiling at the girl he regarded as a daughter. "Always."

Her face hardened noticeably. "Good, because I doubt the differences between Harlaw and the other Islands will occur to the Greenlanders. They'll come against us here eventually. When they do, I mean to show them that taking Harlaw will cost them far, far more than they are willing to pay." She smiled thinly, tapping the pack next to her lightly, causing it to rustle with a metallic clank.

OOOOOO

Oberyn smiled faintly as the scandalized servant left him alone in Lady Taena Merryweather's room. "I think you've scandalized her servants magnificently my dear."

"That would be **we** have my Lord Oberyn." The woman said sultrily, gesturing to a table which was already laden with small delicacies and fruit. "It takes two to create a scandal after all."

"It takes two to do many things." Oberyn said gently caressing her rear through her conservative, yet strangely provocative dress as he moved past her. While he was here to get information, that didn't mean he needed to be in a rush about it, now did there?" *Especialy when the wench is so obviously willing.* "But before that, business I'm afraid."

Taena Merryweather of Longtable nodded, pouring them both goblets of wine and holding one out to him in both hands. Oberyn chuckled, taking it from her and lifting it lightly in salute before sniffing at the wind and then taking a

slow long sip, his eyes never leaving hers.

But when he set it down however, he was back to business. "The news my lady."

"There is quite a lot of news actually. The latest from up further north, is that the two Baratheon brothers faced one another and the younger came out the loser. You've probably heard rumors about that and the burning of King's Landing already?" Oberynd nodded and she went on more grimly. "They're true. Stannis now controls the remaining Reach forces up there, and burned King's Landing to the ground using some kind of magic from his Red Witch, purportedly to combat the spread of a plague. Have you heard of her before?"

"We've heard rumors of that before we set out from Sunspear. But the rumors are true?"

"Yes. And that isn't the only sign that magic that has returned though I'll get to that in a moment. Stannis apparently received word about both your depredations and the assaults the Ironborn have been making, you know of those?" Oberynd nodded again, and Taena smiled and went on. "Much of the Mander below Oldflowers has been given over to the Ironborn, for several leagues away from the river unfortunately."

Taena shook her head frowning a little. "Honestly, I need don't know why the Ironborn are continuing to raid as they are, their numbers aren't very large, and I would've thought that even those raping murderous bastards would've had their fill of raiding for now and returned back to their islands, if for no other reason than to drop off their booty. But they haven't. It's as if they're gripped with some kind of, of madness. And that's not even considering what's happening on the Arbor."

"Pity," said Oberynd, holding the goblet up to the light of the window behind her. "Whatever will Westeros do for wine without the Arbor to call upon?"

That statement showed what little concern Oberynd had for people of any realms save his brothers, he was here for vengeance that was all. *Nothing else mattered and nothing would get in his way. Well, that and putting Viserys on the throne I suppose, though I'd rather be facing Stannis myself than simply causing so much chaos down here as to force him to split his army. He's known as a mighty warrior, but I'd bet my spear and its little surprise would see him off quickly enough.*

For all her self-control Taena almost looked taken aback at his attitude, but controlled it quickly. "S-so, Lord Stannis knew of your depredations and those in the Ironborn, and sent a force under Lord Caron to retake the Mander and work with the Marcher Lords to crush you. Another force passed by here on the Mander several months ago under Ser Garlan Tyrell. He was heading down to Oldtown to join with the remnants of the Redwyne fleet to retake the Arbor. It's rumored that he arrived just in time to save his sister at her stand at the Castle of Oldflowers."

"I've heard that from a few of my armies... guests. Though I also heard something else, something about miracles aiding him on his way?"

The woman shivered a little, turning away from him for a moment before looking back. "Some say that the Seven have been at work my Lord. Seven miracles guided Garlan on his way, and since then the crops have been bountiful and coming in far more quickly than they should be, so much so that many Houses now have a surplus. There are tales of fallow fields springing to life and blooming all in the space of a month."

"The septons are all all saying that it's a sign that we should be backing Daenerys Targaryen and Ranna Stark. They've been saying that for months, and it's taking in the smallfolk's admittedly limited minds. You won't find any aid among them, nor will Viserys if he wins through."

*Which is frankly doubtful to my mind,* the spymistress added internally. But she was a consummate spy, able to play off all sides against one another for her own ends. Right now Oberynd was right in front of her, so she had to play the good Martell spy, as she had previously played the part of Varys' loyal spy or Petyr's agent.

"I see." Oberynd said with a frown. "Still, unless they intervene directly in the battle I can't see anyone caring overmuch. As for Viserys, I've no doubt he'll be smart enough to keep out of any large-scale battle until the Starks and the Baratheon's wear each other down."

He leaned back frowning thoughtfully. His job was to hurt the Reach and the Stormlands, do as much damage both to their farmlands and fighting ability as he could. *Bryce Caron, hmm from what I remember he's young, untried as a commander but well thought of. A summer knight with a bit more sword skill than most, but no real knowledge of how to lead in battle. Excellent.* "Where is Lord Caron's force now?"



"Unlike Garlan, Bryce never thought of using the Mander to hasten his journey my Lord, he has followed the Roseroad. The highway however dips westward quite a ways. He crossed Bitterbridge about a month or so ago I think, so he should be halfway between there and high guarded by this point, possibly as much as two thirds of the way.

"Well out of the way of any assault along the Mander then. Or..." Oberyne frowned for a moment, thinking. "What are the defenses of Cider Hall like at present? And are there any bridges over the Mander between here and Cider Hall?"

"The defense of Cider Hall is in good shape. Lord Fossoway left several knights behind, along with the majority of his trained archers to hold the walls. Lady Fossoway has been meticulous in bringing in smallfolk and preparing the castle since word of your assaults along the Blue Byrn reached this area."

Oberyne cocked his head and eyebrow at her, causing Taena to smile thinly, shrugging her shoulders. "One of her ladies in waiting reports to me my Lord, she is not a dedicated spy, merely a gossip who thinks of me in the same manner. I asked her to look at her lady's response to this current crisis because I needed advice but did not want to outright ask for it for pride's sake and the little idiot believed me."

That was actually the way Taena got most of her news: by being known as a gossip, and talking to others of similar bent. There was nothing wrong with gossip after all, especially considering that she really had followed through with her idea of following Lady Fossoway's lead in preparing Longtable. Of course Longtable was not a very strong castle, and the lands around it were not as rich in terms of population as the area around Cider Hall, but she had done what she could.

Of course that was before she opened her gates to Lord Oberyne and a small entourage from his army, which was still camped in the sacked keep of House Cockshaw. None of them were wearing tabards or anything that could mark them out as from the invading army, the news of whose presence had spread.

"As to whether there is a bridge or not between here and there, there's one of the main ones on the Mander, it's quite wide and made of stone. It will easily accommodate your army's crossing, though I have to ask why you would be crossing in the first place."

"I don't want to have to fight my way through Fossoway territory as you seem to indicate we'd have to. Simply following the Mander down from here would force me to come within bow range of Cider Hall, which my army does not have the discipline to simply take and ignore."

"You realize if you cross the river, you will probably run into Lord Bryce eventually? He'll hear of your coming through the smallfolk and the septons, and turn aside before reaching Highgarden. "

"If he does we'll defeat him in the open, but if he doesn't we'll take him from behind as he is making for Highgarden. There's no better time to ambush someone than when he sees his target in sight."

"And what of Lord Willas? News from Goldengrove indicates he's arrived there, and is preparing river barges to carry him back down to Highgarden. You might also face him in battle." Taena objected.

That made Oberyne hesitate for a moment. Despite the hatred their families were supposed to hold for one another, he and Willas had been firm friends for several years. A fact that broke through his need to keep going, to burn and make the Reach suffer as his family had. "I, I will cross that bridge when I come to it. After I take Bryce from behind, I'll turn immediately northward on the Rose Road towards the Crownlands. Viserys will no longer need my army's aid eventually in that campaign."

*We'll cross the Mander, then fall upon Bryce, that young fool won't know what hit him. Then we'll burn the lands between here and there, which should sate my army's lust for blood, booty and fire for a time, before turning north. I just hope the young idiot really is smart enough to stay away from direct clashes for now. His black beast might be larger than most of the breed, but it's still young, so isn't as tough or dangerous as Viserys probably thinks.*

"Now," he said setting the glass aside and reaching for Taena's hand bringing it to his lips. "I believe that business is concluded, unless you have any other information for me?" Oberyne spent the rest of the day rutting with Taena in her marriage bed. He wasn't the first she had welcomed to it behind her husband's back, but Oberyne felt a thrill as he always did in moments like this. He left as the sun was setting, satiated for now in more ways than one.

Behind him Lady Taena stood at her window frowning as she watched him go, tapping one finger against her thigh thoughtfully wincing occasionally. Oberyne had been a passionate lover but not a gentle one, and she would have to wear high neck dresses with long sleeves for quite a few days until the bruises healed. But that wasn't what she was

thinking of. What she was thinking of was the fact that the Seven had returned, and seemed to be backing Lady Margaery, Willas, and through them Ranma Stark and his wife. She was thinking about that and the rumors of another army marching down to the Mander from the northwest, one with the banners of House Stargaryen flying overhead.

She owed Lord Doran quite a lot, without his little monetary gifts Taena would not have been able to keep herself in the creature comforts that she had become used to in Myr and without his aid certain indiscretions of her own might've come to light. *And yet, and yet the gods are pointing the way, and frankly I don't think Viserys has any chance in the Stranger's Hell against Stannis or Ranma Stargaryen in the open field.*

*No, I need to make a decision based on what I think is the main chance here and now. And I didn't like what I saw in Obery's eyes. Those are the eyes of a man who has become so accustomed to violence and death. So much so that he has lost sight of his real goal, of anything but the next battle, the next slaughter, much like the mercenaries under his command. It faded slightly when I mentioned Willas, but it came back with a vengeance when I spoke of Lord Caron and his army. Worse, if he marches over the bridge on the Mander, that'll take him directly into the heartland that feeds half of Westeros, which would be a disaster. And I don't think he even cares.*

She stood for several more moments before sighing and ringing a small bell. *I'm sorry Doran, you've been good for me, but I think that the Stargaryen's star is on the rise, and I mean to jump on the cart now.*

Her trusted lady-in-waiting, a Myrish woman who had been with her long before her marriage to her oaf of a husband entered, bowing slightly averting her eyes from her mistress so as not to see the signs of her recent indiscretions. "Get me a few of my long neck and long-sleeved gowns to pick from Misera, then after you've helped me dress, I'll need to inform the master I'll be needing two raven's prepared. One for Highgarden, and one for Bitterbridge I believe."

OOOOOO

All was silent in the Commander Mormont's office of Castle Black for a moment after Jeor Mormont read out the message from Winterfell. It was not so much a contemplative silence, though there was contemplation going on. No, this silence was more shock and fear driven than anything else. As ready as many of these men had been, as respectful as they had started to become towards the threat of the White Walkers, they had all assumed that they would have to attack the Wall head on. Learning they would face assault from another direction was a severe blow.

Tyion broke the silence, shaking his head as if he was throwing off a blow. "Lord Eddard's right. They will be coming for the Wall as well as pressing out elsewhere. What can we do to fortify our defenses from attacks coming from south of us?"

"Quite a bit actually," said Commander Mormont coming out of his stupor from the news quickly now that someone had started the ball rolling. "There's a reason the Night's King was able to hold against the powers of the wildlings and the North for so long. First, we'll have to choose which castles to keep fortified, and which to abandon and break down. If we don't fortify them, we cannot allow any castle's staircase or elevator to remain connecting them to the Wall."

"If they came from Skagos, then Eastwatch-By-the-Sea is the most threatened," Growled Mors Umber. Shaking his shaggy head he rose to his feet with a creak of his old bones. "I'll head back now, best ta get a jump on forting up."

"You do that my friend, however I think we also need to realize that our lines of supply may well be broken soon there whatever we do. After all, the Bay of Seals itself might freeze, and once it does, no ships, going to be able to get through. I'll want hunting parties out every day until we sight White Walkers to bring in fodder for the castles. Also I want messages to go out to all of the smallfolk that have moved into the gift. They're to pull up stake and join us here on the Wall. Castle Black and the others we keep open will have enough room to house them, though that means our supplies won't last as long."

"Bear Island and Westwatch," said Kyle, frowning heavily. "Maybe we can set something up there had to bring in supplies from Bear Island?"

The mountain clansmen frowned looking at one another but nodded. "Until we're under attack up there, we can bring in supplies over the mountains, though it'll be slow goin'."

Tyion frowned. "It'll have to do. We should start rationing immediately I think, the better to force our supplies to last longer, and keep it up when the smallfolk start arriving. But I think all we'll be able to do is hold on here until the North pushes this incursion back."

"Easier said than done." scoffed Qhorin Halfhand. "I don't mean to demean the courage of the Northerners my lords, but we know the King and much of the North's army is down south. It would take them months to get back at best, even if Lord Ranma started out the moment he heard the news, and we all know that there's still a war going on down there."

"I wish I could say different." said Tyrion honestly. "My older sister's bit of madness couldn't have come at the worst time for humanity as a whole." He smiled suddenly. "Or should I say former sister hmm?"

"Enough." said Commander Mormont shaking his head. "Deal with what we can here, leave the rest to the king and his men." He looked around all at them all and nodded towards Tyrion. "Giantkiller, I'm giving you the command of speaking to the wildlings. They have Two days more to come to a decision to join us or be left out in the cold. We need their manpower, but if we can't get it I'm not willing to keep Castle Black's tunnel open for longer than that. Just because the White Walkers might be coming at us from further south doesn't mean they won't also be coming at us straight north. It's what I'd do if I was them."

"That won't be much of a hardship." Tyrion said, smiling slightly as he remembered the frankly gorgeous young woman who led the wildlings now with her two advisors. Those advisors might have some say, but Val was the driving force among them.

Commander Mormont nodded then turned to Kyle and Harrion. "My lords, I want any of your men with carpentry or stonework skills to join those from the Order. They will move into Eastwatch. I want them to look into the idea of somehow setting up a pulley and winch system down to the Gorge. If we can do that, bringing up cargos along the river might be possible. If not, I want Eastwatch as fortified as we can make it. I'll have my own men with skills in that area working here in Castle Black, while I decide what other castles we should keep intact."

The two men exchanged a worried glance. There were at least 40 leagues of gorge between Westwatch and the Bay of Ice. Traversing that far by boat would be incredibly hard, and dangerous too. Even if men could be found to pilot such boats, the size of the shipments would be small by necessity. And Deepwood Motte was no White Harbor. But still there was nothing they could do about that, if Eastwatch was cut off they were in for it anyway. So both men simply nodded, and the meeting went on from there.

OOOOOO

The mass exodus of smallfolk from the lands near the Bay of Seals and further south on the eastern front was a slow process, with many families not truly realizing the danger and simply trying to bring everything they could with them rather than push for speed. Several dozen such families from the northeastern portion of Umber land had joined together to make a caravan, moving down through former Bolton land heading towards Hornwood rather than the Last Hearth or Karhold. It was a long journey, but the folk making the decisions for the caravan felt that Hornwood was a safer bet.

*The nights are getting even colder* thought Robett, one of the men assigned to guard the camp, as he stared out into the dark beyond the fires of the camp. Those fires were burning low now, they hadn't taken the time to gather much fuel for them that day.

He shivered. Old God's damn it, it was cold. In fact, it was colder now than it had been a few moments ago. *Don't be stupid*, Robett thought, shaking his head. *That's just your imagination. The temperature can't drop that quickly. Can it?*

Robett's thoughts cut off abruptly. *What is that?* In the deep of the woods on the south side of camp he had seen a blue light of some kind. It was there for just a moment and then it was gone but Robett could've sworn it was there. He saw another light a few moments later, but then there was nothing for several candles, and he put the lights out of his mind, concentrating on staying awake and alert.

It was nearly the end of his shift and the fires of the camp and burned to nothing when the lights were back with a vengeance. He turned to shout something, only for a hand with long, thin fingers to clamp over his mouth. Those fingers were longer than a human's should've been he noted in that brief second and then something sharp slammed into his back, then he knew no more.

Screams abounded through the night, while a family consisting of three members, a mother, a teenage daughter and a young boy burst out of their tent. Their names were James, Nira, and Fiera. They had been sharing a tent and indeed a blanket together to share warmth, but the cold had woken them up, and then the screams had started.

None of the fires were still lit, making sight difficult in the dark of the night, with only the stars and a half moon above

them to light the scene. But there was a strange eerie glow of blue here and there, and that was enough to see the **beings** moving through the camp.

They stood taller than most men by at least a good foot. But they were thin, almost emaciated looking in their faces and arms, which were visible from the shoulder down, which was strange considering how cold it was. All they seemed to wear was armor, black armor with spikes showing here and there, small ones in various patterns and larger ones on their shoulders. It gleamed in the faint light from their eyes and from the moon in a way that made it look more like dark ice than steel, but not quite.

Nearby the boy saw his father charging one of them roaring a battle cry, bringing his axe around in a sideways blow that should've taken the attacker off his feet at least if he had been able to block it at all. For just a moment the overwhelming fear that had gripped James and his sister the moment the screams began faded and they shouted together "Go father!"

But the creature was able to interpose its blade between that attack and his own body. It was still knocked off its feet but was very much alive, and it rolled the blow, coming up hissing something in a language that sounded foul to James' ears.

The two exchanged several dozen blows, but then to the man's surprise his axe shattered after another exchange of blows. The steel of it had been frozen so much that it was brittle enough to shatter like glass. But his surprise didn't last long, because the creature's sword came back, cutting his neck and head off in a welter of blood.

James shouted "No!" but had enough presence of mind to grab his mother and big sister's hands and try to pull them away. Both of them were staring in shock at their father and husband lying there dead, but James knew he had to get them away quickly before whatever that thing was could turn on them.

His mother suddenly shrieked, her hands going up to her face breaking James's grip on her wrist as an arrow hit her cheek, going through the skin there and out the other side. She looks down at her children, gritting her teeth to keep the pain at bay as something dark and vile began to make its way through her system. "Run! Run!" With that she reached down, grabbed up a hatchet that had fallen from somewhere and turned, shrieking towards her husband's killer.

The two children ran, somehow escaping the camp for a moment, but as they raced on through the woods they could hear someone pursuing them. James let go of his sister's hand, reaching down grabbing up a large cob of wood. "Keep going!" he shouted, "keep going!" Nira looked at him, and he shook his head. "Run! They can't catch us both!"

Nira nodded, her eyes wide and frightened but determined. She leaned down quickly, kissing him on the cheek. "May the old gods keep you brother."

Then she barreled off through the woods in a different direction, making as much noise as she could which James noticed after a moment. He scowled angrily realizing that she was trying to draw their pursuer after her but with a growl he took off in a different direction hoping that one of them at least would survive.

It was not to be. Through the forest James could hear his sister scream, the sound cut off abruptly. And suddenly all around him he saw lights, small blue lights. He stopped running, putting his back against a tree, raising his makeshift weapon. "S-stay back!" he shouted, trying to sound as brave as his father had been. "Stay back!" And failing.

They came out of the woods, several of the same creatures that had slain his father. They did indeed stand taller than a man, with long pointed features almost like a foxes, complete with pointed ears. Their hair was uniformly white and wispy, falling to their shoulders, glimmering disturbingly in the light of their eyes, which glowed a pale, somehow sickly blue. Their thin lips were curved into cruel sneers as they saw the young boy in front of them.

James snarled and rushed towards one of them, raising his makeshift weapon with a cry. "Rahgg!"

One of them laughed, saying something to another in that strange hissing language then negligently flicked his blade, smacking the cob of wood from James' hands.

At this his bravery deserted James, and he fell to his knees, staring up at them. "Please!" he said, praying for something to save him, or simply for these creatures to go away. "Please, mercy!"

One of them leaned down, his thin, alien face almost directly against James'. "Please, mercy?" It said in common.

"Please," James said tears of grief, pain, fear and shame running down his face. "Please, mercy."

He gasped and screamed as something barbed wickedly slammed into his stomach, and he was hoisted into the air above the creatures head. "Please mercy!" it said, laughing as it imitated the words, and soon the others took up the chant, thrusting their own barbed blades up into the boy's body where it hung from the first one's blade. "Please mercy, please mercy!" They chanted, laughing all the while as the young boy died on their blades.

Several leagues distant, a wight horde thousands strong marched through the night, with a large majority of the creatures the White Walkers had suborned on Skagos. Above them, two undead dragons flew through the night on silent wings, their target, and that of the army below them several weeks journey south.

OOOOOO

"No Old God's damnit!" Torrhen said growling angrily at Theon as they sat at his family's table in the dining hall, while all around them the noise of the meal continued. "This is my family's seat! I fully agree that the holdfasts and other minor houses should be evacuated, but this is a castle! Furthermore, we've spent months preparing it for a siege, we can hold out for years! I don't care what forces the White Walkers can bring against us, so long as we have men to man the walls we will defend Karhold!"

Theon glared angrily at the other young man, while Lady Karstark remained silent, her face showing her uncertainty. The last of the smallfolk and minor lords from the lands around Karhold had arrived that day, carrying tales of undead having risen from family graveyards. Thankfully there weren't many people on the Karstark land, only four minor houses and a few hundred smallfolk families. A single massive forest dominated the area which kept the numbers of people it could support down much like the wolfsworn did for Glover, and, much less so, Stark and Cerwyn. Though those families which did live in it tended to be excellent hunters and archers for the most part, many of whom had been folded into the defense of Karhold, making up some of the numbers Karstark had sent to the Wall and down with Lord Rickard.

"If the wights were a normal enemy, you might be correct, this castle could stand any kind of normal direct assault. At least until the river froze, and they could come at you from that direction. But they aren't human!"

He held up a hand as Torrhen made to speak. "No I didn't try to fight the undead when I was on Skagos, but remember I faced them with the Wolfsworn up in The Gift! I **know** what we're facing. Wights don't feel pain, they don't feel fear, except with fire. They will keep on coming until you literally have to hack them into pieces, and even then those pieces will still try to attack you! Their hands and feet will try to trip you up, their heads will still try to use their teeth! They won't retreat when they take losses, they will simply keep coming!"

He sighed leaning back. "If we had weapons that could harm them, I'd be the first to say stand and fight, but we don't. You when I personally checked your family's armory for anything that could be used, and we don't have even a single dronglass knife to our name."

"I hear what you say, but I think we have enough fire arrows, enough strength in the walls and numbers to see us through." Torrhen said stubbornly. "We'll continue to ferry smallfolk out to the Narrow sea. But my family and our arms men will stay and fight! Will you stay with us Theon? Your skill with a bow would be an aid beyond price here."

Theon stared hard at him, then over to lady Karstark and back. He finally sighed nodding reluctantly. "I'll stay."

OOOOOO

Petyr reached the Saltfans within a bare week of leaving the Dornish army behind. After retrieving a small cache of gold hidden in a merchant's house there, he and his men stayed in the town for a few days, recuperating and generally having some down time after the hard life they had led with the Dornish army both before and after its defeat.

"So where to now my Lord?" asked Lothor.

"We'll head on to Fairmarket, and then up to the Green Fork." Petyr smiled thinly looking between two small pieces of parchment. One was a message from one of his spies in Riverrun, the other was calculations of various speed and distance questions. "I will acquire my personal prize, and then we will head on to Seagard. I have agents there who will be able to smuggle us onto their cargo ships, from there we will head down to Oldtown, and from there out of Westeros entirely."

"And we'll be paid for this will we?" Asked Osmund Kettleblack, exchanging glances with his brothers. Having to leave their family's lands behind, and knowing that their lands would no doubt be seized by the Royal House was a hard pill to swallow despite the amount of money that Petyr had already given them. It was made worse by their father's death

to disease on the march with the Dornish army.

"Oh yes." Petyr replied quickly. "You saw the money I had stored here? I have the same again hidden in Fairmarket, and even more stored in Seagard. I felt that was one of the last places anyone would look for it, and my agents there were some I had made in my time in Riverrun, so I can trust them more than most. Yes..." He mused, his voice slowing as a wide, somewhat disturbing smile appeared on his face. "Yes, you will be paid handsomely I will have my prize, and we will live like kings in Essos when this is task is finished."

*Now if only I could shake the feeling that someone was following us before we entered the town...*

OOOOOOO

It was drizzling slightly which was becoming the norm here in the Riverlands when the rest of the Royal Army and its accompanying prisoners arrived. Behind Ranma and Daenerys the portion of the army that was already present gave a loud cheer, answered by its fellows as they moved to join them. The camp had already been prepared, with several hundred tents brought out from the city to add to the armies already large stores so that every man had a tent above them that evening, even the prisoners, though those were much more crowded than that of the rest of the army. The camp was also well made, to keep any hint of disease at bay.

Ranma and Daenerys however cared nothing for that. What they cared about was that Merry was with that army... along with their other friends of course.

Even as Jason Mallister and the other lords dismounted the royal couple had to fight to keep from looking at Merry, who was beaming happily at her two lovers. She dismounted quickly, rushing over to hug Daenerys before moving over to where Sunfyre and Rhaegon were laying down behind her. Both dragons rumbled happily to see the female two-legs who gave good scratchings and smelt of honeysuckle and blood. Daenerys laughed, putting an arm over the younger girl, leading her off through the rain as Ser Barrister followed, exchanging a nod with Eric who followed Merry, guarding her as always.

As the women moved off Jason looked at Ranma, nodding her head towards Merry. "If I could, I would bring Lord Darry back to life to kill him again for what he did to that girl. She would make a magnificent lady Paramount, but with her injuries..." Jason shook his head.

"It makes her no less of a lady my friend." Ranma said with a laugh, clapping Jason's shoulder.

"True enough and she's a bossy little one. Lady Merry basically took over the army while you were gone. She and her helpers made certain that everyone was getting the treatments they needed and that the Reach Army and their camp was organized enough to prevent disease. Oh and she's got about three dozen maesters from the Reach now following her every command like a little general. That's how Renly apparently decided to address the issue of disease on campaign, simply accosting every maester he could and dragging them along with the army."

Ranma winced at the implications that might have in the Reach, but Jason caught it should and shook his head. "Don't worry, my friend. The Reach has always had an overabundance of Maesters. Minor Houses there have them, not just the Great Houses, which would in turn have two or three. I've no doubt some of them were left behind."

Ranma nodded, his mind already moving to other things. As they had waited for the Army to rejoin them Ranma had become increasingly worried about the time limit which was rapidly approaching, indeed they were a few days less than two weeks away from the two month time limit.

Luckily Ranma and Daenerys had not been idle in the week spent waiting for the army. They had made several hard decisions on what to do with their prisoners, and they had written up a message to send to Lady Margaery for her eyes and for Jon's eyes once Jon reached Highgarden. That had already been sent with a force of twenty men to Riverrun where maester Vyman would send it on.

They had also opened up dialogue with the Royal Navy. A tentative meeting had been set up with Davos, though he insisted that it wait until some of the army which had served under Stannis was present. He wanted to question them closely on his Lord's actions, specifically what part Stannis had played in the destruction of Kings Landing. This of course would color his relations with Ranma, the man who had not only defeated his army but personally killed Stannis in battle.

Neither Ranma nor Daenerys had any problem with Davos' stance per-se. Indeed, the man's caution and loyalty to Stannis spoke well of him to them. But they needed the Royal Navy right now, which meant that Davos had a lot of bargaining power, and they were forced to wait, something Ranma was **very** unhappy about.

"Let's get inside the tent my Lords," he said looking around as the other Lords that had remained with the Army, including all of the Wolfsworn save Daryn joined them. He noted absently they were looking much better since he had last seen them. Roger in particular was looking good, able to get out of his saddle and stand with only a slight grimace as his wounded leg took his weight.

He spared a moment to nod at them all especially, nodding at Meera at the same time, something which made the young Reed heiress well up with pride. "The next few days are going to be very busy and very hectic for us all, but we hope to have it all organized at least from the get go."

OOOOOO

As the two of them walked off towards where Shireen Baratheon was being housed in a tent by herself guarded by two Tully men Daenerys squeezed Merry's hand, while Merry squeezed back just as tightly. "I missed you." Merry said fiercely, leaning against the older girl's shoulder for a moment.

"Ranma and I missed you, too." Daenerys said shaking her head. "I dislike being apart from any of my loved ones." She looked back at her dragons who were following them, smiling and reaching back to scratch at Rhaegon's eye ridge for a moment causing the dragon to rumble in pleasure while Merry did the same for Sunfyre. "I wish I could say this the last time we'll be parted, but with life being what it is..." she shrugged sadly.

"The deadline for the Old Gods' warning is coming up quickly. There's no way will be able to get the whole army back North, but we still have to try." Merry said with her own sigh. "I could wish for a few days at least just to have some down time, but..."

"I know exactly what you wish for you horny little girl." Daenerys said, smacking her thigh against Merry's slightly as she pretended to stumble in the muddy ground of the camp for a moment.

"Can you blame me? Merry asked archly, despite the ferocious blush on her face Daenerys' words had evoked. "You and Ranma, both of you are Seven-damned teases."

Daenerys laughed, but as they walked on, she went on more seriously. "We might be able to make time for that at some point Merry but right now, we need to talk to Shireen."

"Have you talked to her at all since taking custody of her?" Merry asked, smiling and nodding at the soldiers around them, who bowed to the queen and the Maiden of Healing.

"A little, but she seems very twitchy in my presence. No doubt her father and uncles filled her head with tales about my family, he'd be spoiled for choice alas. She seems a little bit more at home around Ranma, which probably means she doesn't know he personally killed Stannis, a fact I would like to keep from her for a bit longer. But he and I have been so busy with other things we haven't had much time to devote to her."

Merry nodded, not commenting on how rarely Shireen was around the king or Renly. Neither had ever seen the girl as family, and not entirely because of their frosty relationship with Stannis. A few moments later she was bowed into Shireen's tent by one of the Tully armymen on watch outside it. "Cousin Shireen?"

Shireen was a thirteen going on fourteen year old girl with the Baratheon light blue eyes under brown hair and unfortunately both her father's square jaw and her mother's large ears. A bout of greyscale when she was an infant had left half of her left cheek and most of her neck covered in gray and black skin. Though she had not been mistreated, and indeed had been treated well for the most part thanks to the Sand Snakes, the depredation of being a prisoner to a king whose temper was as volatile as Viserys had taken its toll on the girl's nerves. This showed in her face and body when she turned to the tent flap, her eyes wide and wary.

After a moment however, that look went away to be replaced by confusion. "Prin-er, Lady Myrcella?"

"Cousin, not lady or princess." Merry said, moving towards her with her arms outstretched for a hug. "I am so sorry about everything that has happened to you in this war. My mother was an arrogant and willfully blind woman at times, but I never thought she would commit treason as she did to keep Joffrey Waters on the throne."

Shireen hesitated then nodded, not wishing to delve into that conversation any deeper since it would bring up the dubious nature of Myrcella's own birth. She accepted the hug demurely, surprised at the strength and firmness in Merry's arms, which surprised a real hug out of her in turn. "I could say the same Myrcella, Your Majesty, for my father's actions." She said looking over Daenerys, unable to stop herself from taking a shot at the Stormborn. "Yet some of us seem to have gotten out of it far better than others."

"I would've been perfectly content to be the Lady of Winterfell and remain with Ranma in the North. We would both have been content to remain in Winterfell, but events forced us to take the throne. I realize that sounds trite, but in this case it is true." Daenerys replied, pulling up two small camp chairs and sitting down as Merry set aside her. "Now that Merry has joined us, let us talk."

That discussion went on for some time, giving Daenerys a far better idea of Shireen's character than she had before this. Her reserve seemed to fade somewhat, and she spoke well and somewhat intelligently, if not as well-read or worldly as could be hoped. *Still, is that a sign of her age, or her natural temperament? Regardless, I don't think she's ready to become Lady Baratheon.*

Several hours later the two girls left Shireen behind, talking quietly to one another while they walked through the now dark camp. Their path was lit here and there by braziers and fires despite the ongoing drizzle, yet that did nothing for the mud underneath their boots. "What do you think of Shireen?" Merry asked.

"Much better that time around than my first impression of her. I thought she was a shrinking violet, but there is a brain in there. But I don't think we can install Shireen at Dragonstone or at Storm's End. She's not trained for it, knows nothing about Storm's End, and is far too timid."

"I'd suggest keeping with us as a lady in waiting, teach her what she needs to know slowly. Or, better yet, keep her with the army until we reach Winterfell and then have Lady Catelyn and Lord Eddard start teaching her, I think they've proven their ability in that areas." Merry said, smirking slightly. "I could always use another pair of hands, and it would let you keep her as a hostage, whatever that might be worth."

"I dislike that, no we won't use Shireen as a hostage, though the awarding of lordship of Storm's End could be kept in reserve." Daenerys mused. "Besides, we've already got a few such captive, no need to add a fourth."

"You're talking about Arianne and the Sand Snakes?" Merry asked shrewdly.

"Yes. After talking to a few of our lords, we decided we can't simply execute Arianne as her actions against Westeros really deserve." Daenerys laughed harshly. "Oh, that was a hard fact to admit to, for both of us. Still, doing so would set Dorne against us in the future as well as now, and Daryn and the other's talked us out of it. Oberyn's death, once Jon contrives it, is going to have a big enough impact. We can ill afford to tie up the manpower it would take to remove Doran from power down there right now, the smallfolk and remaining Lords respect him too much for us to move against him. This was a disaster for Dorne make no bones about it, and the Lords with the army might be willing to do so, but those back home? The best we would get would be a civil war, and Ranma and I don't want that. We'll be turning to other means to make Dorne pay for backing Viserys."

"Good. I'm **sick** of this." Merry confessed leaning her head against Daenerys' shoulder. "I'm so sick of the killing and everything that comes with it."

"I understand that all too well and I too am tired of killing." Daenerys replied, letting her own head fall against Merry's head for a moment.

"So what will you do about Storm's End now? And about the Sand Snakes and Arianne, if you're not going to execute her I mean."

Daenerys smiled grimly, and told her about a plan Ranma had thought up for Arianne. Merry gasped at first then laughed aloud, shaking her head. "That is so appropriate it's not even funny."

"I thought so. But the Sand Snakes, what to do with them eludes us at present. They have more standing than I expected with Dornish army here, and if that spreads to the smallfolk back in Dorne even they can't be executed without causing problems in the future."

"Why not..." Merry said slowly... "Why not do the same to them as you wish to with Shireen? Keep them with the Royal House and train them up, see how they do. Put Nymeria to work in helping Alayaya put together a complete spy network while watching her closely. If she does well, name her to that post permanently along with Alayaya. That will show that you're able to let bygones be bygones, and splitting the post of Master of Whisperers like that might be a good idea in any event, set a precedent for the future, since it would stop someone like Varys from playing kingmaker. Besides, it worked well enough for us so far hasn't it?"

Daenerys nodded, and the two of them fell silent, once again remembering Domic and how he had died. After a moment however Merry went on. "As for the other, the one Meera captured, isn't she a decent commander? Watch her, keep her with the army and if she proves a decent enough fighter, make her train with Dacey."



"Hmm, that's a good idea I suppose. The training itself would serve as a punishment in a way, and the upshot of her becoming, what a Sand Stalker, or something of that nature?"

"Sand Spear." Merry said firmly. "Weapons or shields, you need to keep using that sort of symbolism."

"In fact." Daenerys said taking that idea and running with it. "I actually have an even better idea there, something that might tie the Martells to one of our most loyal Houses. But I'll have to talk to Rickard about it first."

At that point the two of them entered the royal tent, finding Ranma there alone, having just sent his lords and friends off to bed. One moment Merry and Daenerys were talking seriously, the next Ranma was hugging them both, twirling around with the two girls in midair, laying kisses on face, neck and mouth as he told Merry how much he missed her. Though they didn't go much further than that, the serious discussions for the day were certainly over.

The next day the army marched into Maidenpool to cheering from the smallfolk, something which began the moment they formed up for the March from smallfolk lining the walls of the large town. Of course this wasn't the full army, Maidenpool could not have housed them all. The surrendered Dornishmen and the rest of the prisoners were kept outside.

All the Lords that had surrendered and the Reach Lords that had retreated from the battle however came in with the rest of the Army. That battle was now known as the Shadow's Fall due to the events the night before and Melisandre's power which had been used during it.

Those Reach lords were in a sort of legal limbo at this point, an honorably surrendered force but one which had taken actions against the crown and the smallfolk since falling under Stannis' command. Yet while they had technically followed Stannis, they had truly followed who they thought was their Lord Paramount at the time, and such loyalty could not be held against them. But any actions they took while following Mace still had to be paid for, and since Willas wasn't here to do that, the Royal family could do with them what they wished both as vassals of their loyal lord and as prisoners.

While the portion of the army that had come into the town was allowed to have some downtime, Ranma and Daenerys presided once again over a series of trials. For these trials they were joined once again by Rickard to represent the North and Merry as well, in her position as the former Princess of the former Royal family. Lord Blackwood represented the Riverlands this time rather than Jason, who remained with the army outside the walls for now. They were also joined by two newcomers.

One of these newcomers was from the Reach: Lord Fossoway of the Green Apple Fossoways, Garlan Tyrell's father-in-law. The man was brought to the court within a moment's of the army's investiture of Lord Mooton's keep.

He stopped for a moment in the doorway of the dining hall, staring at the hall which he and the prisoners had passed through with the other, extremely nervous Reach lords mere moments ago. None of them believed that a Stark would stomach any kind of torture or anything to willingly surrendered prisoners, but there was the Targaryen girl to think of. Her father wasn't the only madman that House had produced after all, something even the most pro-Targaryen lord remembered all too well.

The hall had been changed in the brief time since he had last seen it. Gone were Mooton's banners, which had been strewn here and there from the ceilings of the roof. In their place was one banner for every Lord that was sitting on that table, with the Royal Houses the most prevalent hanging right behind them, its words, 'Honor Above All', visible to every man who entered.

For a moment the hall was silent then Daenerys spoke. "Lord Fossoway, we have questioned many of our own lords about who among the Reach nobles we should look to for his probity, adherence to the law and honor. One name they all agreed upon was you. As such, we ask you to take part in this proceeding. Realize that this is a trial, no one's fate has been decided yet, though my husband and I have heard the evidence of some of the cases, and we have some idea on the penalties we will be demanding for the most... politically sensitive prisoners, but for many even that is in the air."

There Ranma took up the tale. "We ask you to sit, to give us your opinion on what you hear. This will not accrue any special right or new power to you. The Reach is a mess as you well know, but it's one that we are too far removed from here to have an accurate picture of. Furthermore, we have duties in the North that we need to see to. Therefore, we will be leaving the remapping of the Reach and its territories to House Tyrell in the form of its new Lord Paramount Willas and his spokeswoman Lady Margaery, along with our Hand, Jon Stark."

Lord Fossoway twitched at that eyes narrowing. "My Lord, may I ask where this Jon Stark is now?"

"Jon Stark was already sent into the Reach with a force of allied Houses before Stannis and our army clashed. We estimate that by this point he has probably reached the mouth of the Mander, and begun his travel down the river. His skills as a leader and warrior will be needed there against the depredations of the Dornish mercenary army, but I have no doubt that my brother's mind will be even more necessary in the coming days." Ranma smiled, his entire bearing showing the confidence he had in Jon.

Inwardly however Ranma grumbled, not liking this formal talk, but again this was most only the place for it. *And the way my wife is pinching my side is definitely a clue that she would be unhappy if I broke from the script. Hmmpf, I'll get you back for this tonight love, you know I will.* To his side Daenerys retracted her hand, flushing at the way Ranma's hand had caressed it **just** right for a second there.

Lord Fossoway thought for a moment then nodded slowly. "As Lord Willas would be my Lord Paramount's heir regardless of anything else, I feel that I can in all honor serve in this body. Realize however that I will give my opinion honorably and honestly. I am no man's yes-man your majesties. I was not even that for Mace or King Robert."

"Is any northern Lord a yes-man to anyone?" Rickard scoffed angrily. "Myself and Lord Blackwood sit on this panel to give our opinion Fossoway, not to parrot back Ranma's words. He's never wanted something like that, and never would. Even Lady Daenerys is remarkably open to suggestion and debate."

Both Royals smiled, and Lord Fossoway looked at Rickard then at Lord Blackwood, both of whom he had met in the past though Rickard only briefly during the Greyjoy rebellion. Lord Blackwood however he had met several times. Indeed, they had debated at one point whether or not they should unite their Houses through a marriage between one of Lord Blackwood's sons and one of Lord Fossoway's daughters.

Seeing both men nod he simply nodded in turn. "Very well, where should I sit?"

The other newcomer was Lord Brune of Dyre Den. He was the patriarch of the most powerful House of that land, and had led the secret assault that had taken Lord Mooton and the town of Maidenpool once the Dornishmen left. As such he was now the incumbent Duke Crackclaw, with a stake in the town of Maidenpool, the revenue of which would go to creating better roads into and out of Crackclaw point, and in creating a port town for themselves on the Point in the future. Unlike Lord Fossoway, he had heard all the stories of Daenerys and Ranma, and had no reservation in giving his oath to them or taking part in the trial.

After that, the trials began quickly and many of them were very easy. The Stormlands lords in particular were ludicrously simple to deal with because there were so few Lords from that realm left alive. Because of that, and the fact there was no trueborn Baratheon male remaining alive, the Stormlands would be broken into duchies like the Westerlands, with each duke beholden directly to the crown rather than a Lord Paramount.

Despite its part in backing Stannis, Massey became the first of these to be recognized. They would take control of Massey's Hook, along with a large section of the shoreline facing Blackwater Bay towards the Wendwater. That land had formerly been controlled by House Kellington, a house which had been annihilated between the battles between the two Baratheons, their lord having died on the march afterward under Stannis, though no one seemed to know how.

The new Lord Massey was incredibly grateful to Ranma's rescue of his sister, a sentiment which had not faded since the battle of the Shadow's Fall. Justin knew all too well what would've happened to Glinda if any but his own men had found her when the Baratheon army overran the Golden Company's camp. What Glinda had already suffered was more than enough, and the fact that Ranma and Daenerys were prepared to waive any reparations from his House for their part in backing Stannis thanks to the deprivations of the Golden Company on their lands simply solidified his excellent opinion of the royal house. And indeed sent a message to the remaining Stormlands armsmen as well, a very good one.

The only other remaining lord of Stannis' original backers, Lord Errol, had survived, and strangely enough no wrong doing could be laid at his feet despite rumors passed on from the armsmen among the prisoners. Lord Brune and Rickard took a dim view of him, but the others were not convinced by rumor.

As House Errol had no heir or lady that could be trusted to run his lands, and because those lands were important in terms of food production for the Stormlands, he was allowed to return home. But the reparations Haystack Hall was leveed with would cripple his family's finances almost as badly as the war had hammered their military strength.

From there the trials moved on to deal with the surviving Stormlands lords that had originally followed Renly.

Lord Lester Morrigen was given the choice of joining them to serve the Royal Army as a knight until winter ended or

exile. He agreed to this realizing it was a life sentence yet also a way to regain his family's honor. No other reparations would be leveled against his House because of this, and House Murrigen would be allowed to enrich itself on the lands of their neighbors under his surviving son, Richard. Richard had impressed everyone on the march with his intelligence and acumen, and Lester was happy the royals were willing to keep him as the House's heir despite knowing he himself might well die in the near future.

The last remaining actual Stormlord, Lord Horpe, was the first lord to be executed for war crimes in this series of trials. This was because Lord Blackwood had followed Ranma's instruction on noting down the colors of those Houses most involved in preying upon the smallfolk as Stannis' army marched into the Riverlands.

Lord Blackwood had personally seen Lord Horpe leading such bands several times, and had even gathered a few witnesses, spiriting them away with his skirmishers. Horpe's lands, like that of Musgood, Trant and others, had felt the Viper's sting already, but they would still be officially turned over to House Grandison, the nearest surviving House that had any strength remaining. Grandison however had no surviving representative among the prisoners, so they would have to speak to the Royal House's representative when they were in the Stormlands.

Of course a final redrawing of the borders within the Stormlands would need to wait for a time. That work which would be left to Jon, Lord Dondarrion, and the representative the royal family would be sending down there with the remains of the Stormlands army to make certain that anarchy wouldn't erupt in the Stormlands, whose name would be announced at the end of the trials for the Stormlords.

Frankly the only powerful Houses, the Houses that Ranma and Daenerys's representative would have to lean on to control the chaos that the Stormlands would devolve into with so many Houses wiped out or powerless, were those who had stayed at home. Dondarrion was easily the strongest of these, with other Marcher Houses that had kept some of their men home coming a distant second, along with House Grandison, with the town of Grand View to call upon.

The fate of the last house with a representative present, House Swann, was a surprise for most. Donnel, Lord Swann's oldest son and heir, hadn't exactly covered himself after being sent to war with a force of around a thousand of his house's men, but he was still alive, as was his younger brother Balon. When Balon was shown in, the two brothers stared at one another in surprise, neither having realized the other was present among the thousands of prisoners.

Ranma smirked slightly at the surprise on the two Swann's faces before speaking. "Ser Balon, I trust your stay under our care has not been too unpleasant?"

The former Kingsguard nodded his head slowly, his eyes looking all around. Of course he had heard what had happened to his former charges, and had even learned about Joffrey being both a Waters and a kinslayer, but it hadn't made his failing to defend Joffrey or Cersei as his oath demanded. "No... Your Majesty, my stay as your prisoner hasn't been unpleasant at all. You and your men have treated myself and all your other prisoners with all the decency honor could demand on the march."

"Good. You are here now Ser Swann because Ser Selmy has spoken up on your behalf, saying your placement into the Kingsguard was one you deserved in terms of skill and personal honor." Ranma watched as Balon's eyes moved to look at Ser Barristan, where he was standing along one wall, his white armor and cloak once more immaculate white.

"As such, we have decided that the dishonor done to you by being forced to serve a pretender to the throne is enough of a punishment. As King and Queen, we relieve you of your oaths to the defunct knightly order called the Kingsguard. You and your brother will serve our representative, Ser Selmy, in restoring order and our rule to the Stormlands until he is satisfied. Your house maybe called upon to take up more responsibility for the lands ravaged by the Viper's madness, but we both believe that your father will be up to the task. And I think we can trust the two of you to serve Ser Selmy as honorably as you served the Kings you were previously oath-bound to. Is this the case?"

Both brothers' eyes tracked to Ser Selmy, the penultimate example of knighthood, who, despite being surprised by this appointment, simply stared back stoically. Time enough for him to bring up his objections to this move later in private, though his previous dealings with kings and queens told him it would probably be futile.

The Swann brothers then turned to one another, communicating without words as some siblings could, before turning and bowing deeply to the two monarchs. "Yes your majesties, we will serve Ser Selmy and the realm as best we may, you may depend on this."

After the Stormlands was dealt with, Ranma called for brief recess. While the other Lords went off to find something

to eat and before Ser Selmy could speak up, Ranma nodded at Daryn. "Bring Davos in, he should be ready to make a decision by this point."

Daryn nodded, and not a minute later came back with Ser Seaworth. He had been closely questioning the men of the army. Not the Lords, but the men who served under them while he tried to build a picture of what had happened around King's Landing. He had come away with a grim understanding of how Melisandre had ruined the honorable man that Davos had given his oath to. "Your Majesties," he said, bowing his head to Ranma and Daenerys. "I have..."

He paused, then went on steadily if not happily. "I served Stannis Baratheon, not only as Lord of Dragonstone but as the person who I felt was the rightful King of Westeros. When we met, he was honorable to a fault, fair-minded if rather hidebound, but a good, decent man for that. By his own actions, and by the actions he allowed the Red Witch to take, it's obvious Stannis fell from that high perch before his death. I, I therefore am left to do my duty as my oaths to Westeros as a whole dictate. Both myself and the fleet I currently command in the defense of all Westeros are yours."

Ranma smiled in welcome. "Take a seat Ser Davos, **you** aren't on trial here at least."

When Davos did so, looking at Ranma in astonishment Ranma simply laughed quietly. "Davos, we've talked to our lords and men, both those who served in Robert's Rebellion and in the Greyjoy Rebellion. Not one of them had anything bad to say for you. Besides, you're not the only good man whose loyalty led him astray in this war. You did your duty as you saw it, you did not commit any atrocities, and you served in an exemplary fashion, retaking Dragonstone and sinking several Dornish warships before blockading Maidenpool. We're not going to hold the fact that you served Stannis against you."

"Indeed, your actions speak well of your abilities, and the fact that you did not storm Driftmark, or put that House to the sword as we feel Stannis must've ordered speaks for your honor." Daenerys said.

She reached out with one hand, and knowing his cue young Cley moved forward, handing her a large scroll set with the new royal seal. "This is a warrant declaring you as Duke Rainwood. We have no idea what the nobles houses from the Rainwood left at home, but none of their military forces sent to war survived. As such, your House is the sole surviving power in the region, and will be called upon to keep order there. The size of that area means you will no doubt become one of the new Stormlands dukes given time. We would like you to create a port somewhere along Cape Wrath for the future, but at the moment, this warrant and what it means is all we can do."

Ranma held out his own hand, and Cley smoothly moved to place another scroll in his hand while Davos took possession of the one Daenerys held. "This is a message to Lord Estermont. We would like you to designate a trustworthy captain to lead a small number of ships down to Plankytown in Dorne, but they will stop over on Greenstone. Estermont kept their naval power at home, and that will give the expedition down to Dorne some added bite."

Staring between the two, Davos could barely understand what was happening here. Kings should not treat defeated forces so kindly after all, certainly not reward them for services rendered to their enemies! But these two were, and it suddenly occurred to Davos that maybe kindness was yet another weapon in their arsenal. *And it isn't like they haven't amply demonstrated their strength by this point.* Davos thought sardonically, thinking of the songs that had already begun to be sung of the Shadow's Fall, the March of the Wolf King, and, his personal favorite, the Battle of Dragons.

After a moment he nodded humbly. "My liege, your majesty, I know just the man. But if I may ask, what would you have the bulk of the Royal navy be doing at this time?"

Ranma smiled thinly. "That is quite a tale Davos, but one you need to know in full, because we need your aid, yours and the services of the Royal Navy. Though, I hope that you were in Dragonstone long enough for our order for dragonglass weapons to give you a clue as to what we're going to be dealing with."

The three of them continued to talk for a time, with Ranma and Daenerys outlining what they wanted to do. Davos however had to inform them his fleet didn't have the lift capacity to transport the army in one go to the North. So the royal couple were forced to split off some of their forces.

The Riverlands cavalry, Tristan Ryger and House Shawney would stay behind with the mountain clansmen, who had professed severe unease about ocean travel in any event. The Tully cavalry would be sent to Harroway for now, on hand there in case Ser Blanetree needed a bigger hammer in dealing with the bandits.

Another six hundred men, mostly made up of Lord Ashford and his men, all of whom had given their allegiance to the Royal House, were to work with House Buckwell of the Crownlands. They would carry word to the Crownlands Houses of the outcome of the war, relay a message to House Chelsted, the most powerful house in the Crownlands (by a significant margin at this point), and restore crown control over the lands. But without King's Landing, the Crownlands weren't a large enough issue to devote more time to.

Davos left the dining hall knowing that he had done the right thing to bend the knee to Ranma and Daenerys, and grimly determined to do his part. Not a turn of the candle later, Royal Navy war galleys entered the town's docks and portions of the army began to move through the town embarking on the waiting galleys.

The moment Davos left Ser Barristan turned to the royal couple. "Your Majesties, you cannot be serious! My place is at your side your grace. I thought I had proven that you need a bodyguard long before this."

"That might have been true in times of war, my knight." said Daenerys, waving the man into a chair. "But I hardly think I'm going to face assassins around every corner now. Moreover, can you really argue that we have no one else to send that knows the Stormlands?"

Ranma nodded agreement. "Jon's going to have his Hand full in the Reach." He paused smirking at Daenerys who rolled her eyes at his joke, smacking him on the shoulder and he went on. "And Lord Dondarrion is going to be busy down in the Marches. We need someone in the Stormlands to ride hard on the mess it's become, restore order. You've been with the army for months, you've seen our methods, you've seen our organization, and you're from the Stormlands."

Actually, House Selmy was one of the more powerful remaining houses, having sent only a third of their forces to war under Renly because they were considered a Marcher House. Ranma hoped that that would add to Barristan's ability to rally the shattered Stormlands to his aid in order to restore order and law to the lands which had been left without their lords for too long.

"I might have been raised there your Majesty, but I have not been to the Stormlands in years! Well," the older man amended honestly. "Save for traveling the Kingsroad down to Storm's End with Robert occasionally. That's hardly the same thing as knowing the lay of the land enough to plan an anti-bandit campaign."

"It isn't simply about knowing the lay of the land my knight and you know it." Daenerys replied firmly. "The Stormlands will be in disarray for years whatever we do. Too many Lords have died, too many armsmen have died. Many houses have been torn down and despoiled already in this war. When we spoke to Justin Massey telling him we needed him to restore order down there we were telling the truth. The Stormlands will slowly fall into chaos, chaos breeds bandits, lawlessness, and dissension. We **need** to send someone down there with the remnants of the Stormlands Army to restore order! And that means you."

"No one can the question your honor or integrity Barristan." said Ranma coming back into the conversation. "Everyone knows you as one of the truest knights of the realm, and hopefully by the time you get down there the word of your new oaths to the royal house, which means people won't even question whether or not you'd do something dishonorable if you were ordered to. We want order restored to those lands, we want those lands repaired, and the houses that remain in the Stormlands shown that we can be merciful and as my wife says, that means you."

Ser Barristan frowned, shaking his head. "And what about my own point, who will guard the Queen's back while I'm away?"

Before Ranma could speak he held up a hand. "I realize that while you are hear Your Majesty my presence is rather superfluous, but the point still stands seeing as you're not always around, the duties of the crown to compel you so. And none of your Wolfsworn have training in how to spot assassins."

"No they don't, but my dragons have a strong sense of smell." Daenerys replied firmly. "Whenever Ranma is not with me, I will bed down with the dragons, surrounded by the Wolfsworn. That will be enough to see off assassins surely."

"I suppose," Ser Barristan agreed reluctantly. "But what about poison?"

"Merry." Daenerys replied with a shrug. "We also have several other Maesters here. Merry is learning more and more all the time not just about healing but about poisons and other things of similar nature. Plus, when Fenris is around or one of the other direwolves as will be the case when we reach Winterfell, they'll be able to smell if anything is strange or unusual in my food."

"I dislike the idea of placing your safety in the hands of beasts my lady, no matter how intelligent." Ser Barristan said,

though it was more rote response than anything else. He had seen the devotion the animals had to Ranma and Daenerys respectively, and Fenris at least had taken Daenerys to heart as well though the dragons certainly hadn't done the reverse with Ranma. They still occasionally tried to bite him, which was rather amusing to watch. If dragons could pout Rhaegon certainly would have the last time he'd try to bite Ranma and was smacked on the nose with the hand of the arm he'd tried to bite off.

Daenerys reached out, taking the older man's hand. "Ser Barristan, this is not a sign of distrust or of the fact that we don't need you, we do, it is just that right now we need you down in though Stormlands rather than by our side. When your task is done, then you may return to us."

The knight sighed, squeezed her hand and nodded. "Very well your majesties, I will take on this quest for you."

OOOOOO

At the same time that Ranma and Daenerys were dispensing justice, Ser Garlan Tyrell was **finally** leading the majority of his fleet in towards the Shield Islands. They had been held up for over a two weeks in retaking Starfish Harbor, but now at last they were within striking distance of the last lands the Ironborn had taken from the Reach.

Originally Garlan had wanted to assign the Redwynes to retake the island, but after their deplorable display of cowardice, neither of the two Redwyne 'knights' could be trusted for the task. So Garlan had been forced to use a hammer to smash an egg, and further had been forced to give both of them a chance to reclaim their honor by putting them in charge of taking House Redwyne's keep.

*And of course Horas and Hobber fucked that up too, Seven save me from fools!* Garlan thought, actually pouting a little as he thought of the battle the two had tried to plan for reclaiming their family's keep. Not a well-built or decent castle by any stretch, retaking it had still cost him two men for every one of the defenders. The only good side, and Garlan had to admit it was a morbid one, was that the two morons had gotten themselves killed almost at the start of the battle, trying to show that they did have some courage to them.

Others might have thought their deaths had reclaimed the honor they lost in fleeing from the battle on Balon's flagship. Garlan, despite being related to them simply wished their stupidity hadn't resulted in so many other good men dying. *At least this paves the way for Desmera to take control of House Redwyne, a gloomy thought to be sure, but at least I know she and her cousin will retain the island behind us, and I think between the two of them they can start to heal the wounds the Ironborn left on the Arbor.*

Garlan shivered, and it had nothing to do with the cold wind blowing all around him as he stood at the prow of *Shield's Honor*. The Ironborn's occupation of the Arbor would take decades to heal, and that was only possible because their captives, thousands of womenfolk, had been kept in the keep rather than on their ships. The thin, scared, broken faces of those women when they had retaken the keep would haunt him forever. And there was the damages done to the harbors, holdfasts and vineyards to see to as well.

*Still, I can leave that in Desmera and Desmond's hands, I have four more Islands to retake. Then, then I will have to turn my attention north.* Archmaester Marwyn had not lost any of his certainty about the threat growing beyond the Wall, and Garlan had given his word.

Hours later however, the battle he had assumed would be waiting for him had not occurred. The fleet slowly spread out investigating the waters around the Shield Islands, but they didn't see a single longship. With the rest of the fleet patrolling off shore of South Shield, a single boat was sent into its port.

The captains report was odd, troubling but not in an immediate way. The Ironborn ships, about five ships worth, had up and left several days ago. They left the islands even more ravaged than the Arbor, because the 'salt wives' the crews had taken since investing the islands had gone with them. But, and this was the odd thing, the small fleet had sailed off southwest rather than north. That was odd, since that way would only take them around the Arbor and into the Summer Sea rather than back to their Islands.

*Five Ironborn ships could to some damage further south I suppose, but that's not enough manpower to take any of the Reach castles on the shore, and barely a tenth of what they'd need to take Oldtown. No, wait, it's not five, it's six, isn't it. One ship came in, and soon all the others left with it... I wonder who was on that ship. Hmm... I think we'll leave several war galleys here, then sail over to the mouth of the Mander to make certain they aren't waiting there.*

But Garlan's fleet would find no sign of the Ironborn ships. Other longships were still up the Mander somewhere, but the forces left on the Shield Islands were just gone. With that confirmed, Garlan left a fourth of his fleet to guard the mouth of the Mander and the Shield Islands, then, after taking on food and water from a few supply ships up from

Oldtown, turned north, heading along the shore to the Westerlands and beyond. After all, just because he was heading north didn't mean Garlan couldn't make some stops along the way.

OOOOOO

After that break, the trials continued with the Reach lords and two others. First was Lord Mooton. For his part in supplying Viserys and allowing him to land his troops he was exiled to the Silent Brothers.

His daughter however was not because Lord Brune spoke up on her behalf. It turned out that she had actually helped the Crackclaw Point invaders get into the keep. She had been corresponding with Ser Tyle Brune for several years, and when Tyle requested her hand in marriage, Ranma, quickly agreed. This tied into the fact that the Crackclaw Point Houses would be getting a portion of the tithe for Maidenpool, which was given a royal commission to grow into a city.

Ranma honestly doubted that Maidenpool would ever become a major port, not with Harroway a bare few days sail further into the Bay of Crabs. But it could turn into a major exporter. The lands around it were very good for dairy products. The cheese from this land and from Butterwell were famous for a reason after all, and Ranma had already turned over house Butterwell's land to a knight of that house who'd remained with the army, a distant cousin to the Lord of that house that had been serving under house Mallister until that point.

The next issue to be dealt with was Varys. He had tried several times to escape the army's custody. But with Dacey and the other injured Wolfsworn in charge of him, he had not succeeded, and now faced justice for his many crimes.

Here the lords on the tribunal were split on what to do. The evidence against him was damning after all. The fact he had backed a pretender to the throne, withheld information from Robert (and Joffrey, but no one cared about that) and had played a part in bringing the Golden Company into the conflict, betraying his post as Master of Whisperers to two kings, possibly three if you counted Aerys the Mad, could not be argued. But Fossoway and Blackwood both felt he might be more useful alive. They did not persuade the rest of the lords however, and Varys was executed within a few moments of the verdict being reached.

He died quickly, despite his protests and attempts to sway the court to his side. To the last Varys had thought he could talk his way out of his execution, but nothing he said mattered in the end and Ranma actually sighed with relief as the eunuch's head left his shoulders.

From that point they turned to dealing with the Reach. Three lords were accused of taking part in the razing and rapine of the smallfolk, though only two, Lords Cuy and Mullendore, were convicted of it and sent into exile. Their House's men suffered far worse, most of them being executed on the spot. These were not smallfolk levees after all, these were knights and armsmen who not only took part but exulted in preying upon those they should've defended. But since the lords themselves were only seen taking parts in raids where there was burning and looting rather than killing and rapine, they were exiled rather than executed.

The third however could not be convicted, because Lord Blackwood and his men had only seen his colors in places where very few smallfolk had actually died under his forager's blades. There also had been no burning under his command so far as any witnesses could be found, so Lord Rowan went free. Again, this wasn't exactly a perfect way of dispensing justice for wrongs committed, but it was the best the King and Queen could contrive.

The trials continued well past sunset before they finished. Then, after a quick snack Ranma and Daenerys once again sat in judgment with the panel of judges, but this time they were not alone. No, this time every Lord from the Reach, the Stormlands, and the Riverlands was in attendance. Even Lord Buckwell Antlers was there to represent the Crownlands, thanks to Jason having thought of contacting the man after the battle and telling him to come with them with a small retinue. He hadn't taken part in any of the proceedings so far, but had witnessed them all as one of many such witnesses that had been brought in to see justice done.

"Bring in the prisoners." Ranma ordered coldly.

After a moment the doors to former Lord Mooton's dining hall opened, and the surviving Lords of Viserys' army were shown in, along with Arianne, Nymeria, and Elia. They started for a moment at the Lords arrayed against them ranged behind the central table and along all of the walls. Lord Buckwell, the Reach Lords, Lord Massey, the Swann brothers and Lord Errol were lined up along the walls, while the River lords, the two Northern Lords and the Crackclaw Point Lords were arrayed behind the table.

Unlike where they had been sitting in judgment, Ranma and Daenerys sat alone at that table now. In front of them on the table was Ice crossed with Dark Sister. To one side of the crossed blades was a stack of scrolls sealed with the

new royal seal. To the other side was piled the trio of crowns that had been taken from the bodies of Viserys, Stannis, and Aegon. Even the one that had been taken from Joffrey was there, on the bottom of that pile, almost unnoticed at first. As a sign of the victories the royal house had won so far, that took some beating.

Nonetheless Daenerys had wanted to do this outside so that her two no-longer-little ones could also be included. That would have driven the point home that the new royal house had the same power as the old House Targaryen, but even more support from the nobles. But it was raining again, and it would've taken a day or so to set up a large enough pavilion for all of the Lords and the dragons to be within.

*Nonetheless, I suppose that the total effect is enough to get the point across. You face not just the royal house with one or two Lords Paramount behind us my Lords, you now face the totality of the rest of Westeros, united for once, and hopefully well into the future.*

Ranma gripped her hand underneath the table, and Daenerys squeezed back twice, signaling that she wanted to wait a few more seconds. She let the silence of the hall linger, then nodded regally at the guards by the door who began to shift the Dornish Lords forward, until they were directly in front of the noble's table.

When they were in place, she began to speak. "It is said that you Dornishmen play politics even more subtly than the Reach or the Westerlands. Thus you will realize that when we speak we speak not just for the Royal House, but what the Royal House represents, Westeros united, united by the sword in some cases, united by words in others, by blood and oath of fealty. But a great thing is not great until it is finished, and Dorne alone remains to be brought into the royal fold."

Ranma took up the tale, as they had discussed. They needed to drive home once again that this was a true even marriage, with both Ranma and Daenerys being co-equal as rulers. The other Lords had already learned this, the Dornishmen needed to learn it now. "I am not just a student of warfare but of history, and my wife knows the history of her own family as well as any. We have had several weeks to think about this my Lords, and we have allowed our initial rush of anger to subside. Simply because we know that if we do what justice truly should demand, we would face unrest in Dorne, which could possibly boil over despite our best efforts."

He fell silent, allowing hope to awaken in the Dornish Lords for a bit. That they would might be able to get out of this debacle with nothing more demanded of them than the normal reparations paid out by the loser.

Then Ranma continued to speak, crushing that hope ruthlessly. "Yet the fact remains that you backed a butcher, a psychopath who used his dragon and his influence over you to burn and slaughter hundreds of people in some vainglorious efforts to reclaim the crown in the only way he thought he could. That must be paid for. So while we will not be executing you as was our first desire Arianne, neither will we let you free. It is on your shoulders, on your shoulders **alone** that Viserys was able to come back as a true threat to Westeros at all. Without you and your father, he would have nothing but mercenaries behind him and not the numbers or the influence to truly be dangerous."

Daenerys spoke up then, seeing the objection in many of their listener's eyes. "Yes, his Dragon could've made him a power, but not enough of one to be a threat to all of Westeros as he had become with your aid. You and your family must pay for that."

Ranma nodded and went on. "Arianne Martell, for your part in bringing war and death to Westeros, we sentence you to live out your days in White Harbor. Specifically, you will remain there and be in charge of carrying for the former queen Cersei Lannister. When the revelations of her son's true nature came out, Cersei's mind broke, and since then she has been comatose, calling for a permanent day-per-day care. You will be in charge of that, and so long as she lives, your safety will be assured and you will live as your noble status would demand. If anything should happen to her, you will be stripped of all of your comforts, and sent to join the Silent Sisters in that same city."

Despite seeing the poetic justice behind that sentence, Ranma had not been happy with it. Despite their time on the trading galley together, he had never warmed to Arianne, and she was to blame for helping Viserys become the threat he had. He had wanted to execute her, but his advisors had convinced him and Daenerys otherwise.

And after going over the history of the Targaryen's interaction with Dorne Ranma had reluctantly agreed. Killing Arianne would've caused more trouble down the line, making her another Elia Martell for Dorne to rally around. But this was an elegant solution. *And if Arianne thinks that she'll be able to try to gain some influence in White Harbor she's sorely mistaken. Lord Manderly will handle her easily.*

For her part Arianne was staring aghast at Ranma and Daenerys. To lose her family's influence, to be exiled to the cold North, regardless of whether it was supposedly a city or not, was one thing. To be forced to take care of Cersei, a Lannister and not only any Lannister, but one of the ones who she blamed for her family's dishonor, that was



beyond cruel!

Seeing this Ranma took a bit of vindictive pleasure in the horror that was passing over Arianne's face. *Let the punishment fit the crime* he thought grimly, now truly getting behind this idea. "Take her away." He nodded at Dacey, who along with Hathar and Daryn were stationed by the doorway.

Dacey nodded back. Moving forward she took the other woman's arm pulling her back towards the doorway when Arianne continued to stare at the royal couple in horror.

Behind her and Nymeria and Elia exchanged a glance. That was well beyond what they had feared would happen, and showed both mercy and justice in equal amounts. Which spoke well of their own chances here, especially in regards to the conversation Nymeria had with the two royals after the Dornish army first surrendered. *They must truly be willing to listen if they were able to set aside their anger at Arianne to that extent.*

Daenerys spoke up then, staring at the two girls. "In like mind, we realized that the position of base-born in Dorne is different than in most of Westeros. And if we cannot take aggressive action against the one who was the archetype of my late brother's return to Westeros, we cannot take action against either of you to a greater degree. For your parts in this, you will serve the Royal House until such time as my husband and I believe that you have repaid your debt to Westeros through service."

"I hasten to add you are not hostages to your family's good conduct, you are simply serving out your time much like those men and Lords assigned to duty on the Royal Canal project from the Westerlands. Your duties will be decided upon and described to you later."

Both women bowed, and at Daenerys's imperious gesture the two of them removed themselves to the door, where they were escorted out by six more guards, men of House Tully and Blackwood.

Ranma stared at the Lords of the Dorne. "Your own positions and that of your men is somewhat different than that of House Martell. House Martell's men have already been consigned to working on the royal canal for five years, but you and your men will face a different fate. Much like to Westerlands lords who followed the Lannisters, cannot be held accountable for where your loyalty let you, only the actions you took since. But we cannot let you off with mere reparations like in the past or even Dorne in general."

"House Martell **will** pay reparations to the crown." He went on, tapping the long scroll of parchment that had been laid on top of the crossed swords in front of him and Daenerys. "Plankytown is to become Crown Land, its revenues taxed to pay for reparations to the Stormlands for Obery's campaign there. Your houses will pay a 5% increase in taxes to be used to repair Gulltown and to replace the ships of the Royal Navy destroyed in this war, along with what damages you did to Dragonstone and Driftmark."

Daenerys took up the tale there. "Furthermore, House Dayne will be rewarded for not taking part in this. It, the lands of House Wyl, Fowler and Manwoody will be combined, and added to a new duchy which will join the Stormlands Duchy of Dondarrion."

That won some exclamations of shock and consternation as all of the Dornish lords realized the implications, though not from the lords themselves. Those lords had added their men to Obery's command, and might well have gone with him on his slash-and-burn campaign. Without those men at home, their lands would fall easily to House Dayne's if they agreed to back the crown, especially since Dayne was more powerful than any two of the others three combined in any case.

But that didn't matter to the lords present, what mattered to them was the strategic implication of the passes coming under the control of a house that disdained House Martell and the rest of Dorne. While invading Dorne would not be easy thanks to its desert nature, if you controlled those passes it was possible. It was also a very pointed reminder that Dorne's semi-independence was at an end.

"Further you and your Houses my Lords, will swear fealty to us personally here and now, or be sent into exile. Your men will be turned over to the royal army without you. You will all serve the Royal Army for five years, and will return home so long as they survive the coming war."

One Lord raised his hand cautiously. "Your Majesty, what do you mean when you say 'the coming war'?"

"The black candles have been lit my Lords." Ranma replied. "The Great Enemy of all life has returned, and this war was frankly a sideshow taking us away from the real one. We must march north as soon as possible to combat it in the North."

'Impossible!' said Lord Yronwood. He was something of a historian, and he understood what Daenerys was talking about, whereas the other Dornish Lords were simply looking confused. "You're talking about the White Walkers, the threat that the Wall was made to defend against? They can't exist any longer, it has been thousands upon thousands of years since they were seen! Besides which, they can't get past the Wall."

"We have seen signs of their return my Lord, and my husband and his Wolfsworn met and destroyed a force of wights that were found on this side of the Wall in the Gift." Daenerys replied, squeezing Ranma's hand to let her answer first. "Magic has returned to this land as well my Lords as you all well now. Is it such a giant leap to assume that the Great Enemy has also returned?"

"I suggest that you all familiarize yourself with those old stories." Ranma said dryly. "We also realize however that your horse archers will be next to useless in winter, your horses will probably die within a few days of heading north, so they will be left here and put to work. However your archers themselves, those can be useful. And as such, you and your men will have the opportunity to win back your honor. Now, will you swear your oath?"

OOOOOO

"I am **so** happy that's over. Have I mentioned how much I hate politics?" Ranma moaned, falling face first onto the bed that he and Daenerys had commandeered here in. He turned his head slightly to glare at Daenerys and Merry, who had entered with a few servants who were carrying trays of food. The servants looked torn between giggling or trying to hold it in at his overacting, while Daenerys and Merry showed no such confusion, laughing aloud at him.

"Politics is possibly the thing that person who came up with the phrase necessary evil was thinking of when he coined it, my love." Daenerys said, patting him on the leg for a moment before moving over to the table where the servants were laying out a repast for her, Merry and Ranma. The two of them had waved off any idea of having dinner with the rest of the Lords tonight, wanting to have some quiet time with their friend, which all of their Lords had understood.

They had left Jason, Patrek, Daryn, and Tytos in charge of moving the army through the town to the waiting Royal Navy. Though they could've hoped to have some time to allow the army a break, the time limit was pressing down hard. Even now they wouldn't be able to get the army up to White Harbor within the two month timeframe, though they could come close enough that Ranma hoped they could get by. The four of them and Davos were in charge of that, and the Royals felt they could leave it in their capable hands.

Tonight however, tonight was for the three of them.

"You both did magnificently though. Firm but fair, justice given without anything to hint that it was based on revenge." Merry said, sitting down across from Daenerys she flushed a little as she felt Daenerys's hand on her thigh over her dress before the servants had even left, glaring at the girl who smiled back innocently before removing her hand and diving into her food like one of her no-longer-little ones.

"That coupled with what we did to the armies that face this will solidify our power more than anything else could have." Ranma said shaking his head. "I realize that, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. And I still feel that Dorne is going to be a problem."

"Doran and his son Quentyn, possibly, though our holding Arianne, Elia and Nymeria might make them reconsider striking at us. Though if Doran accedes to our demand that he send us the magister's head, that will remove at least part of the problem. And we left his own fate open-ended. If Margaery and Jon decide Oberyn and his mercenaries have done too much damage, they have the naval power to do something about it." Daenerys shrugged. "We did the best we could this far removed considering the threats in the North."

"With him out of the way, the only true schemer that I do here that still out there is Petyr. But Fenris will see to him however long it takes." Ranma smirked evilly, an expression Merry mirrored for a moment.

"We haven't heard anything more from the Westerlands, which concerns me considering we're going to be heading north and be out of touch from the rest of Westeros." Daenerys shook her head worriedly. "I know that travel times mandate a long turnover, but we should still should've heard something from them."

"Not necessarily." Merry said with this shake of her head. "Where would the ravens have gone? Most of the Westerlands houses wouldn't have ravens trained to travel to the Riverlands. Moreover Kevan, from what I remember of him, was always a thoughtful sort of person. He's intelligent, but he's not going to rush to a decision quickly. And he'd be the only one with the Raven that could get to Riverrun, and from Riverrun to the army a messenger would take what, two, three weeks at best?"

"If that." Ranma said with a sigh. "While the Royal Roads might've been able to withstand the pounding of the army's march, the roads we've traveled since marching east from Harrenhal aren't. It's going to be slow going for most anyone that travels that way. In fact Ser Barristan will probably run into trouble heading down towards Duskendale. The road between here and there is good, but not good enough to stand the pounding and the rain it's taken."

With another sigh he stood up, moving over to join them at the table laying a kiss on Merry's neck and shoulder before doing the same to Daenerys. The three of them simply ate for a few moments, talking about nothing in particular just simply enjoying their time together, mostly concentrating on where along her journey Sansa could be, what could possibly be happening down in the Reach, and Jon and his task.

"I might not like her personally," Merry said shaking her head, "but I think that Margaery will handle everything in the Reach well enough. I've heard nothing but good things about Willas long before this all began, and you saw that none of the surviving Reach Lords had any issue with your assumption of authority over them once Lord Mace died, well save those who you exiled. That speaks volumes about their low opinion on him. But we'll need to do something to tie Highgarden into the fold in the future."

"I'll leave that to Jon as well." Ranma said complacently.

Merry looked at him and Daenerys, her eyes narrowing. "Are you two trying to play matchmaker?"

"As much as we can this far removed, possibly." Daenerys replied, smiling slightly. "But it makes good sense. We'll have to think of some Northern Houses to marry your brother's off to Ranma, to further tie the Starks down into the North, since Bran will be the new Lord Paramount of the North, but Jon's hand in marriage is still a card we can use."

"When Bran's of age, yes." Ranma said with a laugh. "Though I think that teaching him politics and anything about land governance is going to be an uphill battle. I'm glad I can leave my father to it."

Both girls laughed, understanding that he was simply stating a simple truth.

With a sigh Ranma leaned back, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them to concentrate on Merry, who was now giggling at something Daenerys had just said that he hadn't heard. He caught Daenerys's eyes, raising an eyebrow and she nodded with a bright smile.

Merry cocked her head at that smile before turning to Ranma, only to squeak when his lips found hers. Her eyes widened in surprise before closing as she melted against him. Daenerys moved behind her, moving her hair aside to gently kiss her neck.

How they got from the table to the bed remained a mystery to Merry for some time, because the next thing she knew she was lying with her back on the bed, with Ranma hovering over her as Daenerys moved in for a kiss of her own. The two women kissed their tongues out and twinning around one another ardently. Ranma worked on the ties of Merry's dress.

### **Lemon Warning!**

As his two loves kissed Ranma finished pulling Merry's dress apart, carefully lifting the younger woman up at the hips so as to pull her dress down from her shoulders, down her body and off her legs before setting it aside. This left her clothed in a silk chemise which Daenerys was already pushing up from her stomach, leaving her lightly tanned skin their bare. The sight of Daenerys' pale hand against the backdrop of Merry's slightly tanned skin was strangely erotic to Ranma, and he leaned in, kissing Daenerys' fingers and the skin of Merry's stomach all around it while more and more skin was revealed.

He took a special moment to look at the scar from the battle at Darry, kissing all around it and then licking lightly at the scar itself. *I hope Darry's roasting in hell somewhere, but whatever torment he's facing in the afterlife is a picnic in comparison to what I'd have done to him had he lived!* Shaking his head clear of such thoughts Ranma trailed his lips over to Merry's naval.

Merry moaned then giggled a little as he found a ticklish spot, though most of her attention was still on the kiss she was sharing with Daenerys. After a second she pulled away, breathing heavily. "T-this is no dream, is it? I'm not going to wake up and find myself back in Riverrun before the trials am I? This is really happening?"

Daenerys moved from Merry's mouth to one of her earlobes, nibbling at it gently and running her tongue along the edge causing Merry to moan, lifting her body off the bed as she gasped and shuddered. Daenerys had learned long before this that her earlobes were an especially sensitive spot for the younger girl. "This is really happening Merry,

and I think you've been a very good girl having to wait so long for our relationship to... climax... shall we say?"

"Oh that is so bad!" Merry laughed, pushing her away slightly with one hand as she groaned, which had nothing to do with Ranma's continuing ministrations, at least at first. That changed abruptly when Ranma completed Daenerys' task of pushing her silk under garment up above her breasts.

He cupped Merry's breasts gently, marveling at the way they fit into his hand. Not having grown much since Ranma had first noticed them on board the ship up to white harbor, Merry's breasts were smaller than Daenerys', which more than a handful. But both girls' breasts were firm, perky, malleable to the touch and incredibly sensitive. Daenerys' nipples were a pale pink. Merry had surprisingly bright red nipples, which just begged to be sucked.

Never being one to question such things at a moment like this Ranma leaned down, whispering "I love you Merry" before taking one of her nipples into his mouth. He sucked gently at first, causing Merry to moan, bringing one hand up to fist into his hair while the other was busy holding Daenerys' head in place as the two girls resumed kissing.

The two broke off for a moment and Merry moaned aloud "I love you, both of you Seven help me, I love you both so much!"

Daenerys' smiled, her own hand joining Merry's on top of Ranma's for a moment before joining its fellow in pulling her own dress over her head before Daenerys tossed it to the side, shaking out her hair a luxuriant platinum cascade for a moment before she leaned down. Pressing her forehead against Merry's she looked into the other girl's brilliant green eyes, her own violet ones brimming with love and desire. "And we love you. We may never be able to say it public, we may never be able to marry you in front of the Old Gods or the Seven, but we **are** married Merry."

"Amen!" Ranma mumbled, pulling away from Merry's now distended and glistening nipple. "The three of us are a perfect triangle! Let no man, woman or god come between us." As the two girls began to kiss once more, Ranma leaned back, getting onto his knees for a moment while pulling off his shirt, then turned slightly to sit on the edge of the bed pulling off his pants kicking them aside before turning back to the action.

In those brief few seconds Merry had pulled Daenerys' underthings aside and pulled off her own silk chemise leaving both girls only clad in their panties. Ranma nearly growled, his ardor rising at the sight of the two girls. Their upper bodies pressed against one another, their breasts rubbing against one another while they kissed, Daenerys' rear waving in the air above Merry as Merry writhed under Daenerys' attentions. A wet spot was growing on Daenerys' panties, showing how much she was enjoying this.

Ranma leaned in running his tongue over that wet spot causing Daenerys to lift her head from Merry's mouth crying out "Ranma!" Then she said it again in a far different tone of voice when Ranma gripped the side of her panties and ripped it off rather than pulling them down her legs. "Ranma! That was my favorite pair!"

"I'll get you a new favorite pair." Ranma said with a laugh, beginning to use his fingers on Daenerys' already drenched slit.

Daenerys moaned, shuffling forward slightly to get away from Ranma's touch, turning around and reaching forward to grab Ranma and pull him into a kiss which was mostly tongue. Below them Merry watched this one hand gently kneading her breasts while the other went down to her panties, pushing them slowly down her legs. She wasn't surprised to find that her own panties were almost drenched, the anticipation of this moment, the foreplay that they had just been doing, and the sight above her all combining to overwhelm the, at least in this area, innocent girl.

Ranma broke off the kiss with the Daenerys to lean down to kiss Merry in turn, while one hand gently stroked down Daenerys' back before gripping her small but very pliable rear. Daenerys smiled watching the two, grabbing Ranma's hand and moving it around her thigh so he could get to work again on her sit. She laid down next to Merry, looking one leg over the other girls, leaning in to kiss and knead her breasts.

She had never done this before, and found that having another girl's nipple in her mouth was strangely arousing, as was the moaning coming from Merry. Merry broke her kiss with Ranma, moaning "Daenerys, Daenerys! That feels so goo..." she broke off into a louder moan when Ranma pulled off her panties and one finger gently stroked down her glistening wet petals.

Daenerys briefly lifted her head off of Merry's nipple, licking it sensuously for a second before saying, "In the bedroom Merry, you can call me Dae." When the younger girl's eyes locked on hers she winked. "But only in the bedroom if you please."

Merry laughed. "Dae, I like that!"

"I came up with that at Moat Cailin, was trying to find a nickname for Daenerys that she liked." Ranma said rather proudly, while he leaned back slightly, turning around again to kick off his underwear.

When he turned back, Merry couldn't stop herself from staring. Not even Daenerys' continued ministrations on her breasts or the fact that Ranma had gone back to fingering the both of them could take her attention away. She had heard Daenerys and Ranma make love several times and had heard of Dae exclaim about how big Ranma was, but that was a very different thing from actually seeing Ranma's penis for the first time. It was a little intimidating frankly. "That's supposed to go inside of me?"

She didn't realize that she had spoken aloud until Ranma reached down, gently cupping her face and kissing her nose and forehead. "It's supposed to but I promise I'll be as gentle as I can. If you don't want that to happen just yet that's fine. Nothing will happen tonight that you don't want Merry. I love you, the last thing I want to do is hurt you or pressure you in any way."

Merry nodded, but didn't reply either way, simply staring at Ranma's cock before Daenerys turned her head away slightly to lean in for a kiss. That took Merry's thoughts off of her fears, and she returned the kiss ardently, before pushing Daenerys away pulling the other girl up the bed enough so that Merry could work on her breasts for a change, leaning to the side over them and nibbling and sucking at Daenerys pale white skin before latching onto her light pink nipple.

"Oooohhh that feels, feel's good! Very different from you Ranma, but just as goood!" Daenerys moaned, each word coming out breathy and drawn out.

Ranma laughed, leaning down to work on Merry's breasts once more as his fingers continued to work on both women. Moving his body to the side so that now he was laying within Daenerys' legs he rubbed his now achingly hard shaft against Daenerys' core.

She broke off moaning long enough to look up at him, and nodded, before leaning down to kiss Merry's Forehead. "Watch Merry." She whispered, her voice a sensual purr. "Watch."

Merry did so, her eyes slightly wide as Ranma slowly sheathed himself inside of Daenerys, throwing his head back with a low moan that was the most animal-like yet arousing sound Merry had ever heard, making all of her attempts to overhear their love making pale in comparison. The sight of Ranma's toned, lean body beginning to move over Daenerys' own gorgeously proportioned and pale one was also erotic in the extreme.

Both of Merry's hands moved down to join where Ranma was still gently fingering her core, two fingers joining his own in thrusting in and out of her flower as she threw her head back into a moan. But still her eyes were wide open staring at the sight before her.

Looking at his ladies sprawled there on the bed with Daenerys gently kissing Merry's neck and shoulder as she moaned at his ministrations, with Merry simply washing Ranma piston in and out of Daenerys core he once more noted their different skin colors. Daenerys was pale, the pale of genetics rather than lack of sun. She had never tanned in Essos, and her skin color hadn't changed at all when they went north. Merry's in contrast was slightly darker in tone.

In order to better control himself Ranma closed his eyes, his body now on automatic as he tried to concentrate on other things lest he lose control and end this moment with Daenerys too quickly. They hadn't been able to get together on the campaign since Riverrun after all, and Ranma had found his self-control in this area decreased swiftly. His thoughts rather naturally turned to all the moments the three of them had shared, both Ranma with Daenerys of Merry and all three together.

The first time Ranma and Merry met: how she had seemed a bright yet unloved child. The times they'd shared on the trip down to Kings Landing as he told her and Tommen tales. The amusement Ranma had when Merry decided to feud with Margaery over his affections despite at the time being rather embarrassed by it and her crush on him, not realizing that a crush could grow into something more. The kiss they had shared when he was under the influence of whatever it had been at the tournament.

That first moment when Ranma met Daenerys stood out sharply in his mind. How fierce she had been, how strong she had seemed, simply standing there her clothing burned to ash on her body as she held the two dragons eggs, fierce and unbowed. That first morning on the ship when Ranma had described how to put on a proper hidden dagger, the times he helped Daenerys train her little ones, when they discussed politics, when they simply sat and looked out over the ocean.

The laughter, the discussions, and the jokes they had shared before he had to leave, and his joy at seeing Merry on the ship with his father, when he realized that she had been the one to save his life. The moment later on when he realized that Merry was becoming a woman. The flirting, the discussions of the future, Daenerys and him growing closer, their eyes meeting and being lost in one another as they danced, his proposal and her joyful acceptance.

His and Daenerys' first night together and every night since. The moments Daenerys, Merry and he had shared on the campaign, all three of them growing closer, Ranma seeing the two of them laughing and talking, hugging occasionally, sharing a horse as Merry leaned against Daenerys' back while her arms were around the taller woman's waist.

The realization that he had come to love her in Riverrun, the moment he learned that Daenerys had too. All of those moments passed through Ranma's mind and he kissed them both on their foreheads, unable to put into words what he was feeling right now.

Daenerys pulled away from kissing Merry, throwing her head back and moaning loudly "Raaanma!" as she climaxed. But Ranma didn't stop his thrusts, simply varying their tempo occasionally, driving her to multiple small orgasms one after another.

Moments passed like this, with Merry also orgasming from her own fingers and Ranma's and he began to lose control. He thrust harder, faster into Daenerys, with Daenerys eagerly lifting her hips off the bed meeting him thrust for thrust. "Love you, Dae, Merry, love you both!" Ranma moaned leaning down to kiss first Merry then Daenerys as his hips spasmed cuming hard,, sending his seed deep into Daenerys' womb.

He collapsed boneless on top of Dae for a moment, simply breathing in the scent of her sweat and whatever Dae put in her hair as he recovered from his exertions. He raised his head however to look at Merry as she, sweating and gasping from her own release, started to giggle. "What?"

Merry shook her head, leaning over and running her hands down his back to his rear gripping it for a moment before coming back and pushing into his hair. She pulled her hand away, showing that it was glistening with his sweat. "You're sweating! It's just, I've seen you march or run all day, train with the troops and you never really seemed to sweat, but you're sweating now. It just struck me as funny for some reason."

"I take that as a compliment," Daenerys said archly, pushing Ranma slightly off of her body for a moment, so that she could turn to give Merry a gentle kiss.

Ranma shook his head with a laugh, pulling out of Daenerys gently causing her to moan in something between pleasure and displeasure. Merry watched avidly as Ranma pulled his shaft out of Daenerys, causing a small flood of cum to escape as he did. He was still hard however, and he looked at Merry, leaning down so that their foreheads were touching. He looked into her eyes, a gentle smile on his face. "Yes?"

Merry understood what he was asking and with her body still flushed with endorphins from her recent orgasm, her fear had been swept away. "Yes."

She opened her legs wider, and Ranma moved over until he was kneeling directly between them. Merry licked her lips as she stared down at Ranma's cock, making a note to herself to try it out as Daenerys had once described. At the time it had not sounded very appealing, but seeing it glistening with both Dae's and Ranma's juices it did.

"Just lie back and try to relax." Daenerys said into her ear, one hand gently stroking Merry's hair while the other trailed down her body pausing for a moment to play with her nipples before heading downward again, stopping at the small little hood directly above her slit. When Daenerys began to flick it lightly Merry lifted her hips off the bed, moaning aloud her name. "Dae, don't tease!"

Ranma gently laid his cock along Merry's slit laughing quietly. "I think that's going to become a kind of inside joke isn't it?" Both girls actually giggled at that, though Merry broke off into a low animal like moan as Ranma and gently eased the tip of his cock into her. He paused for a moment watching her, but she didn't seem to be in pain, and he slowly inserted more and more of his shaft into her glistening slit.

Once or twice he stopped when Merry winced. But she was so stimulated right now, with Daenerys continuing to stroke her clitoris and her previous orgasm that the pain didn't really register for long. Each time pain was quickly overwhelmed by pleasure, and she urged Ranma on. "More, I can take it now, more Ranma!"

Soon however he came to a barrier, and stopped, looking at Merry. She nodded, and he leaned down kissing her gently, though the gentleness ended when Merry thrust her tongue into his mouth lifting her hips slightly off the bed at

the same time, wrapping her legs around him. It wasn't enough for her hymen to break, but it was certainly enough to break Ranma's self-control, and he thrust forward before he could stop himself, bursting through that final barrier with all the subtlety of a battering ram.

"NNFF!" Merry moaned in pain for a moment into Ranma's mouth, but she did not stop kissing him. Soon the pain of that final barrier breaking turned to pleasure and she thrust her hips up again at Ranma giving him the hint that he should keep going.

The two of them continued their liplock while Daenerys kissed both of their necks and shoulders, breaking off after a moment to kiss Daenerys in turn. Merry began to work on the other girl's breasts while Ranma did the same, one hand lifting from the Merry's waist to start to finger Daenerys once more, making squishy noises as he played with her recently filled quim.

This time Ranma couldn't last as long. Merry was tight, as tight as Daenerys had been their first time, and the sight of the two girls below him, with Merry licking and sucking at Daenerys' nipples also had an effect on his self-control. Merry's continual cry of "harder, faster, love you Ranma!" did not help at all either.

At the same time Daenerys wailed her way to another orgasm from his fingers and Merry's work on her breasts Ranma leaned down, pulling Merry away from Daenerys' nipples for moment to kiss her hard on the lips. Dominating the kiss from the get-go, his tongue thrusting into her mouth, his hips went into overdrive thrusting into her core.

Merry's legs tightened around him, and she screamed into his mouth as she came again, the rippling this caused in her core breaking through his last vestige of endurance. He thrust inside one last time, moaning into her mouth "Merrrrrry!" As he came. The younger woman shook with aftershocks as Ranma came inside of her, feeling the warmth of it, the strange full sensation, before her legs unlocked and fell limply back to the bed.

Ranma rolled over, coming to rest on Merry's other side as Daenerys laughed quietly, kissing Merry on the neck and ear for a second. "Are you still with us Merry?"

"Ruined..." Merry muttered, "Loved every minute of it, but completely ruined!"

Ranma laughed quietly, leaning down to kiss her gently this time. "And we love you." Then he leaned back, a wicked smirk on his face as Daenerys leaned down in turn to kiss her before kissing Ranma as they both looked down at Merry. "But you don't think we're already done, do you?"

Merry looked up at them both, and all she could think of to say was, "Oh my." But her arms were moving without any input from her brain, pulling them both down to her.

### End Lemon

Two turns of the candle later looking down at both girls, who were fading into unconsciousness as he watched, Ranma groaned under his throat, just realizing that if Myrcella was here he could not be. *We could come up with an excuse for Merry's presence in our bed for an evening, but not if I'm here too. I hate having to hide this! Dammit, I love her just as much as Daenerys does, just as much as we love each other! But we can't show it to the public, even with Merry no longer being able to marry it would be a very bad move socially. Especially considering that one of the first things the septon's council will ask us to do will be to remove that damn law that Joffrey passed about polygamy being allowed in the Royal house.*

With that in mind Ranma moved over to the suite's bathroom, where a bath had been filled with water which had long since gone cold of course. He washed himself off putting on his clothing and exiting the room quickly. Down the hallway he found Ser Barristan standing guard at the stairwell heading down.

The knight turned to him, one eyebrow raised and Ranma shrugged theatrically. "I've been kicked out. Apparently Daenerys and Merry wants to have some 'lady's only' time, don't ask me what that's about."

Barristan laughed, though he didn't believe Ranma for a moment. He had suspected for a while that the former princess had fallen in love with Ranma and Daenerys, and was honestly happy for all three of them. They worked so well together, it seemed only natural that they make that union 'official'. Of course that wouldn't matter to the public or to the Faith of the Seven, so he decided to run with Ranma's excuse.

"Best not to inquire my Lord." He shuddered theatrically shaking his head. "I remember when Elia and the Queen would have such discussions. They were remarkably close despite their age gap, and what they talked about, well it would make a hardened soldier blush."

"Should I be worried that are trying to gang up on me or something?" Ranma asked, going with it. It would make a good cover if it got about anyway, which it probably would considering that there were still servants about even this late at night.

"Probably not, though the secrets of your bedroom escapades might no longer be secrets."

"Joy," Ranma groaned, shaking his head.

Ser Barristan laughed again then both men turned as they heard a clanking sound of someone in armor coming up the stairs. A moment later Daryn came into view, his face grimmer than his still wounded leg would allow for. "Ranma a messenger just came in from Riverrun. He says he took a boat from Riverrun, and he must've pushed it badly, because he looks half dead."

He shook his head. "But there's something more, something is riding the man, he's frightened, more frightened than most anyone I've ever seen before." Ehiric is with him now, trying to calm the man down. He asked for a septon immediately upon arriving."

"Shiiiiit..." Ranma scowled. "There's only one thing I can think of that would scare someone that much."

"That's what I thought too." Daryn replied grimly.

A moment later the two men left Ser Barristan guarding the stairwell, hurrying downstairs to where they found the messenger, somewhat calmer than Daryn said he had been, but still pale faced and shaking as he gulped down wine and spoke quietly to the septon. He stood up, spilling his wine all over his trousers but he didn't seem to notice as he bowed quickly to Ranma. "Your Majesty, a message came from Winterfell. Maester Vyman opened it, and shared it with the town council and with me in case I lost the message he gave me to pass on to you. It, it's..."

Ranma held up a hand that held it out taking the message from the man. "I probably know what it says already Ser, and regardless your speed and dedication to duty does you credit. Now get back to drinking and put some real food in you."

With that said Ranma opened the message, tilting it slightly so that Daryn could read it, while behind him the rest of the Wolfsworn, marched in or limped in as the case may be. He read it silently, then looked at Daryn who looked back before turning to the others. "The White Walkers've gotten around the Wall, and we can't get it to the north in time to stop them where they are. Get Rickard up here." Ranma ordered looking over at a guard on the door. "He needs to be told. Smalljon get your father up as well."

Once gathered the two northern lords were told what was occurring, and both of them paled slightly with Rickard paling significantly more than Greatjon. Greatjon simply shrugged after a moment. "Last Hearth'll hold, I know we've got some dragonglass weapons in the armory, and our positions defensible enough." He looked sympathetically at Rickard.

"My son will do his duty." Rickard said stoically, only his eyes showing his growing concern and fear. "But we must head north as quickly as possible!"

"We already were doing that Rickard," said Ranma calmly. "The army's already begun embarking. That process will continue through the night and all through tomorrow." Ranma thought for a moment then stiffened his shoulders, throwing back his head. "But I won't be with it."

"Ranma?" Rickard asked, frowning heavily. "I realize that **'politically'**" he said, spitting that word, "you should probably stay here in the south to ride herd on everything going on here but..."

"No, my duty is in the North uncle, and you know it." Ranma said smirking at Rickard sighed visibly relieved. "I simply said I wouldn't be with the army, not that I wouldn't be in the North. I'm going to leave within the hour, and I'm going up to Winterfell."

For a moment none of the Lords understood what Ranma was saying, then Dacey said, "You can't be serious Ranma, Winterfell is months away! It'll be faster to go by sea."

"For the army yes, not for me. At the pace I can go alone, I'll get there long before this army reaches White Harbor."

The Wolfsworn shared glances, most of them angry ones. With their injuries, they couldn't move nearly as fast as they had when they marched on the Golden Tooth, and all of them realized that even that speed had been slower than Ranma, Jon and Arya could move with their direwolves. And whereas most kings' safety would've been an



issue, with Ranma it most certainly wasn't.

"You think the White Walkers will march on Winterfell right off?" Greatjon asked after a moment.

"If I was the white walkers, I would make for White Harbor, Moat Cailin and the Wall." Ranma said firmly. "If they can take and hold the Wall, they can bring their forces directly down via the land, they wouldn't have to worry about holding Skagos, no matter how they got to it. Retaking the Wall would be incredibly hard." *But I hope my father's thinking about Bear Island as well*, he thought to himself, not wanting to alarm Dacey at the moment, she looked angry enough to bite nails already without that worry.

"They're not human, they won't think in terms of cutting the North off from further reinforcements or any other human idea, at least I don't think so." Roger said his voice calm, but his eyes a little wild. Now that it came to it, Roger was not looking forward to crossing blades with the wights once more. That, and his son was in the North as well, his newly born son who had held in his hands for a bare few weeks before having to leave for the conclave and Winterfell.

Daryn was facing similar issues. The last time they'd had a message from the North, his wife, a wife he had barely a few days with before being forced to march off to war, was getting ready to give birth. Hornwood and The Rills were strong, but to defend against the White Walkers?

"That's why I think they'll make for Winterfell if they can. I don't know how they remember things, but I'm certain they know that Winterfell is the center of the North, and one of the most defensible castles as well. You could siege Winterfell forever and never break in, plus I bet Bran the Builder put in some magic in Winterfell's walls."

"Get Davos and Jason in here." Ranma ordered. "Go over the schedule for embarkation, think of any way you can speed it up. Break up the Royal Navy into groups maybe, sending the ships off piece by piece? Any portion of the army we can get into the North quickly, we need to do! I'll leave that to you my lords, I need to leave within the hour as I said, and I have to tell my wife what has occurred."

"Better you than me." Hathan murmured shaking his head and tugging at his goatee thoughtfully. "Much better that you than me."

When Ranma entered their room, his two wives were where Ranma had left them splayed out on the bed, sweat along with various other juices slowly cooling on their bodies. At the sight Ranma shook his head moving quietly through the bedroom into the bathroom. There he found a towel, wet it in the bathtub water and came back, slowly cleaning the two women. As he had hoped this act woke them both up, though Merry fell asleep again almost immediately. The younger girl was utterly exhausted, not having built up the endurance to this kind of exercise that Daenerys had.

Daenerys however was awake enough to frown slightly. Ranma did do this occasionally, but he shouldn't even be here at all, her muzzled mind thought, looking over at Merry. That realization woke her up enough to notice that despite the tenderness Ranma was showing his current task he was frowning. "What's wrong?"

"News came from Riverrun." Ranma replied grimly. "A raven arrived from Winterfell. The White Walkers have found a way around the wall, apparently Theon ran into them on Skagos. They've taken the island entirely, though he survived thank the Old Gods." As Daenerys' eyes widened Ranma went on, detailing some of the information sent and that and send down to Riverrun specially.

By the time he finished speaking Merry was awake if still groggy and without any kind of energy. She laid her head on Daenerys' thigh, staring at Ranma as he finished cleaning her body, shuddering slightly as the towel gently caressed her sensitive parts. Yet to say that Daenerys and Merry took the news that he was going to rush off poorly was an understatement of epic proportions. "Ranma as strong as you are, what do you think you'll be able to do alone?"

"I won't be alone, I'll probably catch up with Timot and the forces under him traveling through the Neck."

"Don't give me that!" Daenerys ordered shaking her head. "You won't stay with that army, it'll move much slower than you will alone, you'll just go racing off again."

"One man alone can do a lot in the right place," Ranma replied quietly taking her hands and kissing them lightly as he stared from her eyes to Merry's. "I have to go. **This** was why I was brought here! Not the war we've already fought, not the changes we've begun to make to Westeros. Those are side benefits. **This**, facing the forces of the Great Enemy, is why I'm here. I need to go. The army might not reach the North before the deadline, but I might be able to."

Daenerys stared into his eyes, seeing the honest belief of that there and finally she sighed pulling her hands away with a nod. "Go." She said, then reached forward quickly grabbing him by the ears and pulling him into a kiss that went on for several moments until she had to break it in order to breathe. "Go." she ordered again. But stay safe until we see you again, my love."

"In one piece if you please Ranma." Merry said reaching up to take Ranma by his hair and pulled him down into an equally ardent kiss. "Please."

Ranma nodded at them both. "I will, I promise I will see you both in Winterfell my loves." With that he kissed the pair of them, then walked out the door while the two women turned and began to aid one another in finding their underthings and dresses. Moments later Ranma raced out of the keep, through the town and out into the lands beyond, picking up speed and racing through the night, following the shoreline towards Harroway and the Kingsroad.

OOOOOO

"I still say we should have fled my love. That was an order that came directly from Eddard Stark! I know you think we can hold out here but..." The speaker was a dirty-blond haired woman, with something in her shoulders and eyes that told of Flint heritage, but you had to look hard to see it. She was currently sitting up in bed, looking down at her husband, her face twisted in concern.

"Oh hush Moira," said Laris Stonegate. "If we leave, we stand to lose everything we've gained since The Leech overstepped himself." He shook his head. "Just you wait, when our grandsons come around our house will've risen to masterly status! A generation later, we'll be a great house!"

Laris Stonegate was a typical Northman, stubborn, honorable and unyielding and most of the time those traits served him and his family well here on the hard scrabble land of the North. He had been a minor lord beholden to House Bolton, and he had enriched himself since that House's fall. Many more prominent minor lords had reacted poorly to their overlord's fall, leaving Laris to gather up more lands and smallfolk to his own name, even when the minor and great Houses of Bolton's neighbors had split up Bolton's land between them. While Marsh, Bloodtaker and Redflag acted out and were destroyed for it, Laris kept his head down, quietly acquiring the land of his neighbors. Farmers, woodsmen, and one small quarry and the smallfolk working it were now under his family's control.

But while Laris might have enriched his house greatly in the past few years that was a pittance to what he hoped to achieve in time. He knew there was really too much land and certainly too much distance between the seats of Hornwood, UMBER, and Karstark to be left without an overlord forever. That was why he and the other few surviving minor Houses had been left to their own devices since. But that couldn't last for more than a few generations before Lord Stark recognized the difficulty, and put a Masterly house above them the better to control and defend those lands.

"That's only if we're here to see it." Moira, Laris' wife, replied tartly. "Which we might not be if all the stories from further north are true."

"Lord Stark's jumping at shadows. He's right to do so if there's even a hint of trouble, but that doesn't mean that we have to leave all I've gained here! Look," he said, reaching over to kiss her hand lightly. "You know we've put up that outer palisade and our house has the special stone fall above the gate! There is nothing that can get through that, and they can't climb up onto the roof so long as we man the defenses."

"I hope you're right." Moira said, but then leaned in and kissed him again on the cheek. Laris smiled, wrapping his muscular arms around her pulling her back down on the bed.

Outside it was still daylight, because despite his confidence Laris was not a fool. He knew the White Walkers always attacked at night so he stayed up at night, while his sons were in charge during the day.

However, he was wrong. The White Walkers might prefer to attack at night, but they were perfectly capable of sending out their wights and other forces during the day. This was why Laris was roused from sleep by the sound of a gong going off elsewhere in his holdfast sometime later.

Laris pushed Moira off his chest, rolling out of bed and grabbing up leather breeches and undershirts. Maybe in the South someone could've simply pulled on their armor and rushed out, but here in the North, even during summer that would be an incredibly bad idea. Now that full winter had come, Laris knew he'd be facing frostbite or worse if he ran out there undressed. It took him some time to pull on his fur leggings, shirt, armor and cloak as well as the heavy gloves his wife had made him several years ago.

By the time he was dressed, his wife had also thrown on her heavy dress, pulling out a short sword and nodding at him as she moved to the doorway. Laris nodded back, rushing out past her and up the stairs. He knew she would check on their two youngest, both girls aged 12 and 10, before taking control of the servants and smallfolk who were not part of the defense. Laris himself raced to join sons, twins of 19, unmarried at the moment though he had hopes, up on the roof of the holdfast.

The Stonegate family's holdfast was a large affair of stone, shaped like a long capital 'I' three stories tall, with heavy ramparts set all along the roof. Around this Laris and his men had raised a wooden palisade in a circle, portions of which were backed with stone from the quarry, though not as much as he could have hoped. Many of his own smallfolk had fled further south when Lord Stark's orders had spread, cutting into his workforce.

He was left with around 60 armsmen, most of whom were on the roof were on the palisade as he bolted up the stairwell to join those on the roof, and another two-hundred smallfolk men, most of whom were at least partly trained archers. As he smashed the trapdoor open, Laris bellowed, "Christian, what are we dealing with?"

Christian was his oldest son by a few seconds and the one in charge during the day technically, though he and his twin Carson tended to split the duty. "We're under attack father, from all sides too!" Christian said, from where he was kneeling behind the parapet, arrow on his bow as he fired rapidly out against...

For a moment Laris' breath left his body and he stared disbelievingly. *I didn't believe it, I really thought Lord Stark was jumping at nothing. I should've known better.*

What was attacking them wasn't an army of humans, bandits or even wildlings, though at first they look enough like humans to confuse the eyes slightly. It was only when you noticed that they weren't wearing heavy clothing despite the cold, that many of them looked like children and women, and that many of them seemed to suffer from a case of being dead, chunks missing here and there, that you realized what they really were. "Wights." He breathed out, shaking it his head. "Wights like in the old tales!"

They charged silently through the snow, moving as easily as a man would over grass despite the fact that Laris knew there was at least 2 feet of snow out there. And all of them, regardless of apparent age, held a weapon. These ranged from swords of various varieties to hoes, spears and anything else under the sun.

"Arrows don't do anything!" came a shout from the palisade. "We're not slowing them!"

Even as that shout went up the first of the wights reached the palisade, then began to climb up it with their hands, only to be thrown back by many of the smallfolk who had joined Stonegate's family in their holdfast. They thrust spears down at them from the top of the palisade as their fellows tried futilely to kill the wights with their normal arrows.

But the wights didn't simply take this. Laris watched in horror as one man was pulled over the palisade by several wights grabbing his spear point. His scream cut out abruptly when his throat was torn out by a random wight below the wall.

Behind Laris Carson came up out of the holdfast leading up a batch of men carrying bushels of fire arrows. He distributed them quickly, with the men lighting them from the braziers set on the roof. "Fire when ready!" Laris bellowed, nodding proudly at his son before grabbing up a bow of his own.

The fire arrows lanced out, slamming into targets here and there in the horde that was trying to scabble over the palisade. The wights screamed as those arrows hit, letting loose the first noises they'd made since the battle began. They even retreated here and there from their fellows as those hit by the arrows went up in flames quickly, something in their undead status making them even more flammable than humans normally were. *More like a human dipped in tar*, Laris thought morbidly as he watched this.

But it wasn't going to be enough to keep control of the palisade, and Laris knew it, not against the numbers of undead hiding along the wall from fire coming from the holdfast's roof. As he watched two more spear-wielders were pulled off the wall and killed, and he saw a wight's hand grabbing the top of the palisade for a moment before an archer used a knife to hack it's fingers off, the wight falling to the ground below.

He moved to the front of the 'I' directly above the doorway into the holdfast, cupping his hands over his mouth to be heard above the clamor of battle. "Fall back! Fall back to the holdfast!"

Even as he did so here and there the wights had pulled themselves up the one story side of the palisade, despite the best efforts of the defenders. Laris turned to Duncan, his face set in grim lines. "Let down some of the rope, then get

downstairs and tell your mother to set off the rock fall."

Duncan's eyes widened, but looking at the battle raging outside the palisade nodded his head. "Yes father." With that he was gone, racing along the wall and ordering men to throw down clumps of rope before heading down into the holdfast once more.

Several other men came up with more bushels of fire arrows and the battle continued unabated for several moments while the men from the palisade retreated quickly, more than half of them being pulled to their deaths by the wights before they could fall back. Laris joined the archers firing as well as he could, only to stop and stare for moment.

There on the palisade, a man Laris had seen be gutted by a wight mere moments ago was getting to his feet! *They're not supposed to be turned that fast! No stories ever said that wights rose that quickly!*

Below he heard a thunderous series of booms, and he smiled grimly. *At least they won't be getting in from that direction.*

The stragglers of the wall pulled themselves up the ropes from the rooftop, then were forced to turn quickly with spears thrust into their hands by their fellows to keep a few of the undead from following them up the rope. The ropes were chopped in half, leaving the wights who had been trying to climb up them to fall back, scrabbling at the stone of the holdfast.

"That's the way lads!" Laris said moving around the roof, slapping men on the shoulder here and there and shouting words of encouragement as Christian did the same. "Let them scrabble and tried to climb up the walls, there's no give anywhere in them! They'll have to climb over the bodies of their own dead to get up here!" Inside however Laris was wondering if they would do that exact thing, and was very frightened they might.

Despite that pessimism Laris knew his family's holdfast was made very well, with no chinks in the stonework or easy handholds on its wall. With that and the stone fall blocking any wights from coming through the main doors, he hoped they'd be able to hold out until help arrived. How long that would be Laris didn't know, but Laris made a mental note to talk to his wife about starting to ration their food immediately.

Snow began to fall then, obscuring the sunlight, hard and heavy. But the defenders were still able to see clearly enough to target the wights nearest the foot of the holdfast. "Husband the fire arrows," Laris ordered. "We've only got so many of them prepared."

That order was quickly passed around the roof, but torches were easier to make them fire arrows, and some enterprising man headed down into the holdfast, returning quickly with several dozen torches, tossing a lit one down on a large group of wights gathered by a corner of the holdfast, trying to scrabble up its face. "Good lad." Laris bellowed. "That's the way!"

That brief boost in morae disappeared however when suddenly arrows began to fall among them, killing several men. "What?" Laris exclaimed. "Where is that coming from?"

"From the palisade, some wights are on the palisade and they're shooting at us!" Christian roared back from where he was at the back of the 'I'.

*The old stories never said that the wights were dexterous enough to use bows!* Laris snarled internally.

And yet here they were using them, already taking a toll of his men. The roof's ramparts was good cover, but not that good, certainly not good enough to deal with an arrow storm like what was coming at them from all sides. The wights weren't aiming for the defenders, they were simply shooting large amounts of arrows from all around from the palisade up at the holdfast.

"Duncan!" Laris bellowed, gesturing to his son to join him. "Grab as many of the fire arrows as you can, start at the front, then work your way around. Don't aim for the wights down below, aim for where the palisade is! Let's see if we can set it alight!"

"That's mostly green wood father, I don't think we'll be able to."

"Then we'll at least kill some of those archers! Do it." Laris ordered, cuffing his son upside the head. The youth nodded, racing off and Laris turned back, grabbing up his bow and firing blindly towards the palisade. The snow was so bad now, he couldn't even see the palisade from where he was standing here, and that was only around 200 feet from the edge of the roof.

Fire arrows shot out in bunches from the roof while Duncan and his men moved around the wall, and Laris took stock of the battle. He was appalled to note that there were only about 62 defenders left on the wall, and most of them were with Duncan moving around it now firing at the palisade. *We lost that many men already!?* That meant he had lost the equivalent of every man that manned the palisade at the start of the battle. *And it isn't even night yet...*

*Still, if we can set that palisade on fire, we'll get some time to rest and restock our fire arrows. I doubt the wights inside the palisade will be able to stick around once that large a fire gets going behind them, they'll break for the areas that haven't been set alight yet. And without the palisade, they won't be able to fire up at us so easily which means they won't be able to use that arrow storm against us again.*

But the palisade didn't burn, fires here and there began in the wood but the wood was indeed green, and it was so cold out and the snow falling so thickly that the fires sputtered rather than spread. Suddenly there was a loud crash, and a shout went up from the defenders along the back of the holdfast's roof. "The palisade's gate is down!"

It was only then that Laris realized that the gate hadn't fallen before, after all why would it considering the fact that the wights had been able to climb up the outer wall so adroitly. He wondered why they were opening it now, but got his answer as another shout went up. "Old Gods save us, there's hundreds of them!"

"Duncan!" Laris bellowed, racing that way along the roof. "All archers, follow me!"

Duncan and his men obeyed with alacrity, firing arrows as they reached the edge of the roof down into the massive horde of wights that had just burst through the outer gate. Laris gaped again, watching as a dozen wights led the charge carrying ladders! *They're not supposed to be that smart!*

But it wasn't the wights that were smart, not really. Wights were dead, as simple as that, reanimated through fell magic beyond the understanding of men. But the White Walkers were now on this side of the wall, and at the moment, this battle was the only one calling for the White Walkers wizards' attention.

The fire arrows broke up the wight horde's charge, but they couldn't stop it. There was now so much snow that when a wight's body fell it was almost immediately smothered by the snow, so fires couldn't spread among the undead ranks. Worse, the archers from the palisade were still firing, still causing casualties among the defenders.

*We're losing*, he thought to himself, though he did not, would never, say it aloud. *We're losing, and there's nothing I can do about it!*

Laris jumped forward, joining several other men to push a ladder away from the wall, then running over to the next grabbing his greatsword from his back and hacking and a wight who had just made it up the wall, wielding a halberd of all things, which it had used to slay farmer thrusting down with a spear. Idly, Laris wondered how the thing had been able to climb up a ladder with that, but he didn't let that thought take up too much of his time, instead hacking it to pieces, its head coming off like a shuttlecock, his back swing cutting the thing's arms off.

For a moment it was all he could do to concentrate on the fight directly in front of him, but he did pause between blows when he heard a distant slamming crash. Though when it didn't continue, he turned his attention back to trying to throw the wights off the roof. He cut down several undead, hacking at their bodies with his greatsword. All around him his armymen did the same, much more at home with this kind of combat than with archery, though the archers from the palisade were still taking a toll on their men. Though Laris didn't know it, he had lost several dozen men already.

He realized this when he heard Christian's voice. "Aghh, the dead, theeegghh!"

Laris turned his head, seeing Christian born to earth by several men who had been struck by arrows. They had come back almost immediately as wights, killing his son and several other men before they realized what was going on.

Screaming in fury Laris charged forward with Duncan, hacking and slashing at the wights who had so recently been their armymen. With those men rising as wights however, the battle on the rooftop was finished. Eventually the two Stonegate men realized this and Laris shouted, "Pull back! We'll close the inner door against them, we can pile up furniture against it or something, but pull ba..."

His thoughts trailed off as men began to come up from below. But these were not just some of the servants or smallfolk who had not joined the defense, but the women and among them were his wife and two daughters. But they weren't coming to help, no. Here and there on their bodies were what were obviously mortal wounds. His lovely wife Moira was missing half of her face. His daughters, the jewels of his life, had their throats slit, possibly by their mother as a last ditch effort to save them from the horror they were now experiencing.

"How?" he said to himself even as Duncan noticed what was coming up from behind them and began to wail aloud in horror. "How did they get through the rockfall?"

The rockfall was a specially designed segment of the roof directly above the heavy oak door into the holdfast. It was made so that when a special capstone was removed from the floor of the second level, the entire roof of the room above the gate would collapse down, blocking the gate entirely. It wasn't perfect, but it would have put several hundred pounds worth of stone in front of the gate, which should have been enough to keep out any battering ram manned by humans.

But it had not withstood the sheer weight of numbers that the wights were able to pile against it. The wights had taken a second battering ram, lashing it to the fist on perpendicular to the first. This allowed them to put more men on the ram, and eventually thrust their way through the rocks.

*I was wrong, I was wrong and I was arrogant, and my arrogance killed us all.* Laris thought, ignoring the rest of the fight as he stared at his wife and children as they came towards him with glowing blue eyes, dropping his greatsword to the rooftop with a clang. Death, when it came was a mercy after that.

OOOOOOO

The Last Hearth was not called that because it was the seat of the most northern Great House. It was called the Last Hearth because it had been there almost as long as Winterfell, as had House Umber. And like their liege lords, House Umber had never thrown much of anything away something Hother Whoresbane was very happy for. While they didn't have many arrowheads of dragonglass, they had several hundred daggers, and they had the Last Hearth itself.

Stone walls defended a central keep of equally heavy, if inelegant design, which was a bare few feet taller than the walls themselves, with a simple square roof and no ornamentation. Those walls were four stories tall and fifty feet thick, with their feet noticeably thicker than their parapets, with several squat towers scattered here and there. It also had a large gatehouse, the gate tunnel having several portcullises within it. The Last Hearth was able to house practically all of the smallfolk living on House Umber's own lands, as well as many of those of the minor lords beholden to them. Its cellars, several stories deep, were large, well maintained, and currently full.

*And we're not without our own friends either,* Hother smiling faintly as he watched over 1,400 men marching through the snow towards him, the banners of House Stark, Cerwyn, and the Wull clan flying over their heads. He clumped down the stairs from the gatehouse, greeting the leader of the band as he slipped off of his horse.

"Greeting Hother, I am Ser Alec Willowtree," The man said with a nod. "My Lord Stark sends his greetings, and sent us and Wull allies to aid you in the defense against the White Walkers."

"You made good time," Hother said gruffly, smiling grimly in a face that looked like a mountain carved by a glacier, complete with a beard that looked like the foot of a mountain. "We've heard tell of a few holdfasts attacked, some farmsteads destroyed. Nothing major, nothing organized you might say, just the undead rising from the graves." He shuddered a little. "Never thought I'd see this, tell the truth. I ordered our own tombs disturbed and put to the torch, Old God's damn the need."

Willowtree nodded grimly. "I have a hundred archers from the mountain clans and 400 archers from the lands of House Stark and the rest are swordsmen and armsmen. We bring pikes, two large carts full of them and armor, another two cart's worth. Last Hearth will hold my Lord, they'll have to take it over our dying bodies."

"Against any other enemy that'd be good crowd pleasin' shit, against the White Walkers, t'ats precisely the way they'd want ta take it." Hother said shaking his head.

Willowtree coughed, looking a little apologetic, then gestured out past the gatehouse as his men began to move into the small courtyard, the carts with them making their own slow way inside, pulled by the first few teams of trained reindeer from Brandon Stark. "I notice that you and your men were busy outside my Lord, isn't it a little late to try to dig a moat?"

"A normal moat maybe youngster," said Hother still smiling grimly. "But not one like that. We ain't gonna be filling it with water at all, but with something else. Keepin' snow out of it'll be more difficult, still, I hope at least it'll provide a bit of a surprise at need."

OOOOOOO

Jon had marched his forces straight from where they had left the Blackwater Rush towards the source of the Mander

making his way down along it in turn. He had also been able to convince the castellan of House Footly to send a message down to Highgarden for him, and had received a reply as soon as possible given the speed of raven's wings. Of course his army had continued its march while Footly waited for a response. They were halfway to Bitterbridge before the messenger caught up with them.

In her brother's name Lady Margaery had, ordered all the lords along his route to pass on messages, and had also sent back all of the barges that Garlan had used in his own journey down the Mander. A few of the barges soon reached the army allowing him to rest some of his troops daily on a rotating basis, and of course also lightening his supply train considerably.

They had just come within sight of Bitterbridge when the scouts shouted back a warning. "Riders incoming! Six of them my lords!"

"More messengers?" asked Beric cocking his head. "I wouldn't have thought that Caswell would be so quick to follow Lady Margaery's commands. I'd have thought he'd bitch and moan so long as she wasn't there in person to glare at him personally, the little streak of piss."

"Lady Margaery's force of personality already surprised me in the messages we've exchanged. I've no doubt that even by raven message Caswell would be overwhelmed quickly."

Beric smiled, nodding his head slightly. "I've actually met Lady Margaery, both when we were in King's Landing and before that at a ball for her 14th birthday. For all that Loras was her father's favorite, I think that Margaery was always the most intelligent of them. Bar Willas perhaps. And when angered, she is a very scary lady indeed, her tongue can flense the bones off a man in moments."

Jon laughed, leading the way through the army towards the front of the column as the rider and the scouts who'd spotted them came into view. "Indeed, her last message showed that intelligence quite clearly, as well as Willas' ability on the battlefield." That message had summarized Willas' campaign in the Westerlands. "Several problems have been solved there without us needing to intervene thank the gods. Frankly I think mothers and daughters everywhere will sing Willas' praises for the destruction of Clegane Hall."

"True," said Beric, biting off the word. "Your brother did a magnificent deed when he executed Gregor Clegane, I drank to his victory then, and I'd do so again in an instant. Honestly if you think about it, that moment began the destruction of the Lannisters mystic of unstoppable ruthlessness."

Jon nodded, and the two fell silent while Edric and Arya came through the army behind them along with Ser Piper. By the time the messenger and his guards reached the front ranks of the marching army, they were all waiting for them to the side of the trail.

"My Lords," the messenger began, bowing his head trying hard not to stare at the odd Wolf/Dragon head banner floating above the army, or the equally strange giant wolves ranged out next to a young woman and man who could only be Starks. "I hail from Bitterbridge my Lords, where we've had a message from Lady Taena Merryweather."

Beric frowned slightly, bringing up one hand to hide his mouth for a moment but Jon had caught it anyway. "What?"

"Lady Taena is a notorious gossip, and there have been rumors of infidelity around her for years, so much so they spread to my seat in Blackhaven, though obviously none were ever proven. Still, I suppose she is bright, brighter than her husband certainly, and certainly in touch with whatever is going on around Longtable. I would however be wary of taking anything she says at face value."

The messenger held out the message, and Jon opened it, moving his horse slightly to allow Beric to read it over his shoulder. The message was from Taena and detailed Oberyn coming to her for information, saying that in return he agreed not to despoil House Merryweather's lands, before going on to describe Oberyn's long term plans. It ended with an earnest plea for whoever was in charge of the Stargaryen army to try to stop him. Nowhere in there was mention of Taena's role as spy mentioned of course, but neither did Taena shy away from hinting at her 'gossip' skills.

The two of them read through it, glancing at one another when they finished. "This isn't good," Jon said, his tone dust dry and understated, but also very serious.

"Your mastery of the understatement is profound my Lord," Beric replied scowling angrily. "This could be a disaster."

Arya plucked the message out from Jon's hand, reading it quickly before handing it over to Edric and Ser Piper. "Am I missing something here? I mean yes it would be bad for the lands that Oberyn passes through, but you make it sound

as if the impact would be much larger than that."

"The area between the Rose Road and the Mander is called the heart of the Reach lady Arya," said Ser Piper shaking his head. "It's not called that because it's in the middle, but because it is by far richest territory of the entire Reach, every single league of that land is farmland given over to the growing of one crop or another. That land could feed the rest of the Reach and then some my Lords, and with the damage already done to the lands around the Mander and up around Goldengrove it becomes even more important. Oberyn could doom the Reach possibly the Stormlands and more to starvation if he puts that area to the torch."

Jon growled, pulling out a map of the area looking over at the messenger to aid him in placing their current whereabouts as well as where he thought Oberyn's army under could be if they had left the keep of Cockshaw and made their way around Merryweather lands. After a moment he shook his head. "We'll never get there in time, even if we all could pile onto the barges Oberyn we'll have crossed long before we can stop him from beginning his campaign of terror again."

Arya frowned, then looked at Nymeria and Ghost. "I, I think I have an idea actually." She looked at the two direwolves.

Catching the look, Jon motioned the others away, leaning close to his sister. "What's your idea, sister?"

"The direwolves take over packs when they try to send messages long distance right?"

Jon nodded, though there was a range limit for that kind of thing. With each successive wolf pack the information passed became less and less useful.

"Well, Ghost and Nymeria are both smart, really smart. We could send them across the river now, have them head down to look for Oberyn's army then take control of some wolf packs around there to harass the mercenaries. You know how horses who haven't been trained act around them. They wouldn't be able to go nearly as fast as if their horses run off every night."

"That's an idea," Jon thought looking down at Ghost. "It could work, but I think we'll need to do a bit more..."

An hour later Arya, Ser Piper, six hundred men of his house, Edric and the two wolves were racing down the river on one of the fastest barges, disembarking two days later. Behind them the army picked up speed, force marching along the river, while the messenger returned to Bitterbridge with a raven message for Lady Margaery.

OOOOOO

Ranma had passed around Harroway in the night a bare day and a half after setting out but did not stop. People had seen him of course causing Ranma to laugh aloud at the odd looks and exclamations of shock at his appearance and the speed he was moving. Grimaldi even tried to send a horseman after him to discover why Ranma was running through the town like that, but the horse floundered after the first few leagues, while Ranma kept on going.

At the pace Ranma was going even the finest horse would've floundered. Ranma set a blistering pace from the get-go, one even Fenris and the direwolves would've had trouble keeping up with. He ate on the run from a bag of jerky and drank from his wineskin (which held camp water) when he needed it but otherwise just kept on going, stopping only to rest for a few hours every night. In this manner Ranma crossed in a bare four days from Maidenpool through the lands of House Wayn and beyond on the Kingsroad.

Since passing the Vale Road intersection however Ranma had noticed that the Kingsroad and the ground directly on either side of it showed markings which told of an army passing by. At first Ranma hadn't noticed it, simply assuming that it was from the time his own army had passed down from the Ruby Ford. But a little bit after leaving House Wayn's land he began to make a note of it, and became concerned. *Is there another army moving about out here? Could the Lannisters or Stannis have brought the Vale into the war? And if they have, how will that army react when they learn the war's over before they could join in?*

Early on the fifth day as the sun was beginning to poke over the horizon, Ranma saw scout's moving through the woods slowly. Some of them were on horse, while others were on foot, either guards or scouts Ranma wasn't certain. They didn't seem all that concerned with keeping a watch out to the south of them, which told Ranma where the Army might be headed.

*Could it be moving to interdict Crannogtown?* While an excellent supply depot, Crannogtown was not very well defended. Despite the palisade around the town really depended on the army smashing any force that could threaten



it long before such a threat could get into position to attack it. *Or could they be going after Timot and his troops?*

Off the top of his head Ranma could not think of the number of Houses and men the Vale could put into the field, a round number of 15,000 was the best he could come up with. An army that large could have destroyed Timot's force, and with it any chance of getting a formed military unit up into the North any time soon. Davos had been very pessimistic about the timeframe for the Royal Navy to travel from Maidenpool to White Harbor, saying it would be at least a month and a half, maybe more. Hence why Ranma was doing this in the first place.

For a moment Ranma debated on whether he should slip into the Umi-Sen-Ken and keep going, trying to pass through the army and figure out what was going on by listening in on random conversation. But if he was spotted somehow, if someone ran into him, tripped him, or more likely, saw his tracks in the mud along the edges of the Kingsroad, he would give a very bad first impression. *After all of this point I don't have any real proof that this army's a threat, I'm just being paranoid. With reason, but still...*

Eventually one of the scouts noticed him coming up behind them, turning their horses around and staring at the man running at a speed their horses could barely match. "Hold stranger! What's your business here, and where are you going in such a rush?"

Ranma slowed, still jogging forward but slowing down enough while the scouts on horseback galloped back down the Kingsroad toward him at their comrade's shout. Soon five of them were around him, keeping pace with him as he continued forward. Idly he noted that the colors all of them were wearing looked like a Vale House, House Tollett he thought, which made his guess about where this army came from accurate at least. *Now to find out what its intentions are.*

"I am Ranma Stargaryen, and I am heading home the fastest I can to deal with a threat that has grown beyond the wall. Who are you and who do you speak for?"

One of the men scoffed, reaching forward to grasp the hilt of Ice where it was sticking over one of Ranma's shoulders. "He's just some vagabond thief trying to run away, with a sword he's probably stolen! Look at it, iEEEE!"

That was as far as he got Ranma grabbed his arm, pulling him out of the saddle with ease. Before his fellows could draw their swords Ranma was holding the man above his head as if he was some kind of packing crate. "Take me to your leader!" Ranma ordered, having no time or inclination at this point for games. "**Now!**"

The four remaining scouts stared at him then up at their fellow who was simply dangling there, as easily as if he weighed nothing all in Ranma's arms. Then one of them spoke to the others. "Didn't the tales about him say that the King had strength greater than most normal men? It... it could be him? Though I question your Majesty why you are out here alone?"

Ranma laughed, gently placing the man he had holding up on his feet. One or two of the men made to move forward their blades half-drawn but the others shook their heads, including the one that Ranma had just sat on the floor. He had no desire to see what Ranma would do if he became angry.

"Like I said, I need to be in the North as fast as possible, and my army can't keep up with me." That won Ranma even more awed looks, and while normally he would've found those irritating at the moment they serve a purpose, so he didn't say anything.

The scouts formed up around Ranma and began to trot forward with him, quickly catching up to the rest of the army which was slowly breaking camp to get on its way once more. The camp itself was a much more sprawling and disorganized affair than any unit Ranma had trained would put up with, and Ranma couldn't quite figure out how large the army was as he was led through it.

Soon the rumor of who Ranma was spread, causing many men to stop what they were doing to stare at him, with one or two of them shaking their heads and muttering questions about his sudden appearance or questioning who he was, let alone why he was there. By the time Ranma was presented to them, Lord Royce and the other commanders of the Army had gathered together in one place in front of the tent they used as a meeting area.

Bronze Yohn looked at Ranma from head to toe for a moment, while Redfort, Templeton and Tollet looked between him and Ranma, knowing Yohn had the best chance of knowing if this was an imposter or not. Indeed Yohn recognized the hilt of Ice on the young man's back, and though it had been a long time he also recognized lizard-lion armor when he saw it. The looks also matched what they had been told Ranma Stark looked like, but that didn't overcome his surprise at the young man's appearance here, especially all alone as he was. "You claim to be Ranma Stark, yes?"

"I am Ranma Stargaryen, first of his name, King of Westeros through right of lineage and conquest." Ranma said smiling grimly. "The sword on my back should have been proof enough Lord Royce, you fought alongside my father in Robert's rebellion didn't you? And I'm certain that Ser Breakstone gave you at least a description of what I look like. Where is he by the way? And more importantly, what are you and this army doing here, heading north?"

Royce looked away from them younger man's even stare. It should have been ridiculous, no king or even minor Lord for that matter would travel alone on foot like this, with no guards no companions, no anything! But beyond the fact that he had Ice, beyond the armor or the looks, there was Ranma's presence, a certain implacable nature that shone through even as he stood there unmoving.

After a moment Royce nodded his head. "Your Majesty, I welcome you to our camp. Young Breakstone parted company with us at the Gates of the Moon, he was travelling back to Gulltown, and we have not heard from him since. As to why we are here, we five represent those Houses in Vale lands that are willing to act, and act for you, though we refuse to raise arms against the Baratheon brothers. How goes that work?"

"Finished," Ranma replied with a thin smile. "Stannis defeated his brother Renly down near King's Landing, and my wife and I defeated him and the forces of the Reach he could call upon. The survivors of the Reach and Stormlands gave their oaths to us and are heading home. Viserys and his army has also been smashed, and a surprise late entry as well."

Lord Royce sagged somewhat, shaking his head before asking hesitantly. "We've heard rumors of Stannis and Renly's battle, and King's Landing's destruction though none of us believed it. But more personally, my liege, my son Robar went into the Reach to see if he could serve under Renly. The last I had heard from him he had been made one of Renly's Rainbow Guard, a pretentious name but even so I was proud of him. Do, do you know if he lives or not?"

"I don't think so." Ranma replied with a wince, derailed from his questions about why the Vale army was going north. "I'm sorry my lord, but from what we were told by the prisoners after the battle about the conflict between Renly and Stannis, none of the Rainbow Guard survived." There were some questions about one of them, but not Robar.

Sighing faintly Redfort reached out to put a hand on Yohn's shoulder nodding his head at Ranma. Though he personally was still wondering if this really was Ranma or not, it was obvious Yohn believed it, so he would act as if he did too. "Your Majesty, please join us in the tent, I think we all need to hear more about what has happened in the rest of Westeros as we were on the march. Though since entering the Riverlands we have heard about the former bastard King and his death, and the destruction of King's Landing as my friends said."

Ranma was ushered into the lords' tent, and filled them in on what had gone on since Breakstone had been sent to talk to them. The news of Melisandre's magics and the pretender Aegon appearing backed by the Golden Company caused exclamations of shock. Their defeat, and the death of two dragons, though Ranma didn't mention how he had killed one of them personally, caused even more. His brief description of the trials after however made every lord there smile or nod, seeing that Ranma was more interested in justice than vengeance, which spoke well of his ability to rule.

"But that was then, now I am needed in the North because of a threat rising from beyond the wall, something which I believe you know already." Ranma finished, staring around at them all with a faint smile. "Or is my mind playing tricks on me when I remember that House Royce kept to the Old Gods?"

"You do not misremember Your Majesty. My House has followed the Old Gods since our founding, We Remember." Lord Royce pulled his tabard to one side so that the runes on his armor could be seen underneath. "Magic has returned, and when I last stood in front of my castle's weirwood tree I felt a call north. I was able to convince my fellows Lords to join me, and we have been on the march now for months."

"Good." Ranma said with a nod. "I already sent some of my army up north nearly two months ago. They should be nearing the Neck by this point, but every sword helps." Ranma frowned. "But now that the war is over, will the Vale still stand separate, or will it rejoin the fold as your initial words indicated?"

Royce looked at his fellows for a moment, then back at Ranma and finally bowed his head. "Your Majesty, we wish to join you, let the Westeros be whole once more. But we have to say, the Vale lands are divided. The mountain clans have been causing more and more trouble, forcing us to keep most of our forces home to combat them. That began long before this war. Jon Aryn's widow is a mad woman your Majesty, which has caused a break between the Houses of the Vale in regards to how to deal with her. I mean no disrespect I know she is your aunt but..."

Ranma shook his head. "I'll never take offense at the truth, Lord Yohn. We heard about Lysa's madness even in the

Riverlands. In fact there were rumors of it before I even left Winterfell. Did you leave enough men behind to protect your lands against these mountain clans?"

"We did, but not to hunt them down on their own lands. Fighting the mountain clans in the mountains is hard, dangerous and costly work."

Ranma nodded thoughtfully, going over the list of the portions of the Army that would not be heading north with the Royal Navy. He also tried to remember who else among the lords present counted as the most powerful lord besides Yohn. "Tell me, who did you leave behind to speak for the Vale in your stead?"

"Lord Belmore, Your Grace." Redfort replied. "He commands a small force keeping a siege going on at the Gates of the Moon, or did when we left. We did not anticipate any trouble with Lysa but we wanted to make certain that the woman could not get any messages out to her erstwhile accomplice Petyr, and we wanted a force in place to take over the Eyrie when Lysa finally made her men snap."

"She was allied with Petyr?" Ranma asked sharply, wondering if the man had maybe tried to head to the Vales, and wondering what sort of mischief he could get up to there before Fenris ran him down.

Tollett scowled, actually spitting to one side. "Bah, allied she practically went to pieces when news of the siege on King's Landing reached us! Lysa told her men she wouldn't do anything until he arrived to 'advise' her."

Lord Royce scowled angrily. "We have since heard news of the attack on Gulltown thanks to one of my factors sending a raven to the Bloody Gate. We know who attacked, and who sided with them, House Grafton was known to have close ties to House Baelish. Might I ask..."

Ranma shook his head. "None of House Grafton's men survived the battle. Nor did any from House Moore. As for Petyr himself, he will be dealt with. I have my best... man... on the job."

Redfort frowned, wondering at the odd pauses there, and the smirk on Ranma's face as he said the words. None of the other's however noticed anything unusual and they merely nodded, satisfied.

Ranma however had already moved on, and the topic brought Redfort's attention back to him very quickly. "Tell me Lord Royce, your House and Lord Redfort's have not intermarried for quite some time, correct?"

Both lords got the implication of the king bringing that subject up immediately, looking at one another while the other three Lords murmured in surprise, though they were mostly approving. Redfort and Royce had been the leaders in this entire endeavor and had kept the Vale if not united then largely at peace barring a few scuffles they'd heard about up further north between Corbray, Lynderly, and Coldwater. "Indeed, our Houses have not married into one another in generations my Lord."

Ranma nodded. "Parchment and quill." He reached into the pouch where he kept the jerky and asked. "Oh, and if I could get some more jerky and some camp water, please?"

One of the servants ran to fulfill that request, bringing back camp water and jerky enough to fill Ranma's pouch and wineskin while he wrote out two messages on different pieces of parchment. Eventually he finished, setting them down on a table, writing out his name, as well as that of his wife before stamping both of them with the Royal seal which he kept on a ring around his neck under his armor. Daenerys kept hers on her finger along with the ring Ranma had given her.

"This," he said holding out one of them up "Names you and Lord Redfort as the crown's duly appointed representatives in the Vale lands. Essentially this places you as first among equals, able to make decisions together that affect the Vale as a whole. This will also allow you or your own representatives to mediate disputes between your fellow lords. It also states that once your Houses intermarry, that the couple's son will become Lord Paramount, and the start of a new House to rule the Eyrie."

That son would in turn be sent to the Royal House to ward, but Ranma decided not to bring that up just yet. After all, it would be years, maybe a decade or more before any such thoughts were necessary.

Lord Redfort and Royce exchanged proud smiles, and nodded formally, with Yohn speaking for them both. "Your Majesty, we accept this charge humbly, and will do everything we can to prove your trust in us is not wasted."

Ranma smiled, nodding his head before holding up the other message. "I would like one of your most trusted commanders to take this one down to Harroway. Quickly if at all possible, my army tends to move much faster than yours, no offense meant. It will command about 2000 men of my army to head into the Vale and meet up with the

various Houses there to solve the issue of the mountain clans."

Those two-thousand would be taken from Silas' command, made up of the troops that wouldn't be embarking on the Royal Navy in Maidenpool. *After all, the Riverlands cavalry wouldn't be worth much in the North anyway, and devoting those men to this campaign now might free up four times their number of troops from the Vale. The mountain clansmen might bitch about it, but I bet they'll like what I offered in payment. Transporting and paying for stone enough for them to make their own keeps up in the mountains is one heck of a carrot considering what it could mean for them long term.*

Lord Royce nodded over to his son Andar, who had stayed silent and watching the proceedings since Ranma had entered the tent. "This is my son. He will head back to Harroway immediately my Lord with five hundred men. They will aid your men in this task, though I don't know if 2000 men will be enough."

"They will if they go about it sensibly." Ranma said complacently. Silas had impressed him, and Tristan seemed to have a somewhat decent head on his shoulders so long as he kept his temper in check. And that kind of combat was the sort of thing that Silas would take to very well. *Using light and heavy cavalry for the task is going to make it harder, but the mountain clansmen should make it easier. And maybe they'll even be able to talk their fellows to giving up their raiding for a while. Doubtful, but I can dream.*

Ranma nodded, then held up the third message. "If you present this at Crannogtown you'll be allowed onto the ships there. The galleons will transport your army up to White Harbor, which will get you into the North that much faster and hopefully closer to where you can do the most good my Lords."

There was some murmur among the Lords at that, who hadn't considered that possibility before this. Indeed the strategic implications of Crannogtown had entirely passed by them, but they approved of the idea of course.

"And by that time hopefully the first consignment of dragonglass weapons will have arrived as well," Ranma went on, "which will give your men enough weaponry to do some good against the White Walkers. For my part however, I have to keep going."

"You won't stay with us Your Majesty?" asked Tollett in surprise. He was still having trouble with the idea of a king simply running up off like that or indeed having the ability to keep moving through the area that Ranma had described so quickly, but the ring, the way he talked and his tale of the war had given enough evidence of Ranma's identity for him.

Ranma laughed. "Normally I would, but I'm under a time constraint." He stared seriously at Lord Royce then around at the others. "You spoke of feeling a pull to the north Lord Yohn, but I had a vision."

He waited for their shocked exclamations of surprise to fade before going on. "When we were near Harrenhal, I went to the Isle of Faces to pray to the Old Gods. There I received a vision, a vision that foretold disaster if I was not in the North within two months. But I couldn't leave Stannis or Viserys behind me to, not even considering Aegon and his sudden appearance. So right now, I simply have no time to waste."

There was a moment of silence, then Royce nodded his head grimly. "May the Old Gods favor you my Lord, and we will see you again in the North."

Ranma nodded, exchange handclasps with him and the other Lords then left the tent, sprinting out of the camp and further toward the North. Within moments he was out of sight still gaining speed leaving behind bemused, awestruck, and worried Vale Lords. Lord Hardyng, a normally silent fellow, put their worry into words. "In the long term our fortunes might well be on the rise my Lords, especially if the Royals spread the idea of more cities and suchlike which the king mentioned as some of his carrots to the Westerlands. But right now, right now I don't know what to make of our fates and I'm very much afraid of this winter is going to be the worst in all of Westeros' history."

OOOOOO

Lord Manderly greeted Salladhor Saan in the Merman's Court where the fires were raging warmly, something that Saan was very happy about even with the brief trip through White Harbor from his ship. Sailing up to White Harbor from Dragonstone had been arduous, dangerous, and above all **cold!** He had sailed northern waters before, even up to Ib Nor a few times on the large island of Ibben, but with winter here the temperature was far worse.

Worse his ships crews had not truly been prepared for it. Most of them had some clothing able to deal with the cold of a night at sea, but not to this extent. He'd lost several dozen sailors, possibly even as many as 100 throughout his fleet to frostbite and cold related accidents, and he had still more down with flus and other ailments. He related this all

too Lord Manderly before opening up discussion on payment for his fleet's merchandise, because he knew Manderly had a reputation as a shrewd and dangerous opponent when it came to the bargaining table.

To his surprise however Lord Manderly simply nodded. "Show my factors the weapon's you've brought us, and we'll pay the promised price: one silver stag for every two arrowheads or one dragonglass dagger, with spear points costing two silver stags. And, if you agree to continue to supply us with as many as you can until the Bite freezes, we will furnish your entire fleet with wintertime clothing for free, as well as housing here and on Three Sisters every time your fleet stops here for two week. Every Captain will get another 400 golden dragons upon the receipt of every cartload's worth of good weaponry their ship brings in."

For a moment Salladhor Saan was silent. While he would prefer to deal entirely in gold, silver still clinked just as nicely in his pocket. But... "That is indeed the amount I was promised, but I have to wonder why you're offering it. Is it true, the, what are they called, the Others, have they really returned?"

"Yes they have. We have verifiable attacks occurring everywhere along the Bay of Seals, and they are slowly spreading. I myself have ordered the cities cemetery to be exhumed and all the bodies within put to the torch. I know that many other lords have done the same to any burial place they know of that doesn't have weirwood trees over or near it. The Old Gods fight the Other's influence, or so the old tales I've recently studied say."

"But because of that we are in deep need of those weapons. I will pay the price we agreed upon your arrival with this shipment could well be the difference between life and death for many." Wyman's eyes and face hardened, locking onto Saan's own, causing the much thinner man to stiffen slightly. "But no more. We might need more of those weapons down the line, but I won't be gauged, whatever our need. Am I clear?"

Salladhor scoffed, but after a moment nodded. "Very well, I agree to the price. Shall we get our pursers in here to do write up the paperwork?"

The Lysene pirate had fifteen ships to his command, each of them able to carry about twenty carts worth of goods, mostly in barrels or packing crates. Lord Manderly kept three, distributing the daggers and arrowheads among his men. Four shipments were reloaded onto river barges here before being transported up the White Knife to Winterfell and Cerwyn.

The rest of the shiploads of precious dragonglass weapons were handed off to Lord Manderly's fleet. Two would be brought up to Widow's Watch. Two more were sent one each to Ramsgate and Oldcastle, while two more would be transported from Ramsgate up the Broken Branch river into Hornwood territory, along with a force of archers and armmen from White Harbor and Ramsgate to defend it until it reached Hornwood. While Ramsgate, Oldcastle and Widows Watch did not have ports or even wharves, they would still be able to take possession of their new weapons much faster from the sea. The last shiploads were given over to five Manderly war galleys, who would head up to the Sunstream where they would hand over their goods to river barges which could take them up to Karhold.

The North now had the weapons they needed hopefully. Now it was just a matter of getting them where they could be the most use.

OOOOOO

Sansa arrived in Crannogtown without incident, exchanging greetings with the men there absentmindedly while she once again thought long and hard about the two young men that were accompanying her. The past few weeks had been tough in that area, both of them had definitely put their best foot forward in the 'contest' as it were. She giggled at the thought, remembering the times she danced with Ben or exchanged puns with Edd, much to the chagrin of all around them. It had felt nice to be the center of attention of two young men, without feeling any kind of pressure on her to make a choice.

Edd had surprised her a time or two, not with his sense of humor which she had of course known about, but with his gentle nature in other ways. *I wonder, she thought now is it a sign of strength that you can afford to be so gentle? Ranma is the strongest man I've ever met, and he's one of the gentlest too. Or is it just Ranma's training that make people so? That he instills some other quality along with physical skills?*

With a shake of her head Sansa sighed. *But even so, Edd's like family! It'd be so wrong! Whereas Ben...* Ben was all Sansa thought she had seen in Joffrey and more, he **solid** in a way that Joffrey at his best had never been able to pull off. He was witty, charming, handsome, well read, and knew the Riverlands like the back of his hand. Sansa was not blind to the fact that would be a tremendous help to her in days to come, but really it was small part as to why Sansa felt she had fallen for Ben Blackwood. *No, my decision was made between these two long ago, but should I tell Edd now, stop leading him on? Though honestly, I'm getting the impression these days he's sort of realized it.*

Sansa's sigh turned into a frown suddenly when she heard a snippet of a conversation. Moving over to the dockworkers who were talking, she smiled at them, causing their initial start of surprise and bows of obeisance to stop. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help but overhear what you were talking about? Rumors from the North?"

"Yes my lady." said one of them, a worker from White Harbor. "There's been rumors of strange happenings, and Lord Stark put out an order to all the smallfolk pulled back to the Great House's castles, not holdfasts!"

The crannogman he had been talking to nodded as well, looking up at Sansa from where he stooped. "Milady, the White Walkers have returned, somehow found a way around the wall they have! Lord Stark, he's hoping to trade land for time, so says my Lord Reed."

"If Lord Reed says it, I'll believe it. He's a good friend of my father, and has been a firm friend and ally to our entire House since long before I was born." Sansa said smiling at the man who puffed himself up at her words. "Could you tell me more about these rumors?"

The two men did so quickly joined by several others eager to speak directly to the Flower of Winterfell. The tales were garbled and disjointed but still gave Sansa a picture of what was going on in the North. *The news must've reached Winterfell almost at the same time we left White Harbor! That's truly horrible timing, I could wish to be with my family at a time like this but the Riverrun does need a lady, now more than ever. We'll have to keep going.*

But, Sansa thought as she looked over at where Edd and Ben were talking to a few of the other guards that would accompany them on the rest of the journey. *But that doesn't mean Eddie has to come with us. He could do a lot of good if he turned back now.*

When she broached the subject however his response was short and unequivocal. "**No.** Ranma asked me to see you safely to Riverrun milady, and that is what I will do! I know about the troubles in the North, I've heard the same rumors, and remember Karhold's a lot further north than Winterfell. But even so, I gave your brother my word."

Sansa leaned close, speaking in a soft voice. "Eddie you, you know that that I don't look at you the way you want me to. That isn't, it's not going to change if you stay with me till Riverrun. Ben and the rest of my guards can see me to Riverrun just as well as you can, but you could do a lot of good up north."

"I could, And I do know that." Edd replied. He sighed, looking away then back at her. "It was a bit of a wrench," he said, the pain on his face showing that for a moment to Sansa who had to stop herself from throwing her arms around her. At the moment it would send out the wrong message, either way he decided to take it. "It's just, you grew up to be such a **gorgeous** woman! I had a crush on you were a young girl, but now..."

Sansa blushed a little looking away but it wasn't the first time that Edd had complemented her in that manner. "Eddie, it wouldn't work. Dynastically it might be a good idea, but I don't think of the two of us could be happy together."

"And that is why I'm willing to say I've given you up." Eddie shook his head with a faint smile which still hinted at pain. "I've seen you and Ben, the connection forming there. And I do want you to be happy. Moreover, my own tastes in the personality of women have changed, if not in their looks. You're right, I don't think the two of us would make one another happy in the long term."

He shook his head. "But that has nothing to do with my promise to your brother. That promise still holds power over me, and until I see you safe to Riverrun, I will guard you with my life." He smirked suddenly. "And though I've given up on you, that doesn't mean I'm going to give you and Ben any more alone time together. Just because I'm over you doesn't want me I want to see you kissing another man."

Sansa laughed and slapped him on the shoulder blushing hotly as she denied the very idea and their time in Crannogtown passed quickly. The next day they were on their way towards the bridge at the twins or the former twins. Ranma and Daenerys hadn't yet decided on a name for that area just yet, which would fall under royal control of course. The bridge itself would still be important place for trading and transportation despite the canal further down the river, but no one want to see another house rise in the area, so the guard detail had remained there since the Twin's destruction.

There they picked up a dozen men of House Stark who Sansa took from the guard detail adding them to her personal household. "It would be good," she said to them, "to have men I know and trust with me and Riverrun no matter how warm a welcome I receive."

They all acceded to her command eagerly, and the trip went on. Once over the Green Fork, they immediately turned south following the Green Fork for several days, passing by the area where the new canal was being worked on then

moving on toward Fairmarket.

OOOOOO

After the expedition across the Mander had left, Jon and Beric set a blistering pace for the rest of their small army. Rotating as many men onto the barge as they could they sped along the side of the river quickly, moving day and night with only a few hours per night given over to rest. The men would have complained if not for the fact that Jon and Beric kept going tirelessly, though Beric notably had to change horses several times, and tie himself into the saddle at night.

Near to Longtable they met more barges and a surprise, because the barges were not alone. A force of archers had travelled upriver on them. Their leader, a young man of Jon's age about as his men paused. "Lord Stark, I am Ser Kevin Conklyn. "Lady Margaery sent me and my men to aid you in this battle. We are yours to command."

Jon nodded, while Beric gleefully slid from his saddle, refusing through force of will the urge to rub his battered bottom. "I'm glad to have you, archers is one area we're not well supplied with, we only have around 300 with us at all. Yet I'm surprised, given what the tales tell of her courage at Oldflowers, I would have assumed that Lady Margaery would've come herself."

That was only half the truth actually Jon was interested to see if the reality of Lady Margaery would match up to the tales and not just that one. Ranma had talked many times about Lady Margaery and their interrupted courtship in King's Landing, and Ranma made a point of emphasizing her intelligence, not just her beauty.

Kevin laughed. "She meant to, but her grandmother and Lady Tyrell put their feet down. Margaery was fully prepared to try and sneak out, but Lady Olenna bribed her personal maid to put a sleeping draught in her food the morning we were due to leave."

"Mothers and grandmothers are like that I suppose." Jon laughed shaking his head. "But how many men do you have with you?"

"Near to a thousand five-hundred my Lord and also bring have enough bushels of arrows to fill up a barge from stern to stern. I'll warn you, not all of them are the best quality archers, but every little bit helps, as the saying goes. Most of them were raised from Highgarden and the lands surrounding it in the past few months, so have only been lightly trained but they're all strong enough to keep pulling a bow for as long as we need them to, even if their aim isn't the best."

Jon nodded, staring thoughtfully at the river. "For what I have in mind, I don't think their quality will be an issue. Can you tell me about the lands around the bridge that Oberyne is making for?"

Ser Conklyn nodded, and as the unit commanders joined them he described the lands there. There was a small but very fruitful grove of trees that began about three hundred feet away from the small road leading over the bridge Oberyne was making for. Of course the road itself was clear, but the grove itself might make for good cover.

"The other side is mostly clear, a few farmsteads here and there and of course wheat fields, but no place where you could set an ambush my Lord. Not one large enough to stop an army Oberyne's reported to be at any rate."

"So the apple grove, or rather right before it begins would be our best bet." Jon mused aloud, looking at the river again. "How far away from the bridge are we?"

"At the pace you apparently set my Lord? I... I would estimate another two days or so?"

"We won't be going that pace." Jon said with a quick shake of his head. "Unless you say that Oberyne is within sight of the River again."

"No my Lord. As Lady Taena reported he swung out wide of Merryweather land. But he's also slowed down considerably according to the smallfolk that have fled his army's approach. They say he's lost nearly all of his horses in the past few days."

Jon nodded grimly, wishing he could send a mental feeling of pride and satisfaction to Ghost just then. "Good, in that case we'll slow the pace for now. I'm going to send a little of half of your archers back down the river to the other side of that bridge. But first I want to use one of the emptier barges to get several hundred of my men down there who know how to handle axes and shovels."

He looked around at his commanders, the knight and Beric for a moment. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear.

This will be a pure ambush. No discussion, no parlay, no chance for peace. Oberyne has led a mercenary army reaving, raping and murdering its way across the Stormlands and the Reach. Every man in that army is under a death sentence, mercenary or no. And we will be carrying that sentence out."

His lips pulled back into a snarl that any direwolf would have been proud of and the others smiled grimly as well. "You'll get no arguments from us Jon." Beric growled speaking for them all.

OOOOOO

The siege of Karhold began one evening without warning. Arrows began to rain upon the outer wall from the forest surrounding Karhold, despite it having been cleared back from the castle for the most part. Quickly the shout went up from the defenders. "Wights!"

Then quickly put a fire arrow to a brazier, raising his bow and pulling back on the string searching for a target. Seconds later hundreds of fire arrows were in the air, impacting the attacking horde as it came out of the woods from the walls of Karhold. A warcry ripped out of hundreds of throats as the defenders prepared to defend the seat of one of the most powerful Great Houses of the North. "The Sun of Winter!"

Archers among the wights began to fire back while the remaining wights raced on, moving over the snow which lay heavy on the ground by this point.

Theon pulled back on his bowstring, letting fly with such force that the arrow hit his target hard enough to propel it back into four others behind it. Two more fire arrows quickly followed impacting the wriggling mass of undead, lighting them all on fire.

As the fire arrows continued to streak out, there was bellow from the woods like a giant beast, or maybe a many of them, roaring aloud in anger or fear. Theon frowned looking over at Torrhen, who had raced out onto the gatehouse's roof with him. "Wights don't make noises, what could be out there?"

"I don't know." Torrhen replied, pulling back his own bow with another fire arrow on the string. "Keep firing!"

The battle continued throughout the evening and into the night, with the defenders rotating shifts every time a candle set into the gatehouse burned down. But it was at night when the White Walkers pressed their attack. As the sun sank below the horizon the temperature began to plummet precipitously far quicker than it should have. Men began to complain of frozen fingers, and the cold slowed the rate of fire from the defenders tremendously. The wights pressed forward, their own archers beginning to get mastery of the defenders here and there despite paying for it with hundreds of their own dead, but what did that matter to them?

From his spot on the gatehouse's roof, Theon had taken a moment to examine some of the wights with a Myrish spyglass, which he idly thought must've cost House Karstark quite a pretty penny. Most of the dead from the battle so far must've come from the graves of people here on Karstark land, or from elsewhere near the Bay of Seals. There weren't any newly dead among them save a few of the archers at the far back.

He told Torrhen this, and the man frowned angrily, moving away from the parapet, though they still had to almost shout to be heard above the tumult of battle. "They're softening us up then for the real blow." He looked at Theon, scowling angrily. "You're right. They don't attack like a normal army would, they're not retreating they just keep on coming, and the cold, it's at their command too isn't it?"

"Probably." Theon replied with a nod, not saying anything like 'I told you so'. There was no time for such now. "I think we should light those fire traps up now, and try to keep them going through the night."

Here and there stumps of trees had been left in place. Elsewhere large tree trunks had been left on the ground, with the snow kept off them, and some scrub brush piled on top. The undead steered clear of those places instinctively, but still dozens of the wights screamed and died when they were set alight.

Several moments of silence passed between the two young men while they watched the results of this little surprise. But then Theon shook his head. "It won't be enough." This was only the truth. After those initial losses to the firetraps, the wights had steered clear of them and kept on coming, their archers continuing to fire back and cause casualties among the defenders while others brought up large ladders. "Besides, we still don't know what made those bellows from earlier. I get a feeling the White Walkers have more surprises in store for us."

He stared earnestly at the other young man and Torrhen growled in frustration, but before he could reply a shout went up from the back wall facing the river. "The Sunstream's starting to freeze! I'm seeing ice on it!"



The two young man raced along the wall to the keep, racing up out onto the roof, where they gazed over the parapet at the water of the river, which was indeed freezing. Even as they watched some of it slowly froze by the dock set against the castle's wall, and more than one men on the large barge moored there, one of two in the river at present, was staring over the side. Theon turned back to Torrhen, reaching out to grab his shoulders, shaking the man hard. "Retreat now! Retreat now before we can't any longer!"

Torrhen stared at him, then down at the waters, before turning back to stare out over the battlefield, before nodding reluctantly. He turned away shouting for a runner, and soon enough people, smallfolk from the last batch that had retreated into Karhold along with the servants and all of the womenfolk were rushing out to the waiting ship.

"RAHHHHH!" They had left it too late. There was a roar from above rather than the surrounding woodland, heralding a new surprise from the White Walkers.

Theon turned to stare up, his eyes going almost comically wide as something flew through the night above them, something huge with vast wings of bone and pockmarked sinew. "What by the gods old and new..."

From the smoke obscuring the sky above the battlefield a large maw appeared on a long serpentine neck, snaking down and ripping a man on a tower in half, caring away his upper body. A moment later as the thing's wings' disturbed the smoke enough to let everyone on the towers and walls see it, a long tail lashed out, smashing two more men from the wall as a cry went up made of equal parts fear and shock. "A dragon, an undead dragon!"

"A wight dragon..." Theon growled, while Torrhen stared up into the fire-lit night in a futile attempt to track its course. "I wish I could say now I've seen everything, but I'm afraid the White Walkers might take that as a challenge." Theon frowned staring up into the sky himself, a fire arrow ready on his bow.

"You think you'll be able to hit it on the wing?" Torrhen asked, knowing Theon had the best chance of something like that.

"I'll be able to hit it, whether or not a single arrow will do the deed, that's up to luck." Torrhen nodded, and raced off back to the gatehouse, to take command of the defense once more.

The undead dragon made three more appearances in the next few candles, and each time Theon tried to put an arrow into it only to watch as his fire arrows skipped off its scales. In response the dragon let loose a cone of freezing air, so cold it actually froze humans into ice if it hit them full strength. Over a dozen men died each time it appeared.

Theon's desperation grew with every arrow he expended on killing it. He moved from tower to tower and wall to wall, trying to anticipate where the dragon would attack from next, only to fail nearly every time.

Faced with this, the cold, and the wights, the men began to falter, but with Torrhen and his chosen commanders exhorting them all they continued to defend the castle while the last of the servants rushed out of the castle to the waiting ship. That ship pulled away, heading down the river quickly thanks to desperate punters polling it from along its side before the wind caught in its sails.

At a signal from Torrhen, one man in every three began to retreat from the walls as the second barge pulled up to the dock. Its crew were fearful but determined, several dozen men aboard also taking shots on the far bank, though very few wights had appeared there just yet.

Unfortunately thanks to the defenders retreating and the dragon taking so much of their attention, the wights now had come close enough to the castle in enough strength to throw up ladders here and there along the outer wall. Once this was done they began climbing up them with the speed of spiders despite whatever shape their body appeared to be in. Then a battering ram was brought against the front gate, and despite the fires begun in several of the wights all around it, they began to batter at the gate.

At the same time, the wight's arrow assault redoubled. Theon turned as one man screamed aloud, a loud whining sort of wail as he fell backwards. He saw the man had been hit in the shoulder and shook his head. "Walk it off you fucking coward!"

The man continued to scream, convulsing in place, quickly expiring to Theon's intense surprise. He ducked back down below the parapet, reaching forward to the man's corpse, grasping the arrow shaft, hissing and pulling away quickly. Despite his leather gloves his hand had practically frozen against whatever the shaft was made of. The man to was cold to the touch already, but that didn't stop Theon from setting a torch on his chest, where the fire caught on the man's fur coat.

He stood up, staring out into the night, trying to see this new force of archers when Torrhen's voice reached him from the gatehouse roof. "Fall back to the keep! Fall back!"

Theon saw that several dozen wights had gotten up onto the westernmost wall and had slain several of the defenders. Those defenders rose in turn, and had to be hacked down by their fellows. As he watched the eastern tower came under attack from the dragon, the men on its roof dying from its breath attack and claws. He quickly loosed the arrow he had on his string, reaching for another only to watch in despair as both of them bounced off the dragon's snout, doing no damage.

More wights began to make their way onto the wall as Theon continued to watch, a feeling of despair filling him. He looked around, noticing now that several others had reached one of the nearer towers cutting him off from the stairwell down to the courtyard and to the rest of the wall.

Looking down at the ground he saw a nearby pile of hay that had been slated to be brought up and tossed over the wall before being set alight. It didn't look particularly solid, but it was certainly better than trying to fight his way through the armymen around him and the wights now coming over the wall in several places near him. With a roar of "Old Gods damnit!" Theon hurled himself off the wall, slamming into the hay and rolling for a moment to come out with his feet under him.

He found himself surrounded by men retreating back to the keep, and he pushed them on shouting "Retreat! Get inside the keep!"

With that he turned, pulling out his longsword, which he had taken from Karhold's armory, hacking at a wight that was coming after them after being kicked off the parapet. There were only a few of them in the courtyard just yet, but they were pursuing the retreating defenders quickly.

Theon exchanged sword blows with two of them, before hacking the leg out from under one of them, and stabbing the other with his dark, which he had replaced much like his longsword here in Karhold. He took that one's eyes out, letting it flail around before retreating quickly from the other one, which was still trying to scabble after him despite not having a leg anymore.

Reaching down he grabbed up his bow where he had dropped it, racing on. Theon was one of the last defenders to retreat into the keep, yet when he turned at the gate, he stared in astonishment, only then realizing that Torrhen and more than two dozen others hadn't retreated from the outer wall at all and were now cut off on the gatehouse's roof.

Torrhen shouted down at Theon. "Close the door Greyjoy!"

"Come on Torrhen, jump for it!" Theon shouted back, all their differences forgotten, as he pointed at a haystack near the gatehouse. "Hack your way through dammit!"

Torrhen shook his head, turning about and firing at a wight who was trying to un-limber a longbow on the wall to shoot at the defenders on the keep's roof. "We'll hold here." He said sounding almost calm even though he was shouting to be heard at all. "Tie up as many of them to attack us here at the gatehouse as we can. Go Theon, go!"

Even as he spoke two men facing the outer wall poured boiling pitch over the side. It had taken hours to come to a boil, and even then it was more lukewarm than anything thanks to the cold of the night. As soon as the pitch was out of the cauldron another man threw down a burning cob of wood, killing possibly a hundred wights gathered around the gate and destroying their battering ram.

"Go Theon!" Torrhen shouted, another arrow on his bowstring.

Seeing over a dozen wights making their way towards the keep's gate, Theon growled angrily, but ducked inside nodding at the men all around him, all of whom were looking at him with expressions that mixed grief and shame with grim determination. "Close it."

They complied and Theon raced away through the keep while the men of House Karstark continued to fall back through the keep, racing out the back of it towards the waiting boat in groups. The ice on the river was getting thicker, mostly centered around the dock and the ship, showing a fell intelligence was driving the cold in its work on the water.

Theon however didn't care for that at the moment. Stopping only briefly inside the keep to restock his quiver with fire arrows, Theon raced on, exiting out onto the roof and moving to the center of the portion of the wall facing Karhold's outer gate. Breathing in deeply, he set a brazier directly next to him, then thrust his entire quiver into it, the fire arrows sticking up out of the coal of the brazier.

For anyone else the fire of the brazier would've set the shaft of those arrows on fire before they could be used, but not Theon. He was too fast, grasping and firing them in one smooth motion, one arrow every half a second.

Even as his arms began to feel heavy, he kept on firing until all of the fire arrows near him were expended leaving over three dozen dead wights on the wall around the gatehouse. He moved onto the next brazier, commandeering the fire arrows from the archer stationed there and did the same, only turning his eyes upwards as he heard a roar.

The undead dragon was back, attacking the keep itself now, coming so close as to almost however over the roof, it's head rearing back in preparation to use its breath attack . Theon coolly drew back on the bowstring, letting fly at the thing's head, knowing the dragon had at last come too close. This time instead of impacting scale and bouncing off, Theon's arrow found the undead dragon's eye. "Die, you fucking monstrosity!"

"GRAHHA!" It roared, bellowing fury and letting loose with a torrent of ice from maw trying to slay its attacker, but Theon ducked aside, rolling on the stone of the rooftop. The dragon glared angrily at him, but more fire arrows from all around began to strike it on the wings. With another bellowing roar it took off, flying higher into the air away from its attackers.

"The sun of Winter!" The men around Theon all shouted aloud jubilantly, but Theon ignored them, moving back to his place on the wall, grabbing up more fire arrows from several dead archers. At the same time, the special arrows of the wights began to fall amongst his fellow defenders.

A shout from below in the keep reached Theon and his fellows then. "They've got something hammering at the gate, and the last of the defenders and servants are aboard, come down! The barge master says we have to go!"

With teeth grit in grief and rage impotent rage the last men of Karhold began to fall back, with Theon the last of them to duck down into the keep. One last arrow left on his bow, slamming into what he hoped was a white walker, a figure in odd black armor whose gender was indeterminate.

It was trying to loosen arrow at the top of the keep from the outer wall, which was now almost entirely under the control of the attackers. It let out a keening wail, falling back and smacking at its chest. But it was otherwise undamaged as it rose, its eyes glinting evilly in the dark and fiery smoke of the battlefield.

Theon however had already raced down into the keep, joining the throng of defenders as they moved through the key towards the waiting boat on the docks.

Theon was one of the last men aboard, and he turned watching the castle as the boat pushed away from the dock and out into the river, the sails catching the wind quickly and the man on the barge's sides punting it through the still slowly freezing water. He kept on staring, watching as the dragon came back, slamming down onto the top of the gatehouse, which was still holding out. He kept on watching as it lunged forward with its gaping maws towards Torrhen who turned roaring something lost on the wind and distance as he charged to his death.

Karhold had fallen.

OOOOOO

At around the same time that Karhold fell, Last Hearth too felt the brunt of a White Walker assault rather than the small undead attacks that had attacked the few remaining holdfasts north and east of it. By this point all of those smallfolk had retreated or died, giving the defenders of the castle around 2000 more hands and mouths, bringing the total of the household up to almost 5000, which was near the totality that they would have been able to produce in times of war.

Of course more than half of those numbers weren't truly trained armsmen, but thrusting a pike down against climbing White Walkers wasn't exactly training intensive. And many of the smallfolk had training in archery.

The Last Hearth was built in large plain dusted here and there with large boulders, with very few trees anywhere nearby. Certainly not enough cover to allow an army to sneak up on it. This allowed Ser Willowtree and Hother Umber to stare out at the army of wights marching towards them from the west. Here and there at the back of the horde were beings that could only be the White Walkers: taller than most men, and obviously not human their movements faster and smoother than the wights around them over the snow.

Willowtree pointed that out, watching as they moved further back through the horde which continued to advance towards the Last Hearth. "Do you think those are the White Walkers themselves?"

"Could be." Said Hother, his ancient eyes narrowed thoughtfully before he looked up to one of the archers nearby.

The two of them were standing on top of the gatehouse, which was the tallest tower set into the outer wall of the castle. "Do you think they're within bow shot?"

"Probably not my Lord." Said the archer regretfully, putting an arrow tipped with a dragonglass arrowhead to one side. Those were precious since they barely had 50 of them all told. They had enough daggers to give every fourth man one of them, but the arrowheads had not withstood the test of time as well as the larger daggers. They would only be used against the White Walkers themselves rather than their wights.

Instead he pulled out an arrow, of which they had several thousands. House Umber's fletchers had been making these ever since the first report from the Lord's counsel had reached them, and they had more fire arrows than they did regular ones at this point.

"Damn."

"I wish you would tell me what that little surprise in your moat is my Lord." said Ser Willowtree looking at the older man with one eyebrow raised. "You seem awfully happy about it. Does it have anything to do with the giant piles of coal that are everywhere in the courtyard? Or with the small catapult?"

"Feh, about time ya put it together." said Hother, grinning through his beard at the younger man. "Me house has got the most coal quarries in the North, I figured we should put some of it to good use." It hadn't actually been Hother's idea, but he had certainly run with it when it had been suggested.

Hother hoped that the White Walkers, or at least their wights, would not realize the danger represented by the moat at all. TO help that it was currently covered by wooden slats all around it. With the snow having covered the slats since then, the trap looked as normal as any other bit of ground out there. For now anyway.

The wight army came on, and at the back of that army were several fantastical beasts. Snow tigers, aurochs, and other, strange looking undead beasts. But none of them mattered really, not in this kind of battle. *If we tried to face them in the open those beasts could well have spelled our doom no matter how well we're armed, but as it is they won't be worth anything unless they can break our walls somehow.* Ser Willowtree thought.

A few moments later the invading army finally reached the outskirts of arrow range. Several hundred normal arrowheads flew out, impacting the frontline here and there and causing absolutely nothing.

Those men came on, even with arrowheads sticking out of shoulders necks, or even heads. Although every wight wielded some kind of weapon, not a one of them seems to bother with a shield or even armor unless they had been killed in it which was a good thing as far as the defenders were concerned. Ser Willowtree nodded grimly, exchanged a glance with Hother, and turned shouting orders. "Switch to fire arrows!" That call passed on all along the parapet, and moments later hundreds of fire arrows were in the air streaking towards the oncoming horde.

Despite the snow that had just begun to fall, those fire arrows struck and began to cause casualties among the undead who screamed as they were lit on fire, losing whatever power was in them continued to drive their bodies forward. As others had noted since this war began, the wight's bodies were even more flammable than normal corpses, which allowed the fires started by those arrows to spread quickly among their ranks, at least for a few moments.

In response the wight's own archers began to fire, but the parapet of the wall protected most of those on it, and the tower's arrow slits and tops were untouched by this attack, too small a target or too high up for that first volley to reach. They'd have to get much closer and fire at a much higher angle to have any appreciable impact on the defenders.

Ser Willowtree frowned however, staring as the undead spread out, not only attacking from two directions now but encompassing the entire area around the Last Hearth. "The fires won't spread from one to another any longer." he said, watching as more fire arrows streaked out, impacting the front of the horde killing hundreds of them, but not slowing the horde down overmuch.

"Don't worry, we've still got some surprises."

"Yes?" Said Ser Willowtree frowning thoughtfully as he stared over the horde and the smoke from the several hundred small fires out there now. The sun was still high in the sky, but snow was falling, making visibility somewhat difficult. "The question is, do they?"

The attack continued for several hours, well into the night, the battlefield lit by the now thousands of fires set in the

bodies of the wights. Ser Willowtree had taken a break as had Hother, but now both of them were back on the wall staring out from the gatehouse again into the gloom of night. "The fires are killing my night vision." Ser Willowtree said worriedly. "We can't tell what anything about what's going on out there."

"If I gotta choose 'tween keeping those fire arrows goin', or seeing what's out there, I'll take the fire arrows." Hother replied tartly.

Moments later the first of the wights reached the foot of the outer wall. There they began to climb up, having a surprisingly easy time of it for now. Here and there defenders poured down boiling water, but it didn't do anything to the wights, they simply climbed through it, ignoring the damage it did to their skin. Pitch would obviously be more effective, but there was very little of that in the North save in the towns and in White Harbor. Last Hearth had enough pitch to fill three cauldrons, but only enough to fill one was being used right now. That had been stationed over the gate, where it could do the most good.

Soon the first of the wights climbing the walls came within range of the pikes held in the armsmen's hands. Thrusting down at them, the sharp steel heads severed limbs, cut heads in half and sent more than a hundred wights falling back to the ground. But most of those wights got up and tried to climb back up the wall, their success only hindered by the limbs they had lost.

So the battle went for a while, before a battering ram was brought forward through the undead army. Once it was in position, it began to work on the outer gate.

"Wait for it," said Ser Willowtree, laying his back against the outer parapet. He waited until he had the timing of the battering ram down, then nodded over at two men stationed by a boiling cauldron. "Now."

They tipped the cauldron over the side of the parapet and the pitch poured out and down impacting the battering ram and many of the wights around it. This slowed them down but otherwise didn't bother them. However when a burning torch was thrown down upon the pitch, the entire battering ram went up in flames quickly, along with hundreds of wights all around it.

"GAAAAYAAHHHHHH!" Their screams rose into a crescendo, actually causing the wights around them still pushing for toward the wall to pause for a moment. But then they came on even faster.

While Willowtree was dealing with that, Hother was surveying the rest of the battle. The wights' ability to climb the lower portion of the wall was not surprising, but their progress on the upper portion was, considering they all carried weapons, and didn't seem to have any concept of being able to sheathe them, those that could be anyway, as they climbed. *So they're much stronger than normal men. Not good, but not a problem either.*

He walked along the parapet and through several towers, surveying the entire battle before coming back to the gatehouse which was not under attack any more. The defeat of the battering ram had stymied that section of the assault entirely, and since it was still burning none of the wights were willing to get close to it.

From there he looked at the walls directly on either side of the gate, scratching at his beard resulting in tiny wight flakes spreading in the air around him for a moment as he watched the number of wights on the wall. Then he nodded. "Light them up."

The reason the wights had so much success climbing the lower portion of the wall was because there was a series of ropes there tied in a crisscross pattern. But it wasn't just a rope, no this rope had been soaked mere hours ago in cooking oil. Being dead the wights had no sense of touch and couldn't tell that the ropes were wet, but they were. And even as cold out as it was, cooking oil was still flammable.

*After all, Hother thought, why use a cauldron of cooking oil once, when you can soak countless lengths of rope in it then use the rope like this? Wish I thought of it myself, but can't argue with the deviousness of it.*

He had wanted to bring as many of the wights onto the wall as possible before lighting it up, and had done so now. Here and there several of the pikemen were trying hard to keep the wights from climbing over the parapet. There wasn't any break-ins just yet, but it was close, so it was the perfect time to set off the trap.

From every tower men moved out along the parapet, setting several trailing ropes alight where they hung over the parapet. The fire spread down their length to the rest of the ropes quickly.

And just as Hother hoped, setting alight nearly every wight climbing the wall. The wights were too concerned about climbing up to notice the fire until they were burning, losing hundreds, possibly thousands of men in those first few

moments.

"GARAAAYAAHHHHH!" A wail of pain went up from thousands of throats, dwarfing the cry caused by the battering ram's destruction as the wights went up like dry kindling where they clung to the walls. Around the Last Hearth the horde actually fell back, retreating from the wall as the rope and their fellows burned.

The White Walkers at the back of the horde stared then as one moved in quickly, the smiles they had worn since the battle began now in abeyance. When they reached bow range they halted, pulling back on their bows and letting loose. With the battle not going their way, the White Walkers wanted to if not turn the tide at least cost the defenders more than they had so far.

Their fire was far more accurate than the wights. Whereas the wights had to fire hundreds of arrows to hit one defender thanks to the castle's defenses, the wights each fired once, and each arrow found its mark. They were no stronger than normal men, but they were hellishly accurate.

Forty-two men died from this assault within an eye-blink, while Hother ducked behind the gatehouse's doorway for a moment watching the White Walker's arrows strike home. Those arrows seem to ignore light armor somehow, penetrating chain mail like it wasn't even there. Though it was turned aside by plate, Hother noted as two arrows struck a man in the chest, one of the archers from House Stark. But if a man was struck by those arrows wherever it hit, they fell spasming to the parapet.

He also noted that regular arrows didn't penetrate the White Walker's own armor. Whatever it was it turned arrows aside. Shaking his head, he bellowed, "Switch to black arrows!"

The archers who had proven themselves the best shots in the castle that were stationed along this portion of the wall quickly grabbed arrows with dragonglass arrowheads. They looked at one another taking glances over the parapet before ducking away, while more men around them died under the White Walker's deadly assault. The most senior of them held up a hand. "On the count of three, one, two, three!"

At that command all of them stood up, aiming at the White Walkers. Two of them died from the White Walkers' arrows, but then their own fusillade went out.

The White Walkers didn't care, calmly reloading their bows not realizing these arrows were slightly different than most. The dragonglass arrowheads slammed into them, punching straight through their strange black armor here and there, killing some of them instantly. Those were the lucky ones.

"IESSSHHHAAAA!" The others who had been shot with Dragonglass screamed, like someone was trying to rend their souls, spasming on the ground as the dragonglass, the embodiment of the fire of the earth, went to work on them like one of their own shots did on a human.

The surviving White Walkers, about ten all told retreated quickly. Then by some unseen command the wights did as well falling back from the Last Hearth, its lower walls still on fire.

Seeing this, Ser Willowtree nodded grimly then bellowed "See to the dead!" At that command man began to move along the wall, grimly going about the business of stabbing every dead man through the heart with a dragonglass dagger. They hoped that this would stop their bodies from rising, and it seemed to work.

As the sun began to go down the White Walkers and their army did not seem in any great rush to rejoin the first day of the siege of the Last Hearth ended. It would start up again soon enough. But unlike Karhold, the Last Hearth would not face the dragons or the White Walker's fell magic right off the bat. It would hold, for now.

OOOOOO

Ghost and Nymeria moved through the night like twin shadows, with a wolf pack numbering more than forty beasts around them. Normal packs were only about six to fifteen wolves at a time. But thanks to the direwolves force of personality, and of course their sheer size and presence they had brought together five different packs into one massive one for the task their companions had demanded of them.

They had been following the mercenary army for over a week now, attacking outriders whenever they could, howling the night away always from the front and west. The army had slowed badly because of this. Any horse that escaped the Army's camp was immediately set upon, and the wolves had eaten well practically every day, building up fat for the coming winter.

Now however, the bridge was in sight. The army would reach it within a few hours, and Ghost and Nymeria both knew

that their smaller cousin's parts in this battle were over with. With growls and nips, they drove the Wolf packs away slightly, letting them break up now. Moments later the two of them moved northwards, while Nymeria took the lead, sniffing the wind eagerly as she caught the scent of her bonded.

OOOOOOO

With the direwolves and the wolves harrying his army, Oberyng's progress was slowed tremendously, even more than Jon had anticipated. Worse for him, Lady Taena had underestimated how the smallfolk viewed his army thanks to its previous actions. They snuck out of their hideaways at times, staying well clear of the wolves but also attacking the outriders of the Army whenever they could. Worse, they had stripped their lands bare of anything that Oberyng could use to feed his force.

Of course the mercenaries hunted and killed hundreds of them, and Oberyng ordered reprisals against any nearby, killing hundreds more. Oberyng had even ordered the camp followers they collected executed, passing them off as locals and making a point of doing it where any watchers could see.

Yet while that helped their supply situations slightly it that didn't deter the smallfolk, they were convinced the Seven was on their side. Discontent was rife in his army now, facing a real supply issue and the losses of their horses. Therefore when Oberyng finally saw the bridge ahead of him he sighed aloud in relief. "Finally."

"So we'll finally be rid of those wolves you think?" Said a young voice behind him and Oberyng turned in the saddle to stare at 'Darkstar' Gerold Dayne.

He had acquitted himself well these past few days leading several punitive expeditions and had actually slain some of the wolves that plagued the army's steps. Those wolves bothered Oberyng, quite a lot frankly, more than they did his men because it was so out of the ordinary for wolves to act in such a manner. And there was only ever one House associated with wolves.

*But surely a Stark force can't be anywhere near here, can it? But if there is then... no, no this is probably some kind of Seven-based 'miracle' the beasts of the forest rising to protect the faithful. Too small and too weak a 'miracle' to save the lands from our torches though.*

"I suppose, at least it can be hoped." Oberyng replied aloud. "Nonetheless, take some of your men and watch our back trail, I want to be on the lookout for them until we're all across the bridge."

Darkstar nodded, turning his horse, one of a bare fifty remaining with the army, around and heading back towards the end of the column, while Oberyng scanned the column for Obara. He spotted her after a moment, coming towards him, flicking her whip out at one or two of the mercenaries who must've made a comment toward her. She looked wan and worried, which was the norm for her these days. She had not taken to live with the army well, and with each passing day there seemed to be distance growing between them.

She nodded a greeting at him, then looked behind the army as a howl was heard in the distance. "It's unnatural!" She spat, not for the first time. "Those wolves, they can't be real wolves, they must be demons wearing wolf skins!"

"We'll be leaving them behind soon enough Obara." Oberyng shrugged. "That's all we can do at this point, our attempt to hunt them down failed miserably nearly every time! You'd think that a human was leading them for how intelligent they were about it."

"That makes my idea even more likely doesn't it?" Obara spat tartly. Oberyng merely nodded and the two rode on.

A moment later the two of them were on the bridge. The bridge was a large affair made of stone. It arced over the river high enough to allow for river traffic to pass beneath it on either side of a single large massive stone column set into the center of its expanse.

Obara and his daughter rested their legs for a moment, leaning against their horses while watching as the army marched past them over the bridge in the normal desultory march of mercenary groups everywhere, before turning to look at the river. Suddenly someone behind them shouted. "There's a barge coming up the river!"

The two of them turned to stare at what was indeed a large barge coming up towards the bridge. While that might have seemed innocent to most of the mercenaries, it didn't seem so to Oberyng, or to the mercenary commanders. He glanced around him, and shouted "Archers! Archers to the riverbank!"

Seeing his daughter's questioning look Oberyng rolled his eyes. "Daughter, the news of our army's advance no doubt spread ahead of us. I refuse to believe that just because we skirted around House Merryweather's land that the river

traffic of the Mander would assume we wouldn't be coming back. Remember, paranoia is a necessity for those of us in the business."

Obara scowled for some reason, moving away to her horse leaving Oberynd to look after her quizzically, wondering why she had reacted like that.

At his order, several hundred horse archers who had been dismounted thanks to that those damnable wolves took up position all over the bridge and began to fire at the oncoming barge. The barge stopped, and from where he was Oberynd could see the crew running about while they began to let the rivers flow would take them back down river.

While that was going on other portions of the army continued to move over the bridge, but then a shout from the front ranks went up as well as screams. One of the mercenary leaders came back at a trot, pointing over his shoulder. "Dere's some kindaditch in de way down the road, its curved, and it's also blockin' de way either side 'long the riverbank."

*Could Lord Caron have gotten down here ahead of us? No not possible, even if he could he wouldn't be smart enough to try and ambush like this. He is a knight of the Reach, they're all about honor and the charge.*"Did you see any banners?"

"I didn't spot none, but there coulda been some hiding in the woods."

More cries rang out as arrows from that area began to fly, and Oberynd grit his teeth. "Form the men up and push them out of the way, I have a bad feeling about this." Above them it began to rain again, and Oberynd shook his head. "Oh, of course, doesn't that just make everything that much better!"

Oberynd's army began to shudder like a living thing, portions of it moving forward, while other portions moved to the side to allow the better armored troops of mercenaries from the Company of the Cat to move forward. While that was going on Oberynd spotted his daughter grabbing up a bow and moving to join the archers. "Keep the Dornish portion of the army back for now." He whispered in her ear. "Let them do the dying."

His daughter frowned but nodded, setting aside her bow to join Oberynd in gathering up the Dornish troops and keeping them on the bridge for now. Since most of them were archers currently shooting at the barge heading down river that made sense to their fellows, so none of the mercenaries noticed what was going on.

Suddenly another cry went up from the side of the bridge facing upriver, causing Oberynd to turn. Another barge was coming down river, and he quickly turned to look at the first. The other barge had stayed at long range of other bows, but now arrows were flying from it out into his army. This wasn't aimed fire, just simply hails of arrows, but they didn't have to be given how bunched up his army was on the bridge and on the Mander's western bank.

"Get some fire arrows!" Oberynd shouted at the top of his lungs. "Get some fire arrows on those barges!"

But his cries went unheeded for a few moments, while the archers of his army died under that hail of fire from their opponents. Horse archers might be able to fire faster, but their smaller bows didn't have the range of their opponents, and those barges were just a little bit out of most of his men's range forcing what few archers there were among the mercenaries to take up the slack, and they simply couldn't.

Oberynd growled, kneading his horse forward pushing through the throng of confused and now worried mercenaries, only of whom were still trying to charge forward towards the barricades, while others were now looking over the shoulder worriedly as arrows continued to fall among them. His army was too large for their losses to matter just yet, but it was the sudden turnaround, the fact that they were being attacked like this after so long without facing any real opponent in the open which was making these mercenaries nervous, on top of the morale problems the wolves and the supply situation had caused.

*I have to get control of this battle* he thought, staring hard at the ditches which were stymieing his forward march. The ditch was about four feet by four feet, with the bottom lined with ditches, with the opposite side featuring a small lip to it two feet or so tall

"Get in among them! Get in among them cut those stakes, first rank cuts the stakes, second-rank armed with polearms pushes forward!" He shouted aloud, and finally the mercenaries around him began to respond like the experienced warriors they were. "Get in among them, they can't have the numbers to face us!"

With that their courage was restored. With the Company of the Cat leading the way, most of the army on the western bank charged forward into the ditch with a roar.



OOOOOOO

Jon stood with two men of House Stark that Ranma had sent with him, both experienced men of the pike Regiment who Ranma hoped Jon would be able to use to train another regiment from the Reach at some point. They had been experienced armsmen before that, and Jon was happy to have them.

"You know the score men!" He said. "Hold the line and weather that first charge!" He said aloud in a calm tone looking to both sides along the half-circle. In front of them the mercenaries finally found their spines again, and began to push forward. Behind him the few archers that Jon had retained with his men fired, aiming for those men among the mercenaries who had horses assuming those were the commanders.

There was a mighty roar, no real single warcry, just a screaming animalistic bellow from the mercenaries as they charged forward. "One warcry lads!" Jon shouted, leaping up onto the small lip of the ditch holding his short swords in the air, trusting to his lizard-lion armor to turn any arrows. "Tell them who we are!"

"Honor above all! Westeros for the King and Queen!" was the cry that greeted him.

Then there is no more time for words. The mercenaries slammed into the ditches, hacking and slashing and dying on the stakes inside of them, while men armed with spears of similar flimsy construction stabbed down into the ditch killing dozens of the attackers. But those first few thousand did their job, cutting and hacking at the stakes, pushing aside a few spears here and there and allowing their fellows to charge up the slope of the ditch into the face of the defenders.

Jon howled "Winter Is Coming!" and brought his twin swords around, one sword blocking a sword thrust from another man, as his other blade found a mercenary's throat opening it up with a quick economical slash across the barred jugular before he turned, dueling with four men at once and sending three of them back into the ditch with fatal wounds in as many seconds before the fourth fell to a sword thrust by one of his men. "Hold! Hold them! Just until the other jaw of this trap closes!"

OOOOOOO

With the arrow assault from the two barges slashing into their ranks from the Mander, all of the mercenaries were eager to get to grips with the opponent they could reach with their own weapons. But there wasn't enough room, not between them and the ditch, to bring their greater numbers to bear.

Thousands of them were still on the bridge and on the other side for a time, but those men were dying quickly from the arrow storm. While the front of the mercenary army knew what was going on and could see an enemy to attack those behind them, those stuck on the bridge and on the other side were close to breaking. Oberyn's decision to keep his Dornishmen slowed this process down, yet it was also costing him his most loyal troops.

From her vantage point downriver Arya looked out from one of the closest farmhouses to the river in whose cellar she had hidden along with Nymeria this morning to avoid Oberyn's scouts. Not that this was difficult given how jittery those patrols had become thanks to Ghost, Nymeria and the surprising resistance from the smallfolk. Because of this, all around the farmstead and in other little hideaways, 600 men of Tully and Piper footmen were waiting within sprinting distance of the bridge and the battle happening there.

Behind her Nymeria lay with Ghost, panting happily at being back with her bonded after nearly a week apart. Ser Piper waited nearby, with Eddard flexing and un-flexing his hand nervously on his sword hilt.

Arya and Ser Piper exchanged a glance, and the older man, nominally in charge of this portion of the ambush, frowned for just a moment surveying the battle. Then he nodded sharply, looking over to his signalman, who turned quickly, waving a bright red pennant out of the farmhouse's doorway.

A moment later his men charged out as silently as possible from their hiding places, joining up on the run into a single force. They were noticed of course, but not before Eddard, Arya and the two direwolves were nearly upon them.

"Winter is coming!" Arya snarled, Fang slashing out and catching a man in the back before she wolf-rushed another, bowling him to the floor while Eddard killed two more with quick, economical thrusts of his sword. But it was Ghost and Nymeria who did the most damage. The entire rear of the Dornish army pulled back, falling over themselves to get away from the direwolves. Most of the few remaining horses screamed and bolted at their approach, mentally tortured for over a week by the constant howling and attacks far beyond what their riders could control.

The four of them held the eastern side of the bridge alone for a few moments, then the men of Tully and Piper were

there, cutting down the men who had fled to either side of their approach before they could encircle the foursome. With the eastern bank now devoid of enemies, Ser Piper and his men formed a shield wall to defend the eastern side of the bridge. "The Rivers, the Rivers for the true King and Queen!"

OOOOOO

Darkstar scowled, staring through the rain and the tumult of battle at the colors this new force was wearing. He wasn't very well educated on the noble Houses of the rest of Westeros, but he certainly recognized the youngish boy wearing House Dayne colors following the direwolves around. He smiled evilly, then looked around at the rest of the battle, a sight which caused his smile to slip off his face.

Arrows were still falling from the barges on either side of the river in a seemingly inexhaustible hail. Darkstar wondered how they could keep up that rate of fire. It wasn't aimed fire of course, but that didn't matter, especially since there were so few archers on the Dornish side left. The barges had moved in, allowing the bows to have even more killing power when they struck.

And the casualties they were causing among the mercenaries were horrific. Most mercenaries didn't have much in the way of armor. Chain mail, or leather Jerkins were the norm, with the exception being the larger Company of the Cat, where several hundred had plate and the very few remaining lancers from Dorne. Most of those were on the front line now, trying to hack their way over the ditches and out of this trap.

A direwolf howled, and Darkstar grimaced, rising up in the saddle as his horse tried to bolt, pulling furiously on the reins trying to get control. An arrow whizzed out of the rain, impacting his horse's neck, and Darkstar scowled angrily throwing himself clear as it collapsed to one side. Rolling along the cobblestones of the bridge he came to a stop, pulling out his sword and holding it high. "Rally to me! Rally to me, Stranger curse your hides!"

Several moments later he had a force of around fifty of his own House around him, and he pointed at one edge of the shield wall that had taken possession on the eastern edge of the bridge. "This battle is lost. Let Oberyn and the mercenaries die, we need to get out of here. Push the mercenaries forward in that direction, break their line and then we'll push on and out of this trap."

Darkstar wasn't the only commander with a thought of getting away now rather than fighting. The mercenaries had not faced a true enemy in this entire campaign really, ambushes and small skirmishes, even a few simple sieges yes, but no threat that could conceivably beat them. They had become complacent, certain of themselves and had of course accumulated a lot of loot that now they were scared to lose.

When this battle had begun the Dornish forces numbered around 8,000. He'd lost a little over 3,000 men since this campaign had begun to disease, festering wounds, and simple death in combat, which was actually the least important of the three before this battle began. He now had a bare handful of cavalry, even fewer archers, and what little courage the mercenaries had was waning quickly, and with it any chance of winning this fight.

Oberyn knew it, and as Darkstar and other commanders tried to break out back over the bridge, Oberyn rallied several hundred men near the center of the ditch's half-circle. Jon's twin swords were a visible blur there splattering blood and viscera everywhere, the rain doing no job whatsoever in cleaning them between strikes.

"Kill him," Oberyn said pointing his spearhead at Jon. "Kill him, and this army will break! He's the leader of this force, I don't know why a Stark-led force is here at all, but that is Jon Stark! Kill him, and we can turn this all around, roll up the ditch sides, then move out of range of the barges!"

The men all around him nodded grimly, and they waded through the rest of the army charging forward. Several of them died from the arrow storm continuing behind them, and more died as they slammed into the ditch, joining their fellows there. Still others got bogged down there, hacking and cutting at the spears being thrust down into the ditch at them, or racing up its side to engage the defenders elsewhere.

But twenty-four of them stayed on target, attacking the portion of the ditch right in front of Jon. The Stark men to either side of Jon did their best, engaging three men each, falling back reluctantly. But this opened a hole, one of many that had been opened on the ditch line now.

Beric led a small force forward to assist from the small reserves waiting behind the ditch, but those few men were the last of the reserves. Jon had underestimated the numbers in Oberyn's army, and been forced to push forward his reserves almost the moment Oberyn was able to convince the mercenaries to attack en-masse. The arrow storm was doing its job still, but the line above the ditch was in real danger of being overrun despite the enemy force's morale and lack of organization.

That didn't matter to Jon at the moment. A thrust from one of his blades caught one of his attackers in the shoulder, then Jon pulled back dancing to one side as a broadsword came down on where he had been standing. His blade flicked out, catching that man and across the nose and eyeballs blinding him, causing him to fall back with a scream which ended as a kick from Jon caught him right in the diaphragm rupturing it badly.

Three more men fell before Jon was forced to retreat from a spear thrust towards the head then another one to the side, then the third aiming for a shoulder, each of them faster than the last. But Jon dodged them all, before thrusting his swords up to form an X, with both of his blade, catching the spear right behind the head as it made to come down on his head in a slash. With a heave Jon forced the spear to one side, lunging forward with his blades outstretched.

While the man next to him died to one of Jon's blades, Oberyng deftly dodged to one side, then spun his spear, smacking a kick aside with the butt of his spear as he nodded almost cordially towards Jon Stark, a small yet vicious grin on his face and battle light in his eyes. "So what brings the bastard of Winterfell down into the Reach? I'd think you'd be with your brother facing Stannis somewhere."

"My brother doesn't need me around to carve Stannis into giblets." Jon replied, bringing up one bloody sword in a sardonic salute before flicking the blood off his blade and attacking viciously. "You and your murderous band however have to be stopped!"

Oberyng scoffed, thrusting forward as quickly as he could move his spear forcing Jon to keep his distance, then was forced to dodge backwards as Jon redirected one of his spear thrusts before closing quickly. Using the spear now as a quarterstaff Oberyng blocked several sword thrusts, but one got through on his shoulder, not deeply but opening up his shoulder slightly.

In reply the spear butt slammed into Jon's side, but not with enough force to matter. Instead Jon lifted his thigh up into the butt of the spear as it was pulled back, forcing Oberyng to move with the spear, twirling around quickly and bringing it up to block another sword swipe, only to see Jon's blade hack through the spear halfway down the shaft.

Undeterred Oberyng brought the butt of the spear around, trying to slam it into the side of Jon's head but he ducked. This allowed Oberyng to catch him in the face with a knee, or so he hoped. Instead Jon threw himself to one side dodging that knee.

Then when Oberyng tried to bring the club down again Jon brought one of his swords up and around to slice the half of the spear thrusting towards him in half again, forcing Oberyng to drop the useless chunk of wood left. He backed away hurriedly, falling back down the muddy side of the ditch, grateful for the chance to get away from the deadly young man.

Four other men suddenly charged up over the ditch's lip engaging Jon before he could follow Oberyng. Waiting until the four were engaged with Jon, Oberyng changed his grip on the half of the spear he was still holding, then hurled it forward from a distance of only about five feet straight up at Jon where he fought on the lip of the ditch. "Can't miss!"

Jon saw the flash of the spear through the rain, and dove aside at the last second, accepting a blow from a mace to his shoulder blade that made him grimace in pain to dodge the spear. Even so he thought it was a good exchange, Jon wasn't about to trust any weapon that the man called the Viper wielded.

His sword caught the mace wielder in the thigh, nearly cutting through his leg and dumping him to the muddy, bloody ground. Jon leaped over him, killing two more men before once again engaging Oberyng at the ditch's edge, the Dornish prince now armed with a longsword purloined from a corpse. Around them Beric and his men held on to the edge of the ditch grimly, the battle titling in the balance while arrows and rain continued to fall.

OOOOOO

On the bridge, the fighting was equally furious. Gerold 'Darkstar' and a few lieutenants had been able to rally enough of their men to try and push through the shield wall holding the eastern side of the bridge.

Arya ducked her head underneath a blow coming at her from a broadsword, Fang flicking out and taking that man in the side of the knee before coming up in an arc to catch another man's arm, cutting deep into it. Fang caught on the man's bone and when the man pulled back screaming he pulled Arya off balance for just a second.

The man next to him raised his blade to cut down Arya. He died however when Edric took him in the stomach with his own blade while Nymeria took out another man guarding their back. Ghost was elsewhere in the battle, hunting down a few men who had been able to break through the shield wall and run for it.

With the training Jon and his men had given them the men of Piper and Tully knew how to work together, forming smaller groups here and there cutting down a dozen men for every one of their own even now when their shield wall had been broken in places. They were aided in this by the fact that most of them had better armor of them their opponents, they were well rested, and well fed, whereas the mercenary army was neither thanks to the wolves and the smallfolk's attacks.

Even so some of them were breaking through. Arya growled as she ripped Fang out of that man's bones, pointing to one side as a group of 50 of the mercenaries hacked their way through ten men from House Piper before they began to turn north, trying to get out of the melee. "That group's going to get away!"

Edric looked up, pulling his own blade out of another enemy who had tried to spear Nymeria from behind after being knocked down by someone else. Staring through the tumult of battle and the rain he frowned. "Those men, I know that House, and that man in the lead! We have to get after him!" Arya nodded, and twenty other men turned with them, racing to engage the fleeing force.

However Darkstar had noticed Edric as well, and he grinned evilly falling back through his men pointing them in that direction. "Those two youngsters are coming after us with that damn demonic wolf!" He shouted. "Those of you with spears concentrate on that direwolf, the rest of you cut down those two, and we'll then be able to get away clean!"

Darkstar and his men attacked as a group, pressing forward hard, separating Edric, Arya and Nymeria from their men for a moment, pushing them almost entirely off the edge of the bridge. Several of them with spears tried to keep Nymeria at bay, with very limited success while Darkstar engaged Edric with several other men and the majority of the others tried to pin Arya down.

That was even harder than the battle the spear wielders faced with Nymeria. Arya was a shadow, jumping here there and everywhere using all of the tricks that Ranma had taught her to stay mobile, fang flicking here and there aiming for weak points in their armor when they had any, or simply carving through leather Jerkins with ease.

Darkstar and Edric met, their blades crossed. Darkstar laughed coldly. "So nice to see his cousin! I haven't seen you since you were what, nine?"

"If you're talking about the time you tried to push me off a cliff, I think I was around ten at the time." Edric replied grimly, battering Gerold's sword aside letting it pass over his head and elbowing the man sharply in the ribs.

Before he could follow up on that blow he had to dodge back from a knife thrust as Darkstar pulled a knife from his belt. The older man rubbed his stomach where his nephew's elbow had landed, wincing even through his plate armor. "You seem to have some bite to you now, heh, let's see if it's enough!"

Edric didn't replied, simply smiling faintly holding his sword in both hands for a moment as he attacked, each blow faster and stronger than the one before it. Not a Wolfsworn by any means, he had still trained with Ranma and the others for several weeks, and Jon and continued his training. He was well beyond what any normal swordsman would've been able to deal with, which surprised Darkstar. Known as one of the better swords in Dorne, he realized quickly that his cousin was faster than he was.

Blocking a slash to his side Darkstar pushed, using his greater strength to bear Edric backwards then lashing out with a kick which caught Edric in the thigh. Collapsing to one side Edric was still able to bring his blade up in a massive uppercut, blocking Darkstar's sword, smashing it out of his grip.

Rolling in the mud and bloody ground at the edge of the stone bridge Edric tried to regain his footing, but Darkstar slammed into him, pushing him down with one hand on his head and pulling back his knife for a thrust down into his cousin's vitals. "I will have Dawn cousin! If I have to kill you and everyone in your family to get it!"

Edric grabbed his downward thrusting arm right behind the hand, holding it with both of his own, pushing Darkstar back slightly until the older man was forced to bring his other hand down as well, pushing his knife down. For a moment that they were locked there, then Edric suddenly wrenched to one side at the same time letting Darkstar thrust his dagger down.

The dagger slammed into the mud where Edric had previously been, and Edric rolled back, trapping one of Darkstar's hand underneath him as his own hand came up slamming into Darkstar's chin with punishing force throwing the other man off him to one side. Grabbing up his own belt knife Edric went after him, smacking Edric's own knife thrust to one side. His other hand came up with a clack of mud, and through it point blank into Darkstar's face. Darkstar gasped, reaching up with one hand to clear his eyes from mud while waving his knife in front of them.

Edric lashed out with a kick, knocking the knife out of Gerold's hand flipping his own dagger up so he was now holding the blade by the edge and bringing in around. It crashed into his cousin's temple, knocking him sideways but it didn't knock him out. He still tried to woozily get to his feet, snarling angrily. "Can't finish it cousin?"

"I'm not a kinslayer." Edric said backing away.

Darkstar was about to laugh when a sword caught him right in the back of his neck, severing his spine and pushing through to come out of his jugular in a bloody display. "But you're no kin of mine." Said a female voice from behind him, her words almost the snarl of an animal. "So I don't have a problem with ending this."

Edric smiled faintly, wincing at his wounds as he stared at the body of his childhood tormentor, reaching down to grab up his sword and smiling at Arya taking his place next to her as they moved back towards the bridge and the main battle. "What was that about?" Arya asked.

"I'll explain later, it has quite a bit to do with your own family's history, and a Kingsguard, one of the truest knights to ever live. He was called the Sword of Morning..."

OOOOOOO

Oberyn could now feel that the battle was lost. No cohesion remained among the mercenaries, no will to fight, and from where he was standing he could see most of his own Dornishmen were down dead or unconscious. Without the ability to use maneuverability, his horse archers were overmatched by the range of the longbows, and had been wiped out to a man, and all the other Dornish troops were gone as well. Even his daughter was nowhere in sight, a face that drove a blade of pure ice into his gut. He vaguely hoped she at least would live out the day somehow.

Oberyn knew he wouldn't, he a realist and knew he was overmatched here. Jon had sliced through every man that Oberyn tried to put between them. Now, as the mercenaries tried to retreat away from the ditches Jon and his men were pressing forward, pushing the mercenaries back against the river's edge. They lost dozen of men in the ditches themselves, but the mercenaries didn't have enough cohesion left to hold it against them.

Suddenly Jon was in front of him again, his brown eyes stormy as his blade hacked forward. Oberyn's sword came up, blocking one sword blade and trying to hook both of Jon's shorter swords on his own pushing him back. Jon let him do so, letting one blade fall to the side for a moment, before ducking slightly to one side, allowing Oberyn's next thrust to continue past him.

There was a sharp stabbing pain in Oberyn's chest, and he looked down to find Jon's short sword embedded in his stomach. He looked at Jon, hacking up blood as he smiled grimly. He was going to say something, something about his family avenging him, but Jon's other blade came around, cutting his head off his shoulders in a welter of gore before he could get the words out.

Jon stood down at Oberyn Martell's body, shaking his head. Then he had to bring his swords up again as some men charged at him, banishing his thoughts of what-ifs and wishful thinking to the back of his brain once more.

It took a few more hours to finally wipe out the mercenaries but in the end it was more simple butchery than a battle. No quarter was asked, and even those who mercenaries had tried to surrender were butchered where they stood. An army of a little over 8000 slaughtered by a force barely over half their own size.

At the end of the day, Jon had lost around 900 men, with a further 320 injured ranging from small wounds to crippling injuries. House Piper had taken the brunt of those losses, contributing most of the men on the other side of the bridge, but in doing so they had won back the honor they had lost facing the Westerlands army and in their Lord's decision to remain neutral afterward.

Leaving behind 200 men to go through the battlefield, executing what mercenaries still lived and reclaiming the treasures that they had taken throughout their campaign Jon moved the rest of his force back upriver several leagues before letting them rest for a day. While Beric, Edric and Arya saw to the organization of the camp, Jon retired for the evening to write out a message to be taken over to Longtable and sent to Highgarden from there. The first part of the Reach campaign was over, now Jon needed to look toward the next stage.

OOOOOOO

Petyr smiled thinly his eyes lighting up with joy as he saw the small party moving through the woods along the Green Fork. They were taking their time, and the guards he saw were certainly on watch, but there are ways and ways, and Petyr was an old hand at sneaking around even in the Woodlands.

He looked around shuddering slightly. *But this is the last Stranger-damned night I spend in the woods! I can't shake the feeling that someone is following us!* That feeling had been at the back of his mind at first, growing stronger over time. Nothing, not taking to the Blue Fork, or staying in Fairmarket seemed to shake it for long.

*It's just a feeling* he thought for the thousandth time. *There's really nothing out there. You've spent so long playing at the great game, you're too used to people watching you so now you're jumping at shadows! Don't mess this up now! You might not get everything out of this you wanted, but you will get something to enjoy at least.*

Petyr continued to watch as the small band moved down the river, though he had to move quickly several times to stay out of sight. The Northern man with the spear seemed to have a knack for moving through the woods, and had nearly spied Petyr several times. Eventually Petyr decided to give it up for the day, and slowly retreated through the woods.

He returned to their camp in a small hidden alcove at the base of a giant tree. The tree had fallen to one side its roots coming out of the ground and create this small, yet it was at the top of a small rise in the ground, which coupled with the number of large roots above them allowed this small nook to remain somewhat dry in the rains which were now constantly drenching the Riverlands. Once inside, he nodded at his men grimly. "It's her, we'll strike tonight."

The man all nodded, shifting nervously. The band never spoke of it, but they were all competent burglars, sneak thieves, and other things. All of them had learned over the years to feel when they were being stalked. And they were getting that feeling now, had been for weeks.

"Let's just do this and get it over with." Osney growled, causing his brothers to nod in agreement. "The sooner we're out of the Riverlands the better."

That night Petyr snuck forward with Lothor and Osmund moving as quietly as they could leaving behind the two younger brothers. Once they found the place the northerners had camped for night, Petyr paused scowling angrily as he noticed that one of the guards was the young Northerner, moving around the camp purposefully staring out into the gloom.

Backing away slightly he gestured his two men closer as they moved further back. "We'll not get in there with him on guard like that. One of you skirt around the camp, cause some kind of disturbance north of the camp for him to concentrate on, maybe pull him up out of the camp entirely."

The two men scowled angrily, exchanging glances. They didn't like that idea realizing that such a diversion could well cost them their lives if the northerner caught up with them. News of what the Wolfsworn could do had spread far and wide in the Riverlands, including descriptions of them, and the one with the spear was memorable at least.

Eventually Lothor grunted. "I'll do it. I can swim if need be, and the river's right there." *And I also have most of the gold you've paid me these past few weeks on me now if I have to make a break for it.*

He moved off through the dark of the wood. An interminable amount of time later there was a faint but slowly growing louder sound to the north of the camp. Eddie frowned, staring in that direction then over at the other guard. He pointed at himself then over towards the noise, and the younger man nodded, moving over to wake another Stark man up to join him on watch while Edd loped off through the woods.

Petyr and Osmund looked at one another, waiting for a few breaths then Petyr nodded and they raced in, moving as silently as they could through the wet and muddy woodland. Aiding this approach both of the guards had turned their attention to the north despite knowing better.

One man died with a gurgle as a dagger went into his unprotected kidney, a hand around his mouth blocking out all sound. The other gasped as a garrote went around his neck pulled taught by Petyr. Several seconds went passed until the man in Stark colors breathed his last, and Petyr gently lowered him to the ground. Petyr nodded grimly, signaling with his hands that Osmund should let out a call if anything happened, before moving forward.

With Osmund standing watch Petyr moved in to the camp, slinking around the two tents that belonged to Sansa's guards, before coming to her own. With a whisper of cloth he moved inside, pulling out a pad of cloth covered in knockout water, a creation of the alchemists that could knock anyone out for ours once the fumes of it were breathed in.

He held it just over Sansa's mouth and nose, taking a moment to look at her shaking his head. *She looks so much like dearest Cat, so beautiful. Oh yes, this was an excellent idea. You and I my dear, I will make you so happy and you in turn will make me happy, depend upon it!*

With that thought he brought the cloth over her mouth and nose, causing Sansa to wake up with a start. Her hands moved, and suddenly one of them held a small dagger. Luckily Petyr could hold the cloth against her mouth and nose with one hand. Fast as a viper his other hand grabbed her arm, banging it against the ground by her bedroll until she let go of her dagger. A moment later she fell back, unconscious and Petyr breathed a sigh of relief.

That sigh of relief ended abruptly when he heard an owl's hoots. That was the sound of Osmund warning him that the northerner was on his way back. He scowled angrily, grabbing the girl up in his arms and putting her on her back for a moment before running out of the tent.

Moments later Edd was back, frowning as he moved through the camp for a moment then back out the other side, heading towards where the guards should be. He had snuck up on Lothor, but the man had been trying to get into the river, and he had died in a short, very brief fight without giving anything away. But Edd was suspicious of a single man following them like that, and had hurried back.

Petyr and Osmund had just finished binding Sansa's arms and legs when Edd found the two dead guards. "To arms! To arms!"

Edd raced back from where the two Stark men had been killed, moving through the camp and pushing two men aside as they tried to grab him asking what was going on. He pushed open Sansa's tent flap, staring inside aghast. "Kidnappers!" he shouted, turning away and looking around through the woods. "Someone just kidnapped Sansa, spread out, find me some tracks!"

Ben and the others nodded, Ben's face going pale in fear for Sansa. They all grabbed up cobs of wood from the fire, racing out into the woodlands. Their desperate searches through the wet woodlands didn't find anything for some time. But then one of the crannogmen that had joined them at Crannogtown got lucky and found the print of a boot.

Kneeling over it he pointed away through the woods, where by the torchlight tracks could be seen "They must've heard you coming back here, they bolted off, didn't care enough to hide their tracks, traded stealth for speed."

Before he even finished speaking Edd was off racing through the woods with Ben hard on his heels. Soon however the Wolfsworn left him behind, racing through the woodlands recklessly.

Finding the trail had cost the pursuers time, and Petyr and Osmund had reached their small hideaway before they had. "Osney, Osfrey, we've been blown! We must away!"

There was no reply from the little muddy hollow underneath the roots of the tree.

"Osney, Osfrey!" Said Osmund "come on Stranger-damn it, this is no time to fuck about, I don't care if you fools fell asleep, let's go!"

Still no reply. Petyr looked at him and motioned with his head and Osmund moved forward cautiously, sword out. He came backwards quickly shaking his head wildly. "Dead! They're both dead! Looks like some kind of..."

At that point Fenris came out of the woodlands behind him, barring Osmund to earth before he could cry out. His head darted down, ripping the man's throat out with almost negligent ease before the giant direwolf turned, glaring through the night at Petyr who backed away hurriedly. Throwing Sansa down in front of him he pulled out a dagger holding it to her throat. "None of that! You, you beasts are smarter than you're supposed to be, so I know you know I'll kill her if you come at me!"

The jolt of hitting the ground woke Sansa up, and she groaned, shaking her head. "None of that my dear," said a voice that she had heard not heard for months behind her. At the same time Sansa felt a prick against her neck.

"L-Littlefinger?" Sansa gasped, trying to see him, but from her current position she couldn't turn her head around enough to do so.

"I'm delighted you remember me my gorgeous one," he said, kissing her hair behind her head, causing Sansa to shiver in revulsion. "I regret the method of our meeting, but life has not been good to me of late."

"A-and you think this will make it better? You think..." she tried to laugh only to stop as the point of the dagger pressed into her throat more. "You, hehe, you think there is anywhere you can go, anyplace you could hide that my brothers would not find you? You're not that much of a fool!"

"You're naïve my dear, naïve but beautiful, so gorgeous, just like your mother was at your age. Did Cat ever tell you of our years in Riverrun together? We were in love once Cat and I, so much in love. But she had her duty!" He spat

the word. "And her father was a fool who did not see my mind and abilities, only the size of the fortune my family could call on. He spurned my suit of her, and Cat was first forced into a betrothal with that lout Bandon, who died like a fool! And then, when I thought the way might be clear for her and I to finally love one another openly, your father accepts the transfer of the betrothal to himself."

"Liar!" Sansa growled. "My mother never loved you! She saw you as a younger brother, and that faded quickly! She came to loathe you..." Sansa stopped speaking as the knife pressed in deeper.

"I know that now, the moment Cat was forced to lay with that wolf of a father of yours, I should have realized she was out of my reach. Yet still I hoped, still I planned! Only for Eddard to survive! For your family to not only survive but thrive despite all that was thrown at them, by me or others! But by that point sweet Sansa I had moved on anyway."

His hand moved over her head down her cheek and neck. Again Sansa shivered trying to move away as Fenris growled, stepping in closer.

"Stop right there!" Petyr said looking up at the direwolf. "You're going to be a good little animal and you're going to let me go! Because if you don't, I'm going to cut her throat. I know you can understand me, and I would rather die with her than allow anyone else to despoil Sansa as Eddard did to Cat!"

Fenris growled, then looked at Sansa whining a little before moving backwards slightly, still more than close enough to jump on Petyr if he tried to get away of course.

Petyr however turned his attention away from Fenris, going back to stroking Sansa's hair in a way that disturbed her greatly. "You, you combine all the attractive features of your mother, with none of the experience that so sullied her, that turned her away from me!" He laughed, leaning down again to kiss her hair once more. "I know that this isn't a good way to start wooing you my love, this isn't how I wanted this to go at all, but I believe that you will come to love me as I love you in time."

"Never!" Sansa's said a full body shiver going through her at the very idea of this man touching her. "Never!" She yelled aloud even when he pulled her hair sharply.

Fenris growled again moving in quickly but Petyr glared at the direwolf pressing the dagger hard into Sansa's neck. "Back you unnatural beast-ARGH!"

Edd's spear came out of the dark of the woodlands behind Petyr, taking him in the shoulder of the arm holding the knife to Sansa's throat, cutting the arm off almost entirely. He continued to scream as Sansa scrambled away trying to break the grip his other hand had on her hair then Fenris was on him.

"Seven no it cannoGHH!" Petyr screamed as the direwolf bore him to earth, its fangs ripping at the arm holding Sansa, tearing it off at the shoulder and allowing Sansa to roll away while the giant beast finished tearing Petyr to shreds. The last thing Petyr saw as his head lulled to one side was Sansa glaring at him with hate in her eyes, visible in the moonlight above.

Edd raced in, nodding at Fenris. "Fenris couldn't you have, I don't know, finished him off before he took Sansa away from us?" As a Wolfsworn Edd understood how smart Fenris was, so addressed him as he would a man.

The giant direwolf huffed at him, fangs bared on one side of his blood-stained muzzle in a gesture as close to a scowl as he could get. Tracking Petyr had been very difficult, and he had almost lost him several times thanks to Petyr staying in towns and exiting with other people or because of heavy rainfall.

Fenris turned to Sansa now, whining slightly and wiping his bloody muzzle on the grass beneath him for a moment before moving over to nuzzle her shoulder. The redheaded pack-mate didn't like messy or bloody things Fenris remembered. But that didn't seem to matter to her now as she nuzzled happily into his shoulder while Edd and Ben untied her, murmuring "Good wolf, good wolf."

OOOOOO

Timot Hammerhand's back scouts saw Ranma coming from where they had been just about to pull off the Kingsroad and marched towards the Crannogtown. The small army halted quickly while Hammerhand made his way back through the column to meet Ranma. "My Lord? What happened? Where's the rest of the Army?"

"Taking to sea at Maidenpool, but they'll take at least a month and a half to get to White Harbor, we're needed up in the North now! Word reached Riverrun and then was passed down to us that the White Walkers had found a way around the Wall." Ranma replied grimly, gulping down some of his water at the same time.



Hammerhand looked around at the men within earshot, all of whom had stiffened noticeably. "I've been marching the men as close to the pace you normally set us to as we could go my Lord, I don't know if we can speed up any further. But we're nearly to Crannogtown, that should save us at least two, three weeks marching, depending on where in the North you want us to go."

"No." Ranma said with a shake of his head. "I want you to keep marching down the Kingsroad through the Neck. Send a messenger to Crannogtown, I'll give him a message to give to Lord Reed, he should be at Crannogtown waiting for you, and I don't want to stop. He should still take command, but I want you to keep marching up the Kingsroad to Winterfell that way."

"Why don't you want us to take the boats to White Harbor my lord? Surely going by the White Knife would let us cut off at least a week's worth of travel time?" Timot asked.

"Not if the river's frozen, it won't. And I don't want you to use the ships at Crannogtown because there's another army, one from the Vale, coming up behind you about two week's march back. I want those boats still here waiting for them when they get here."

In fact the White Knife had indeed frozen in places by this point, slowing river travel tremendously including the supplies of dragonglass weapons. But it hadn't stopped them just yet, not even those on the Broken Branch. Yet in that case, the men who had been sent with those shipments would find the river had frozen behind them, slowing their return journey to a crawl and forcing the commander to decide to join the defense of Hornwood rather than chance it. When news of Karhold's fall reached them, that choice proved even more correct.

"Very well my Lord we'll keep on going, though if we set the pace we need to stave off disease in the Neck we'll need to rest at Moat Cailin."

"I'll leave that to you and Reed, but keep on going as quickly as you can." Ranma ordered.

"Won't you be waiting for us there?" Timot asked.

Ranma shook his head, already moving off. "No, I'll meet you in Winterfell. I need to get there as fast as possible, and that means going on alone. If Winterfell falls, the North falls with it!"

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### End chapter

To those who wonder, yes, Obara is dead. No way I could let her live, that would be stretching the laws of chance in a combat setting way too much. But with Obelyn gone, the last large enemy force in the south is crushed, leaving Jon, Margaery and Willas to turn their attention to smaller enemies, domestic affairs, and reinforcing the North. Not much happened with Ranma and co. this chapter, travel times being what they are, but that won't be the case in the next chapter. The White Walkers are riding high right now, but they better watch out, the big bad wolf is coming home.

Hope you all enjoyed, and as always, please leave a review.

## \*Chapter 20\*: Chapter 20

I do not own ASolaF or Ranma. You know how you can tell? Because I'm actually going to finish the story.

Would like to thank ultimaflare0 for his work as a beta on this, and Anthony444 for his irreplaceable aid in fact checking and plot points.

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### Chapter 20 Winter's Grip, a Fulcrum's Effect

Lady Maegh Mormont had not been idle since returning to her island after the War Council in Winterfell. First, she had gathered the heads of the families that resided on their island and informed them of events. Unlike other major Houses, House Mormont did not have minor houses under them, instead they had large powerful families, all of them intermarried to one another and to House Mormont, most of whom lived almost but not quite like smallfolk would elsewhere. Bear Island's population wasn't large, but they were a tight knit community, and a very martial one as well.

While a palisade was quickly raised around the scrub and broken stone scattered around House Mormont's longhouse and various other structures built elsewhere, foodstuffs began to be prepared and set aside, until the longhouse had enough food within its walls to feed the entire population of the island for at least half a year. Then that palisade was reinforced with what stone they could move into position behind it, and arrows laid aside, fire arrows and regular arrows, as many of both kinds as could be made. So many that they had to be stored in several of the guest rooms in the longhouse rather than in the armory.

When the news of Skagos falling and its implications was sent to her from Winterfell along with the news of reinforcements being sent to her, Lady Mormont once again reacted forcefully and energetically. She ordered the island's small graveyard dug up and the bodies within burned, no matter how old or decayed they were. Bear Island was small enough that it had only had that single graveyard, but it was still dirty, disgusting work, and the people on it had to be rotated off on practically a daily basis to make certain that no sickness or disease could spread from the bodies.

Maegh also sent the old, lame and what few pregnant women were on the island back to Deepwood Motte. Anyone above the age of twelve that was strong enough to pull a bow however remained behind, man or woman. House Mormont had long prided itself in training its womenfolk in war, and that bore fruit now, allowing Bear Island to raise a force consisting of a little over 4000 men and women combined, where any other Great House would only have been able to field half of that if they were lucky from the same area.

The first reinforcements from House Glover arrived barely a week after the message from Winterfell. Maegh greeted Robett Glover, the younger brother of Lord Glover, shaking the taller yet far less built man's hand firmly, so firmly the younger man winced. She noticed and was pleased, though did not show it on her face. "What've you brought me?"

"Around 600 men, the most my House can raise beyond those defending Deepwood Motte. My brother made the decision to not send his entire force to aid you, because he figured that the defense of the town was more important. After all, we don't know if the White Walkers will be able to send forces past Bear Island in the same manner they reached Skagos."

"Good." said Lady Mormont nodding brusquely. "We wouldn't've been able to house more men anyway. In fact, I sent word of that back to Winterfell, House Ryswell and House Tallhart's forces will be more use elsewhere."

That had been several days ago, and since then the temperature had dropped precipitously night after night, until it was so cold that the ocean around the island had begun to freeze. Even so Maegh insisted on keeping patrols going along the shoreline. House Mormont had built several small but extremely well-made guard posts at the best places for ships to come ashore, each of which had enough wood to allow them to set up a signal fire which could be seen from further into the island, and the patrols were based out of these tiny forts.

It was the men from one of these which sounded the first alarm. Before the fire burned low Lady Mormont and more than four-fifths of her forces had gathered on that shoreline. Maegh of course led the force, leaving her second eldest daughter Alysanne in charge of the defenses of their longhouse, intending to ask the scouts what they had seen personally. But when they arrived, that proved unnecessary.

Out in the ocean there was an island where there should not have been one. But it was not an island of stone, rock and sand. This island was ice, a **massive** mountain of ice cut away from the Frozen Shore or further north and sent

out into the ocean. It rose out of the water at least twenty stories, it was difficult to tell from this distance, out of the ocean around it, and was even wider across. And it was slowly heading towards Bear Island.

*I think we just solved the mystery of how the White Walker's got forces to Skagos, Maege thought grimly. This is a new trick, and one with a lot of longer-term consequences behind it. For now though, it gives me and mine something to hit at least.* She'd nodded over to the patrolmen. "Good eyes, how long do you think we have until it reaches the shore?"

"They should be here by evening tide lady," said one of them.

She nodded brusquely then shouted orders. "You lot, dig some ditches and get some stakes ready. You forty, head back to the longhouse and grab as many torches and fire arrows as you can. I mean to see if we can see this attack off here and now."

That evening the iceberg did indeed smash into Bear Island's shore, causing a shivering shake to go through the feet of those waiting by the shore nervously. Now that it was so close, they could tell that the mountain of ice sloped gradually at first, and was quite wide too, about a bow's range along the edges. From there it had several large crevasses on the side of the main mountain of ice, which rose sharply from that point and then spread to either side out well beyond what they could discern in torchlight.

For a moment after that, the night was silent save for the crackling of the torches and the curses of a few men praying to the Old Gods for strength. Not for protection, not to save them, but to give them strength to do those tasks themselves. Such was the Northern way.

Then suddenly there was a keening horn blow from high above in the dark of the upper areas of the iceberg and hundreds of arrows sped out from the night above. At the same time a horde appeared around the edges of the iceberg from some hidden cavern the entrance of which could not be seen by the defenders current position.

The attackers looked like wildlings, Lady Mormont had seen more than a few in her time, while others looked to be clad in the remains of Night's Watch colors, though beyond that Maege could not tell anything of their origin in the light of the torches. But they weren't the source of the arrows which were hitting her line. That came from higher up the iceberg, from some hidden archers they couldn't see in the dark.

She'd already lost six or seven men to those, but the wights charging them were a greater threat. "Fire arrows on that horde!" She shouted, pointing with her sword at the oncoming wights. "Regular archers, see if you can do anything about those blasted arrows!"

Her orders were instantly obeyed, half the force of archers firing fire arrows at the oncoming horde. Given the fact their level of training varied wildly, their fire was noticeably sporadic. Yet at the same time at this range they could hardly miss. Indeed for a few moments as the battle began if an archer missed his or her target, they still hit some other wight.

At the same time the armsmen and levy forces of the island raced forward to take a position along the ditches. Many began to bang their shields, shouting battle cries more to get themselves psyched up for the battle than in any real hope that they would have any effect on the enemy's morale.

The other half of the archers, mostly House Glover men, fired up into the iceberg, raking its visible face from one edge to the other. They still couldn't see, the dark of the night was too oppressive for that, and their own night-sight was shot to hell because of the torches and fire arrows that were even now streaking into the attacking horde of wights.

This was telling, because they could not silence the arrows coming at them. Men continued to fall screaming, their bodies freezing and giving out even from arrow wounds that they could've should have survived otherwise. Dealing with these casualties tied up more and more men as the battle went on.

The horde of wights crashing into the ditches along the shoreline however had a much harder time of it. Men and women armed with long makeshift spears thrust out at them, while others, mostly those younger, threw burning faggots of wood over their heads to land among the horde. Fire arrows slammed into former wildling and Night's Watchman alike, causing them to go up like torches in the dark, screaming. It was the first noise they had made in the battle.

The wights spread in an effort to find a hole in the ditches, but that did not allow them to concentrate enough forces to burst through the defensive lines. Those ditches spread far enough to either side of where Lady Mormont was that

they couldn't get around them without going into the water, which they seemed loath to do even here on the shoreline, where the water was slowly freezing into ice.

That was an interesting little fact that she made a note of, but then Maege roared, "Here We Stand!" charging forward and joining her men along the line as a renewed surge of wights struck the center of her defenses. After a few moments of getting her blade wet cutting dead wights into pieces, she retreated from the line, staring at the overall battle while more men moved forward, hurling the bits and pieces into the countless fires that had started up scattered around the battlefield.

The sniping from the iceberg was still going on, wreaking a toll on her men, but the force of wights was down to a bare handful, and as she watched the last of them fell struck by several fire arrows at once. There was a cheer of 'Here we Stand!', then the archers with fire arrows retargeted firing their arrows up at the ice. For a moment Lady Mormont thought they were trying to simply melt the massive edifice of ice, but then she shook that fancy off. *No one was that stupid, they're just doing their part.*

Yet the attacks from above continued unabated, and she scowled angrily. They didn't have any Valyrian blades here since Longclaw was with Jeor Mormont in Castle Black. Nor did they have any stock of dragonglass weapons. But right now, it looked as if that they were going to have to go in and dig out these White Walker's anyway.

Just as she thought that however more arrows began to fall, so many that it drove her forces out of the ditch and she cursed, knowing what that might mean. "Fall back! Fall back to the wood line!"

All around her men obeyed with alacrity, but hundreds of men went down from that sudden deluge of arrows. As they did Lady Mormont stared in astonishment at what only had to be undead giants suddenly lumbering out of a crevice in the iceberg, dozens of them. With them came what only could be a few white Walkers themselves. There were only a few of them, but their alien appearance was obvious even from here.

*So that's the face of the enemy,* Maege thought, before reaching down to grab up a fallen bow and a sputtering fire arrow. She pulled back on the strain, and let loose trying to hit one of the White Walkers.

One of the giants however lumbered in her arrows way just as she loosed, and it roared aloud in pain and fury, patting at the arrow in its chest. Unlike a wight however it didn't immediately combust. It was not made wholly from flesh magically revived from death, ice and stone were also part of its makeup. With this defense it was able to pat the fire out before surging on, roaring angrily.

Maege absently noted that too was a difference between these undead creations and simple wights. The wights made no sound as they charged only when they died. Indeed, their battle silence was one of the most unnerving things about them. But these things seemed to still have some life in them, or perhaps had been gifted with it rather than were simply extensions of their White Walker's will.

She fell back to the cover of the trees as the arrows from above continued to pepper the men around her, taking a heavy toll on the defenders as they continued to retreat. But Maege was still able to watch as the giants reached the ditches, smashing all the stakes aside before scrambling up easily over the ditches.

Scowling angrily Maege rallied the men nearest her with a single bellowed command, then pointed her sword back the way they had come. "One volley of fire arrows at our dead, then fall back!" Maege raised her voice as the men around her obeyed her order with alacrity, making certain all the men nearby could hear her. "Fall back, fall back to the longhouse!"

Knowing that controlling her people in this mad nighttime retreat through the woods and scrub of the island would be impossible Lady Mormont simply took to her own heels, running off as quickly as she can despite the armor she wore. She paused occasionally to shout encouragement and orders when she saw clumps of men around her gathering several hundred as the retreat went on through the night. Yet the dense scrub and forest of the island made any kind of organization for this maneuver impossible.

Even so her men were not fools, and that initial shout had been heard and passed on by most everyone on the battlefield. Rather than fight a losing the battle for the rest of the island against enemies they could barely see in the dark, Lady Mormont pulled back all of the defenders with her to the longhouse. She hoped that the cleared ground around it and the scattered cover would allow her archers to get the better of any White Walkers that tried to attack.

Maege was not the first to meet reach her family's seat, nor was she the last. But by the time the last straggler came in gasping and breathing loudly his breath visible over chapped, cracked and frostbitten lips, Lady Mormont had an estimate of the numbers.

She shook her head in dismay. *Over 2,400 men lost already!* Robett was missing, along with more than half of his men, and the losses among her people were atrocious, especially among the less experienced men and women of the levy forces. Though thankfully not the younger set who had, thanks to not wearing much armor, been able to retreat faster than the rest. That and the fact the attackers didn't seem to care about what targets they aimed at saved many of them.

*But we'll probably see many of those dead soon enough,* she thought grimly, ascending to the palisade around the longhouse as behind her along the roof of the longhouse and all around her archers refilled their quivers and set up braziers. Fifteen men on the longhouse roof also began to work on loading up a small catapult which had been built on top of it. Other men tossed rope ladders over the side of the longhouse and she nodded grimly. *Good Alysanne, you listened!* That meant the drop fall had been activated as she had ordered, which might help the longhouse protect itself if the palisade was lost.

The drop fall the longhouse used was somewhat similar in type, though Maege did not know it, to the one that House Stonegate used. But instead of simply dropping large rocks down to block the interior of a gateway, House Mormont's drop fall dropped a single gigantic piece of stone into a set recess into in the ground along grooves in the longhouse's thick outer wall. That piece of stone weighed so much that even Ranma, Jon and Smalljon combined would have had trouble lifting it. That, plus the groove and the recess it was set into meant no one could bring enough force to move it without shattering the stone walls of the longhouse and the stone floor as well.

While that thought was a comforting one it soon left Maege's mind as, cries from the watchers around her abounded. "Here they come!"

As Maege had feared first out of the trees were the wights, the men and women who'd fallen by the shoreline turned and sent against their still living brethren. More than one man choked back a sob as they saw a loved one, and a woman near Maege broke down entirely, shaking her head and sobbing. "No Bartran, no!"

"None of that!" Maege barked. Those aren't your loved ones out there any longer! They're simply wights now, their bodies turned to evil! Will you let those bastards use them so, dishonor their memory so?!"

The woman choked back a sob, wiping a gloved hand over her eyes, but her tears had frozen where they fell down her cheeks. Thankfully she was able to wipe her eyes away and she stood up, thrusting a fire arrow into a nearby brazier and putting it to her bow. "Come on you cold fuckers, Here we Stand!"

"Here We Stand!" the roar went out all along the palisade, and the defenders fired. They fired off so many fire arrows that it lit the ground around the palisade.

The sternness of that response seems to take the attackers aback, and most of the new wights died in the semi-open ground around the palisade as their masters hesitated. When the giants came out into the scrubland that surrounded the longhouse they did so without any further cover from their people. Nor, thanks to the broken nature of the cover, could they bunch up en-masse or find adequate cover for their large bodies. Two of them died under half dozens of fire arrows impacting them almost all at once.

At that point at some unseen signal the others retreated back into the forest. Soon after that the ice arrows or whenever they were started to fall among the defenders, shot by White Walkers who had made their way forward, using the scattered cover to somehow made their way forward unseen. But the palisade gave enough protection from this assault. Moreover it gave the defenders the same height advantage the White Walkers had possessed at the shore.

Their returned fire actually started to force the attackers back. The fire arrows couldn't kill the White Walkers, and they lacked the dragonglass needed to penetrate the White Walker's armor. But enough fire arrows could apparently singe or injure the White Walkers, and they seemed much more conscious of their own lives than they were of their undead thralls.

Lady Mormont stayed on the wall throughout the night, hoping that the White Walker's had already lost too much of the strength they'd brought to the island to attack in force. As the sun rose, bringing with it the light and an end to the attack it seemed that was indeed the case. They still had those giants, so Maege wasn't about to become complacent, and she had no idea of their numbers, but it looked as if they'd be able to defend the longhouse. *At least for now.*

During the night Maege had taken the time to get an accurate number of the defenders left, and came away grimly satisfied. She still had a little over 2200 men and women, and she quickly organized them into four different sections. One section would be on guard, two sections sleep, and the fourth doing repair work, eating and simply having

downtime. That group would rotate with the one on guard, then they would switch off with the other two.

Soon after that Maegh left the wooden palisade, moving back to climb up one of the rope ladders with more effort than she would ever admit to, before nodding at her second eldest daughter. The two women shared a wordless hug there in the corridor leading up to the longhouses roof, before Alyssane straightened and moved around her mother, heading out to take over the defense during the day watch.

Maegh looked after her for a moment, thinking of her, her two grandchildren, and her three other daughters. The only one of her family not present here was Dacey, who was serving in the Wolfsworn. She wondered for a moment if any of them would see the spring, then shook off her bleak thoughts, going in search of her House's maester.

Maester Feros was an old man of her father's generation, who had trained up two of the local boys and a local girl (despite all convention being against it) to help him watch the ravens now that he no longer could get around as well as he could, knowing that finding a new maester to serve House Mormont would be an impossible task. The three of them nodded at her as she came into his suite, though he simply turned his head to look at her through rheumy eyes. "I understand that the battle did not go well?"

"It went about as well as we could expect I think." Lady Mormont growled angrily. "I want a message sent to Winterfell and Deepwood. We can hold out here for now, but they're not to bother sending more aid to us unless they bring dragonglass!"

OOOOOO

Their scouts of course spotted it first, their target, their goal, the place where their most hated enemies had lived for generations. While it might not be the most important in terms of strategic importance, or even defending the North from reinforcement from the rest of Westeros, it was important to the White Walkers because of what it represented. Because to them, Winterfell and House Stark represented their defeat.

Memories were long among their people, and the memory of their loss thousands of years ago, when they were turned back, pushed out of lands that were rightfully theirs, and then walled off like animals, burned in every one of them like the accursed fire burned in the earth itself. They didn't care to know much about their enemies, but the name House Stark, that they knew.

That was why the main strength of the force the White Walkers had been able to transport to Skagos was sent marching on a straight line to Winterfell from the moment they reached the shores of the Bay of Seals. No new Builder would rise, no new Winter King would beat them back, not this time, whatever the Old Gods hoped. With the humans so busy cutting down one another in the South, Winterfell would fall, and the **true** kings of winter would put their hands on the soul of the North and crush it utterly.

With the dragons flying overhead, and thousands of wights new torn from the earth along their route the army marched on to Winterfell.

OOOOOO

Ranma had barely paused long enough to take a quick meal with Timot before racing on. It took him about a day to cross the Neck from there, and he arrived in the early morning dawn at Moat Cailin. He smiled gratefully when he saw the three manned towers of the ruins of the massive castle, knowing that he was about a little over two-thirds of the way home. His smile widened however when he saw the rampant lizard-lion on a field of green with an eye of red that signified Lord Reed was in attendance.

Shouts went up from the watchers on the towers as he came into sight, and Ranma chuckled as he saw more than one man visibly start at the sight of him, visible even from this distance. *I wonder what the smallfolk will come up with to call my journey. The Wolfs Run, hmm sounds a little cowardly. The Kings Run, even worse. Either cowardly or a competition at a tournament. That's actually a tough one...*

A moment later Ranma put those thoughts to one side as Lord Reed appeared, holding up his hand in token of greeting as he moved away from the doorway of one of the towers. Ranma slowed down, nodding his head at the older man. "Lord Reed."

"We were told you might be coming." The older man said without preamble, his low, rasping voice causing Ranma to smile fondly. "I've already gathered what I can of the Neck's forces. We're not the most numerous Houses your majesty, but all told I can field around 500 away from the Neck and the Moat. In total 900, I'll leave more than a hundred men to keep order in the Neck, and the rest will bolster the defense here at the Moat. But every man I've got

are trained hunters, archers and all decent with their trident too."

"I thank you for that Lord Reed." Ranma said thankfully. "Though, how did you hear that I'd be coming? I can understand your mustering your forces, but not that part." *Unless rumor really can fly faster than raven wings, that would be a little freaky frankly.*

"My son." Lord Reed said nodding his head over to the tower he'd exited, where Jojen was making his own way forward. He stared blankly at Ranma, a thin almost unpleasant smile on his face. Jojen had hated and loved his ability to predict the future his entire life. He hated what it could do to his body at times when the visions came upon him suddenly. But he loved being able to tell the future like that, to see people and know their fates. It gave him a sort of power, one at odds with his small, somewhat weak body.

Lord Reed went on. "My son saw your arrival, he said that if you decided to 'run the earth' as he put it, then the North might have a chance. If you put all of your trust in wind and wave, then the heart of the North would fall before you got here."

"The heart of the North is a lot stronger than you give it credit for Jojen." Ranma said smiling thinly. "I don't doubt that the North would have been able to hold out even without me there for weeks if not months."

"The future is clouded." Jojen said, staring hard at Ranma. "The fulcrum must reach the place where it can tip the balance. If it cannot, the avalanche will start, and it will not stop. With every victory the avalanche will gain strength, until they can sweep all before it."

Ranma nodded biting his lip to keep from saying something **really** sarcastic. *Wow, that's just really informative, not! Fucking prophecies.* "I see." he said instead. "Thank you for that Jojen, I suppose."

With that he and a shake of his head Ranma turned back to Lord Reed, who was smiling somewhat blandly, realizing that Ranma didn't put much faith in his son's visions. Not that Reed blamed him at this point. Where before his son's visions would've been accurate if somewhat cryptic, these days even Jojen had trouble discerning what they were about, and their accuracy had also been failing badly.

"Tell me, do you have ravens here? Specifically one for Barrowton?"

"I do."

"Good, I'll need one of them, and parchment and ink. I want to send a message to Lady Dustin, an order to send all the horses and carts she can gather down to the Moat."

"That's a nice thought, but we won't need that much transportation, we have our own." The older man replied, gesturing to one side where several carts were being constructed, the finishing touches put on them, and small doughty horses being led to them. There weren't many of those horses, the men of the Neck had no use for such, but House Ryswell had sent them down in preparation for aiding the Lord Reed people into the battle.

"They're not for you my friend, they'll be for the force coming up the Kingsroad. I have around 6000 or so men marching into the Neck even as I speak. They'll be here soon enough, and they'll need to be rushed on their way afterwards. In fact, I'd like you and your men to wait here for them, you'll take command once they reach here. Timot Hammerhand's a good man on the march, but he's not a Lord, and he doesn't have enough experience leading people into battle for me to want him in control once they get past the Neck. I have to believe that the White Walkers might be able to send small scouting portions down into the Barrowlands at least."

Reed nodded, smiling at that news. "How long until the rest of the army arrives?"

"There's another army beyond them on the march from the Vale lands, about 12,000 strong. They'll take boat at Crannogtown then ship over to White Harbor, though I have no idea how long it will take them to get there. I didn't stay with them long enough to get a feel for their marching speed. The rest of the army will have taken to sea in Maidenpool when we heard the news from Riverrun that my father passed on, but Davos Seaworth, the master of ships at this point, if my wife hasn't changed the title, says it'll be at least a month and a half at best for them to get from there up to White Harbor."

Jojen winced, but Ranma simply looked at him, and he shook his head. "The dragons will be needed, needed at the Wall for some purpose. It involves a stone, and magic as old as the Wall itself. But more than that I cannot say."

"That is interesting, and helpful thank you Jojen." Ranma said, smiling at the boy before going on, taking the quill and parchment as it was handed to him writing out a quick note before sealing it with both the Stark seal and the new

royal House seal, before handing it back to the maester Lord Reed had brought from Greywater Watch along with the ravens. "As for me, I need to get going again."

"Alone? You just said that the White Walker's will probably have scouts out past Winterfell." Reed said looking at the younger man in concern.

"They might," Ranma grinned, reaching up to pat the hilt of Ice where it rode over one of his shoulders. "But if they do, it's going to go very badly for them. I didn't run all this way just to lose to the first group of cold-blooded bastards I come across." With another laugh Ranma clapped Lord Reed on the shoulder, turned and raced on.

OOOOOO

In comparison to her husband's race to the north, Daenerys and the rest of the army moved at a snail's pace. *No*, she thought darkly, *a snail would put us to shame*. Contrary winds and storms had forced the fleet to move at a glacial pace through the Bay of Crabs, taking over a week to cover what should've only taken four days max with Ser Davos and other local experts leading the way.

"Nor were we able to get away as soon as I had hoped," Daenerys said, shaking her head and looking over to where Merry was feeding more wood into a small brazier, while her two dragons curled up around one another on the other side of the large tent that had been set up on the deck of Davos's flagship. Both dragons were too large to fit into anything but the main hold now, and Daenerys refused to be parted from them, so she routinely bedded down here on deck with them. The Wolfsworn grumbled about it, but they too bedded down on the deck as protective as a pack of wolves around their cubs.

"I know," Merry replied. "Still, it's not like you were wasting your time." She leaned in, whispering now. "And besides, I needed some recovery time to allow myself to walk without a noticeable limp."

Daenerys laughed, pulling the younger girl into a hug and kissing her fondly on the forehead, just in case there were any nearby watchers who could see their silhouettes on the outer tent canvas. It was true however that she hadn't exactly been wasting but the time spent waiting for the fleets to get underway.

First, she bid farewell to Ser Barristan and to the forces heading down to the Stormlands and the Reach forces which were heading home. Ser Barristan led the shattered remnants of the Stormlands army, a bare 2,000 men, combined with a little over five hundred men from the Crackclaw Point Houses, and a further six hundred heavy cavalry cobbled together from various Reach Houses under Lord Ashford, with orders to supplement their numbers from House Selmy and the other Stormlands Marcher lords.

The Reach forces heading home consisted of practically all of their remaining heavy cavalry, whose horses would be useless in winter conditions for any length of time, which made up some 5,700 of the barely 9,240 strong force from the Reach that that survived serving under two Baratheon kings in quick succession. The rest, archers and light infantry, were added to the Royal Army, broken up and placed under the lords who had proven their worth to Ranma and Daenerys. Most notably Jason Mallister, Tytos Blackwood, Rickard Karstark, and Greatjon Umber, the four lords Daenerys was leaning on heavily for their expertise in warfare now that her husband had raced off alone to the North. These men would serve out the duration of the campaign in the North, and be paid as the rest of the army.

Daenerys also had to write out various orders, as well as an updated report for Jon and Lady Margaery, which would be sent first to Riverrun and then down via raven to Highgarden. Another message was sent overland to find new Lord Blanetree, informing him of recent events. A third was sent to the Golden Tooth and Lord Brynden, informing him of events since he had taken command there. With both Daenerys, Ranma and their armies in the North, Brynden, Blanetree, Ryger, and the Lord Piper became the most powerful forces remaining in the Riverlands, while Jon became their official voice in the South.

*He's going to hate that*, she thought to herself, shaking her head and moving away from Merry for a moment to sit down by her dragons. Rhaegon nuzzled into her side, and she gently stroked his eye ridges as Merry moved over to sit beside Sunfyre, sitting on a small cushion set onto the deck. The deck was wet and cold of course, but the large brazier set into the center of the tent and the warmth reflected off the dragons made it somewhat pleasant for the two girls.

"I'm still worried about allowing Lord Serret go." Daenerys said. "I realize that he did nothing personally dishonorable, and indeed did his duty to the crown in an exemplary fashion as Hand, but still, he was one of the strongest supporters of the Lannisters. I can't just wave my hand and make that those years of loyalty go away."

"You won't have to." Merry said, smiling slightly. "I talked to the man several times on the march, and he was



disenchanted with Joffrey long before his Vile One persona came out. And let's not forget that Tywin threw away a lot of the Westerlands power in the Riverlands Campaign. Lord Serret's pragmatic enough to realize which way the wind is blowing, don't worry. Besides, I can't think of a better way to show that we are serious about respecting loyalty. With the Duchy of Silverden strongly in favor of us and the Golden Tooth in Royal hands, the Westerlands can't keep us out any longer even if the Lannisters are able to rally the other Houses. And that itself is a **big** if."

Daenerys nodded, then looked up as Ser Davos stuck his head in to the tent. He smiled at both ladies, making a particular point to bow to Merry, who he'd met occasionally before this war began. She had become a truly beautiful young woman since, though he was still bemused by how much the northern army had come to love her as one of their own. Several of his crewmen had been overheard commenting on her beauty in a slanderous manner, and he and several of his other men had been forced to step in to protect them from reprisals from some of the Northerners they were currently carrying.

"Your Majesty, we've finally reached the open ocean, but a ship's been sighted to the southwest. It's waving white flags from its prow and main sail indicating peaceful intentions, and it looks as if it's got the Citadel's mark on its sails. What do you want us to do?"

Daenerys stood up, moving over to pull on a large bearskin cloak. "Get me Alayaya, our two prisoners, Lord Fossoway and Septon Ehric please." she said crisply. "I'll want their take on what this could mean." Moments later the ones she had called for arrived at the front of the ship, where Davos was pointing out to Daenerys and Merry where the ship was just over the horizon southwards from the fleet as it moved out of the Bay of Crabs.

"What do you make of this?" Daenerys asked turning to them all with a smile. She nodded her head to Lord Fossoway, who nodded back, moving over beside her as Alayaya, and their two prisoners did the same.

The realities of their situation, had been told to the two Sand Snakes the morning after Ranma had left on his run, and to say they had been astonished by the largess bestowed upon them was to put it mildly. Both Elia and Nymeria knew they would be watched of course, but being watched and even judged for their actions was fine by them so long as they could in some measure prove their worth in such a way to win their eventual freedom.

"I believe that the Citadel has finally woken up to the fact that a new royal family has been created your grace." Said Lord Fossoway. "Late to be certain, but those old Archmaesters always take over long to reach a decision. Committees, bah!"

"Do not think this is because of their largess your Majesty," said Nymeria, speaking up quickly after looking at Alayaya for permission. "The Archmaesters play politics just as much as any of the great Houses, even more so amongst themselves. Whoever they sent will have an agenda, and that agenda might not be in keeping with your own. Be wary about anything he says, and don't trust him with any of the Grand Maester's traditional duties until he proves his loyalty."

Grand Master Pycelle had died on the march to Harrenhal. This had not been deliberate or anyone's fault, he had simply been too old to keep up with the strenuous pace after so long on a starvation diet. Ranma had ordered him buried with full honors, and a message set aside to be sent to the Citadel about the man. He might have served two mad kings, and been partisan towards the Lannisters besides, but he had redeemed himself in the days of the plague, trying to keep it from spreading, trying to do his best to contain it in a city where such a thing was frankly impossible.

"Do you have any idea what their agenda might be?" Daenerys asked.

"I don't know, but they might well be a little desperate if they've heard about magic returning. Most maesters have preached for decades that magic was waning or it no longer existed at all, that their new 'science' had proven to be stronger." Nymeria mused.

Elia smirked slightly. "There's also always been that rumor that they had something to do with the dragons dying out." Nymeria looked at her as well as all the others and she shrugged. "What, am I the only one that's heard that one?"

"That's because it's only a rumor." Nymeria said slowly as if speaking to a simpleton, causing her sister to glare at her angrily, a brief smile of triumph appearing on Nymeria's face in turn. Nearby Dacey shook her head, while Daryn and Roger chuckled at the byplay, but Daenerys had no time for it. She looked at Nymeria to elaborate and she went on. "There's never been any proof of that, nor any real explanation for how they could be involved."

"I'm just telling you to keep it in mind." Elia said defensively.

Daenerys nodded, then looked over at Davos. "Please signal one of the ships to go out and meet with this interloper. I don't want us to wait here for them of course, but they'll be able to catch up to us I assume?"

Davos nodded wincing a little at the idea of someone assuming that a fleet could even stay in one position like that. *My new queen might be a landlubber but at least she's smart enough to take advice.*

He nodded over at his first mate who nodded in turn towards a young boy stationed by the mainmast, then turned back as Daenerys asked another question. "How are we for supplies? I know you said that the fleet wouldn't be able to reach White Harbor without resupply, what did you mean by that, and why did you ask for permission from my husband and I to send out those small, what did you call them, cutters?"

"Cutters are small single-masted ships built for speed your Majesty, they serve as messenger boats and small fishing boats at times. You see, their keel is..." Davos stopped as he saw that most of his listeners looked as if he was speaking in a foreign language.

He went on hurriedly "Er, heh, I sent them ahead of us to a few of the smaller ports along the Fingers, Old Anchor and Sunkenwood, telling them in your name to send out supplies to meet us on the open sea. That'll save us time, and let us resupply which we'll have to do." He shook his head. "As it is will be on half rations for most of the way until we meet up with the ships out of Old Anchor."

"I'll set my dragons to hunting up anything they can in the ocean for us, which should help to meet out what we have." Daenerys replied. "And there'll certainly be able to feed themselves." With that thought Daenerys nodded to Davos once again murmuring that she would leave him to his business until the messenger or whatever was on that ship joined them here.

Hours later, Daenerys was roused from a nap against Rhaegon's side by a cough from the tent flap and Dacey's voice. "My lady, a rowboat's just pulled up alongside us, they are indeed carrying a maester who apparently is here to serve the royal House. He's not alone, he's got a few students with him as well."

"Good." Daenerys said with a nod looking over at Merry who nodded as well. She was always eager to meet others who might be interested in the healing arts. With that the two women exited the tent to meet with the new maester.

The maester, was a tall broad shouldered middle-aged man with rather handsome features and smiling eyes, reminding Merry somewhat of Jaime's features, though with none of her uncle's dangerous air. He also had gentle hands, something Daenerys found out when she held out her hand to shake his. It wasn't proper Royal behavior, but Daenerys had been among Northerners so much that most of her 'queenly training' (a name she had heard Daryn use more than once) had slipped to the wayside outside of formal events.

It seemed to take the man aback at first, cutting him off mid-bow, but he recovered quickly. "Your Majesty," he murmured, smiling somewhat overmuch for Daenerys taste. "Rumors of your beauty have travelled far and wide, yet even the most effusive do not do it justice. I am Crowe, a maester of the Citadel."

"I would leave flattery to my husband, Maester." Daenerys said somewhat coldly as she retrieved her hand, not liking how familiar he was attempting to be. "They matter not at all to me. My men say that you were sent here to serve the royal House?"

"Indeed your Majesty," replied the man, recovering his poise quickly from the firm response to his empty platitude. "While news of your campaigns reached us long since, it was not until a few months ago that we realized that your army lacked a maester to serve it as healing specialist and advisor. As such I was hastened on our way, but the ocean in autumn is nowhere for those in a hurry."

The men of the army around them laughed, and Hathan placed a large hand on Merry's shoulder, squeezing it as more than one man looked to her. She flushed under their gaze, but smiled back brightly and turned to the maester. "In truth good maester, I have been acting in that capacity since almost the moment we left the Neck behind. We had a maester from House Locke with us, but he died in an attack on one of our camps during the first Riverlands campaign."

"Then I am certain I have a lot of work to do." the man said. "No offense to you my lady, but a woman can never truly be a master healer, and a few months learning on the fly can never match a lifetime's worth of education in the citadel."

That was the man's second mistake and he froze as grumblings of discontent echoed from the men all around them, with Roger and Daryn in particular looking ready to commit murder on Merry's behalf. Daenerys smiled thinly. "On the

contrary my friend Princess Myrcella has done an exemplary job. She might have learned on the fly, but that has not been a hindrance. Moreover you will not be the only maester serving the army at this point, we have a little over a dozen serving with the army as healers since the last battle. And if you're tact does not improve, you will not be serving it in any capacity whatever."

"I apologize your Majesty, I was merely voicing what was common sense before this. If the reality is different from that, then I apologize profusely, and am eager to learn how it was done." Crowe said recovering once again quickly. "There is one area however that I am more proficient in than practically any other Archmaester in the Citadel, which is of a delicate nature your Majesty, one we should talk about in private."

Daenerys' eyes narrowed, then she looked around. "Dacey, Meera, Merry could you join us please?"

The man frowned, but seeing as the woman Dacey was heavily armored and armed, and the other, Meera held a wicked looking trident, decided not to try to dissuade them from joining. As the quartet moved over towards the tent with the dragons, Elia and Nymeria frowned, looking at some of the servants who were being shown towards the hatch leading down into the ship. Specifically one of the students. "Is that...?"

"I believe it is. We might need to look into this, sister."

Crowe stopped as he entered the tent, staring at the two dragons which were sleeping side by side, disinterested in him and anyone else at the moment. They were much more imposing in person than he had expected, but that did not change what he was here to do to their mistress.

Daenerys sat on the small camp bed by her little ones, leaning back against Rhaegon's side staring at Crowe. "What is this private matter?"

The healing area I spoke of your Majesty is pregnancy," Crowe said simply. "I am a birthing specialist, an area where your mother I do not know if you were taught this, had trouble with every time, it was well known in the court at the time. That kind of thing is very often hereditary, and the Citadel's Archmaesters felt my aid in this private matter could secure your goodwill towards the Citadel and its policies."

Dacey and Meera exchanged a glance, knowing now why Daenerys had chosen them, possibly anticipating the thrust of this discussion. They both moved back to the tent flap, keeping a wary eye on the man, but no longer really worried he was a threat. Physically anyway, politically this was a very shrewd move on the Citadel's part, and certainly a way to gain the crown's favor, but the two of them didn't care about that.

For the first time since he came aboard Daenerys smiled at Crowe, and for just a moment he regretted his mission, the queen truly was a beautiful woman. "Then I welcome you to our service maester Crowe That is an area I have been concerned about, but with the wars over with here in the South, it is time to think about the succession."

She shared a glance with Merry, who nodded slightly. The younger woman knew that Daenerys hadn't taken any moontea after that night the three of them shared back in Maidenpool, and that Daenerys had been tremendously concerned about it but decided to take the plunge. Ranna and she had talked about it, and had put the decision of when to have a child squarely in Daenerys' hands, saying he would be happy whenever, so long as she told him immediately when she could that she was pregnant.

*And given his ardor, I have no doubt already quickened,* she thought to herself, smiling somewhat complacently as her hand came to rest on her stomach. *Now I need to make sure I can keep my side of this arrangement.* Looking up, she joined Merry in questioning Crowe on his knowledge on the subject, coming away impressed and sending to his quarters with a much better opinion of the man than her first impression had been. It did not stay that way long.

OOOOOO

At the same time that Crowe was having his interview with Daenerys, Elia and Nymeria had convinced Alayaya to let them go in search of one of Crowe' students, who they claimed to recognize. Of course she didn't let them go alone, but they wended their way through the ship in search of the quarters that had been assigned to Crowe and his students, and were surprised to find the one they were searching moving towards them after closing the door behind him.

Or rather her, Alayaya realized with a start, staring at the figure in front of her. She was a master at spotting the female form whatever covering it was under, and **that** was a woman. Not a particularly good looking one, but those hips were definitely that of a woman.

"Elia, Nymeria." Said the student, then staring hard at Alayaya. "...How goes it?"

"As well as could be expected when we were forced to back a sadistic incompetent." Said Elia, shrugging her shoulders. "Viserys is dead, the idea of putting him on the throne died long before that though, and our family is going to pay for backing him. We'll fill you in, but first, what are you doing here, Sarella?"

The so named young woman said nothing, staring at Alayaya who raised one wintry eyebrow. "I'm not going anywhere, whatever you say you'll say it in front of me, or you'll say it in chains. With the White Walkers pressing hard in the North, the Royal House can't afford to have to deal with hidden dangers."

Sarella stared back silently for a moment before Nymeria stepped forward gripping her hand. "Sister," she said earnestly, giving away their connection now. "The Queen and King could have executed us both, regardless of our connection to House Martell. They could have destroyed our entire army, slaughtered every man in it, but they didn't. They've shown mercy and honor at practically every turn, and while I can't say I'm happy about being their prisoner, I'm happier with them on the throne than I think I would have been if either of the two claimants our uncle apparently backed gained it."

"If that's not enough for you Sarella," Elia said, one wary eye on Alayaya who hadn't reacted to the sister part of what Nymeria had said. "Then here's another point. The current king and queen destroyed the Westerlands' power, the Lannisters will never be Lord Paramount again, and the Golden Tooth is under royal command. Without those mines, the Lannisters will never be able to buy their way into greater power again, not for a long time. They also killed the last Baratheon brother, and have broken the Stormlands as they did the Westerlands. Our vengeance for Elia's death has been taken in full, even if not by our hands."

Sarella had been at sea for so long that she had no knowledge about many of the events on the mainland, and her confused, wary expression showed that. "I'm going to have to hear about that in greater detail."

But she frowned staring at her two sisters then shook her head. "My loyalty isn't to our House first anyway, whatever you might say. I gave my loyalty to Archmaester Marwyn, and it is as his spy I'm here. The Citadel's high council does not want to see the return of the dragons, and they sent maester Crowe here to see to that, however he could contrive it."

"Do you have any proof of that?" Alayaya asked sharply.

"That would depend on if you can find anyone on your side who can tell what a poison is? I doubt you'd take my word alone for it after all."

About a turn of the candle later Alayaya had gathered a few of the Wolfsworn, along with septon Ehcric. While Crowe was being shown around the ship by Davos, who knew to stall the man, they entered the room where he and his students had been housed, moving the four remaining students out of the way abruptly as they tried to protest this invasion of privacy.

Ehcric quickly searched through Crowe's luggage, coming back with four different vials, which held liquids he could not quickly identify. "I think we'll need Merry's help with these."

Merry was sent for, and she scowled angrily as she was told what Sarella had passed on. "Why don't they want the return of the dragons?"

"The return of the dragons coincides with the return of magic, it's, there's some kind of cyclical connection there." Sarella said trying to explain something that she didn't actually understand herself. "They think if they kill off the Targaryens or the dragons, magic will begin to wane once more."

"That's nonsense!" Merry said shaking her head. "There were tales of magic returning long before Daenerys hatched her dragons! How in the world do they explain the White Walkers, or that Red Bitch!?" Shaking her head in disgust at such a narrow-minded view she moved over to join Ehcric kneeling over the four unknown vials. "I'll need some cloth, white for preference, and an empty jar."

Behind her Daryn nodded and turned quickly exiting the room.

With that order given Merry opened the first vial, holding it up to her nose for a moment to sniff before pulling back. "That's a deadening agent, and a good one too..." She poked her finger in, nodding as it went numb. "I'll just be keeping this, see if I can duplicate the formula, it would be incredibly useful." she said pushing it to one side. There were chuckles from around her, but she ignored them, moving through the other three.

The next she didn't recognize, but Alayaya, leaning over her shoulder laughed as the scent hit her. "Oh, ahahah, I, um I recognize that one. That's a... let's call it a bedroom aid. It's for men who have trouble... rising to the occasion, or think they require some more energy in that area."

She turned to the four male students, all of whom flushed, looking away, but one face in particular was red with embarrassment. "A little hint boys, girls prefer men who know what they are doing and have some care for their partners pleasure. The ability to go all night long is nice, but energy alone can't beat creativity and the ability to work with your partner."

Merry and Ehric both flushed while the Wolfsworn, Elia and Nymeria laughed while Sarella merely rolled her eyes.

The third vial's liquid was also harmless, which Merry found out after dipping some of it carefully on the cloth Daryn provided before bringing it to her nose. It was simply a powerful soporific, the kind you would give someone who was plagued with seasickness.

The last liquid however, that one Merry almost thought was similarly unimportant. But then she let some of it drip onto the white cloth and watched. The stain should have turned pink after a moment if it was the harmless healing agent she had thought.

It did not, instead it stayed as black as black could be, even drying slowly. She nodded her head grimly over at Daryn, who along with Dacey had stepped up to lead the Wolfsworn. "Arrest him." she said coldly. "But make sure you keep him alive. We'll need to know if more poisoners will be sent if he is discovered."

She turned a gimlet gaze on the four students who had frozen at the sight of the poison. "Search their luggage too, then get them off this ship. They can join some of my other workers on one of the others if they're cleared of suspicion."

It turned out they were, and the young men were bundled away quickly. Crowe however was not so lucky. Not two turns of the glass after leaving Daenerys's presence, he was back, protesting his innocence to no avail.

Daenerys stared coldly at the man. "While we do not believe in torturing confessions out of people, or torture at all, we are sorely tempted in this case. Merry?"

"The poison we found is not a poison that would kill you your Majesty, not quickly, but it would make you barren with even a single teaspoon's worth. It could also be used on your dragons I think, though their immunity to such things might have protected them. It's almost odorless, and tasteless, and in its diluted form, plus added to several other ingredients, the poison is a part of a healing balm, hence my test. There's certainly enough on hand to douse both you and them, with quite a bit left over." Merry replied crisply.

"I see... So it would not have been a threat to me but to my unborn children," Daenerys said her face almost shutting down, save for her violet eyes, which began to blaze with fury. "This does not make me any more inclined to mercy than I already was. Sarella Sand, step forward."

As Crowe glared at her angrily Sarella did so, dressed now in one of Alayaya's dresses and looking much more feminine and almost pretty, though not as pretty as her older sisters. "Your Majesty." She said with a brief, and rather clumsy curtsy.

"Tell me everything about this Citadel's politics you can, and this... man... in particular. I wish to know if the Citadel in its current form can be saved, turned back to its original purpose of serving the pursuit of knowledge and the people rather than itself. If it cannot, we will have to deal with it eventually as well."

"We've already begun to create a healing Hall," Merry said with a faint smile, remembering the work that had begun on that in Riverrun. "We might need to break more of the Order of Maester's traditional areas of control away from them in the future, letting one institution control such learning is a dangerous if they are inclined to meddle in affairs outside their purview."

"Agreed, and hopefully the next batch of oh so intelligent morons will know not to meddle in politics or King making." With that Daenerys turned her violet eyes on Crowe, who quailed at what he saw in them, before she turned to Sarella, who also flinched slightly under that gaze. "Now talk."

OOOOOO

Two small armies faced one another across a narrow field near where the Golden River and the Rose Road came closest to one another, about halfway down the river between the lands of House Rowan and Highgarden. Several

barges lay hove to along the river bank loaded with men and horses.

The road and the area around it were also congested with men and horses along with several dozen carts scattered throughout that army. That second army outnumbered the one by the river, but neither seemed to be in a rush to join battle. The greatest sign of this was the two parties which had met halfway between the two armies under a flag of truce.

Willas stared across his horse's withers at Lord Caron. "I realize and respect the fact that Stannis sent you back into the Reach to aid us my friend, however, I will not agree to bow my head to him until after news of his battle against the Starks has reached me. The Starks too have sent aid. Word reached me from my sister that His Majesty Ranna Targaryen sent his brother and a small force into the Reach with orders to fight the mercenaries coming up from the south. With so much of our own strength away, the Reach cannot afford to turn any aid aside."

Bryce Caron frowned. "That puts me in a precarious position my Lord," he replied honestly. "Lord Stannis did indeed send me down when we heard about the reavers along the Mander and the depredations of the Dornish army, but he also did so because at that time your father had vowed that the Reach would stand with him. Your actions put you at odds with your father's given word."

"Yet I'm also being very prudent about doing so," Willas replied tartly. There was no need to inform Bryce about how he and Margaery had decided to oust their father as Lord Paramount for gross negligence and incompetence of course, but neither was he going to hide his position. "Face facts my Lord, Lord Stannis will either win his crown on the field of battle far from here, or not. So at present, what does it matter here in the Reach who wins? The Ironborn and mercenaries are still here on our lands."

"I gave my oath to Lord Stannis, and I am a man of my word. If you side with the Starks against him, I will be forced to move against you."

"I won't fight you Bryce, but I won't let you fight the Starks force either. According to my sister's last message, Jon and his forces will meet the Dornish mercenaries in battle soon enough. Let them do so, then let us wait to hear what has happened elsewhere. Hopefully by the time you reach Highgarden the war between the Stargaryens and Stannis will have been settled one way or another."

"And if it is settled in favor of Lord Stannis?" Bryce asked.

"Then we will see." Willas didn't actually think that it would frankly, but was willing to hedge his bets that much. Whatever his personal feelings on the matter, Willas knew his first loyalty had to be to the Reach and its people.

The two young men stared at one another for a time then Bryce slowly nodded. "Very well, I must admit to not being in any rush to fight you and yours my Lord, spilling the blood of countrymen like that would sit ill with me." To one side Bryce's half-brother nodded his head, sharing a brief smile with Ser Graceford, who nodded back. "You and your army are free to go on your way unmolested, and we will see you at Highgarden."

Within a turn of the glass the barges once more men were moving down the river, quickly leaving behind him the Army following the Rose road. Willas stayed for a moment at the back of the lead barge staring back at that army, before shaking his head and turning downriver, wondering how the battle between Jon Stark and Oberyn had gone. *Don't make me a liar Stark. I too don't want to fight my own countrymen, whatever the events elsewhere.*

OOOOOO

It had taken weeks for the Wildling Princess, as the Night's Watch and Northerners had come to call Val, to convince her fellows that they needed to bend their necks if any of them were going to survive. By that point disease and injury had seen off several hundred of them, and the White Walkers had been seen, gathering the dead of the battles along the Wall to them, those dead bodies that had not already been burned anyway. Unfortunately, despite the Wildlings best efforts that was a **lot** of bodies.

There were certainly far more than remained alive from the once monstrously large wildling migration. Of those that had begun the exodus south, there remained a scant 4000, comprised of bits and pieces of more than a dozen clans which had been forced to come together into one. That was all that remained of the once proud and independent people of the far North, but even so those numbers were a tremendous boon to the defenders on the wall.

In those same days the castles slated for destruction had been razed to the ground. Or rather not the castles themselves, but the stairwells from the castles up onto the Wall itself, a much easier task than destroying the castles entirely. The wildlings were allowed through the Wall at Castle Black then up onto it, and given command of two of

the castles to the west of Castle Black, Stonedoor and Hoarfrost Hill. They weren't the most well prepared castles, but they also had somewhat decent south-facing defenses, two outer walls shaped like a triangle, with the third side being the Wall at the back.

This put them between the forces of the Ardent Defender, the Night's Watch, and the forces of House Cerwyn and Stark under Kyle Conton. In other words, the forces that were least likely to have any blood debts against the wildlings for their raiding, and the most disciplined.

There were some protests among the wildlings when they've realized that the Night's Watch men did not intend to let them simply through the Wall, but to defend it. But when told that the White Walkers had seemingly found a way around the Wall somehow, they decided that the giant magical edifice provided at least some chance of surviving the coming winter.

For his sins Tyrion had been given the task of liaising with Val, a task he took to with a certain fervor. The woman was utterly beautiful, deadly dangerous of course, but since killing a giant and losing one of his hands Tyrion had decided that few things in this world could frighten him. Certainly not a wench like this.

The two of them were walking along the Wall, staring to either side of it as Tyrion told her what he had learned about Theon and the Wolfsworn's abilities. He was trying to impress on her how dangerous the assault coming from Skagos must have been to overcome Theon.

"It makes no sense," Val murmured in response after Tyrion had finished speaking. "If the Others could get around the Wall like that, why have they not before? Why did they not use that kind of skill in the first wars against their kind? Why haven't they used it since?"

"While you wildlings might not wish to recognize it, tactics and strategies change over time, just like farming or other skills. A common blacksmith of today is of course much better than a blacksmith of a thousand years ago." Tyrion replied, smiling slightly at the girl who rolled her eyes at the barbs at her people's way.

Val understood that the Wildlings needed to change if they were going to survive, but Val was uncertain how that change was going to occur. Nor did she think that right now was the time to think about it. "Let us survive the winter first," she had told the other chieftains, "then worry about reclaiming our lands and becoming free from the kneelers and their cursed crows once more." Despite the fact they had been welcomed onto the Wall the wildlings still retained a certain disdain for the 'kneelers' and the Night's Watch. Even with their defeat having been so total.

"That's true enough, but if the Others can change at all, then why didn't they use this kind of... strategy... before?" The word strategy came out hesitantly, as if Val was uncertain she was using the word correctly. The wildlings after all did not think of strategy, they barely understood tactics.

"I don't know, but I think it could be because of the size of the force needed. Maybe the White Walkers don't multiply as well as humans do over time." Tyrion replied. "That could be a good sign of course. It might mean if we beat their assault off this time, it will be another several thousand years before they..."

He trailed off, cupping his glove covered hand over his eyes, which were mostly covered by a cloth wrapping to keep his face from freezing. Val too was covered from head to toe in cloth, which was a crime in Tyrion's opinion, who longed to peel her out of that clothing one piece at a time. But right now that thought was furthest from his mind. "What is that?"

Val scowled turning to see what had taken the small imp's attention. He had a quick and intelligent mind, and tales of his prowess in battle had reached Val before the first parlay between the Night's Watch and her own people. But even so she could not quite overcome the stigma his dwarf size held in her eyes. To her mind he should've been smothered as a baby by his mother, who had shown weakness by not having done so. If there was one thing no wildling could abide, it was weakness.

That thought left her mind as quickly as the thought of her body left Tyrion's however when she saw what he was staring at. "A flock of birds? No, it's too large for that, and they're coming closer-OLD GODS Protect!"

Her voice rose on the last word as they came close enough to discern some more detail. Flying through the air towards them were what looked like thousands upon thousands of birds. All types of birds, but that wasn't the weirdest thing about the phenomenon. The weirdest was that they surrounded several far larger shapes, which looked like... "Dragons?"

"Somehow I don't think those are regular dragons." Tyrion replied as all along the Wall the alarm drums began to beat

out a tune. Tyrion ignored the noise for a moment, staring not at the approaching flyers but below them into the Haunted Forest as he tried to see any detail there. When he did, he wished he hadn't. "By the gods old and new, it's them. They are coming."

Val turned her eyes in that direction, but her eyes weren't quite as keen as Tyrion's and it took her a moment to see the details that Tyrion had. When she did Val gasped, shuddering in fear. Out of the woods came a horde, there is no other word for it, thousands upon thousands of undead wights shambling their way forwards. But that could have been borne, even if those wights were former wildlings, or even people that Val had known personally. It was what was coming up behind them that made her gasp.

Pushing their way through the forest, knocking down trees as they came were giant mastodons. Every four of the beasts were tied together dragging giant siege weapons behind them, which stopped soon after they were spotted. The massive catapults began to lob stones at the Wall while the birds and dragons came closer. There were dozens of them in sight of where Tyrion and Val stood on the Wall, and Val wondered bleakly if this was the only place the Wall was being attacked, or if these same numbers were being thrown at it all along its length.

Beside the mastodons stood other giant creatures, which looked nothing so much as ice spiders. They were simply giant spiders made of ice and what looked like black steel, powered by fell magics. They were easily the most horrifying site Val had ever seen, and she shivered as they scuffled forward towards the Wall. On their backs they carried what looked like dozens of wights or White Walkers, it was impossible to tell at this distance.

Bronn raced up, slamming a helmet down onto Tyrion's head and thrusting a sword into his hand before raising a bow, aiming down an arrow into the distance. All around them hundreds of men of the order and in the other surrounding castles boiled out onto the Wall, shouting oaths of surprise and dismay as they stared at the horde coming at them.

The feel of the helmet slamming down onto his head broke Tyrion out of his shock. "All archers load with steel broadhead and aim for the fucking birds! Catapults, aim for the horde down there, the spiders in particular if you can!" He grabbed a nearby Order member, shouting into the man's ear. "Get to the nearest tried trebuchet, tell them to start hammering at those siege weapons of theirs! Then keep on going down the line, until you get tired and hand that order off to someone else to carry on. I want the entire Wall knowing those things are the main targets for the trebuchets!"

Tyrion had no idea what kind of ammunition those catapults down there were armed with. Nor did he think they could range on the top of the Wall. But he didn't want to take any chances either way.

"By your command Giantkiller!" The man said, racing down the Wall to the west.

As he did, Tyrion looked around him. Here and there several men who had come out from inside the castle too quickly had to retreat, the jeers of their fellows in their ears as they hurried to pull gloves, scarfs or face wraps on. But most of the men on the Wall were ready. They quickly began to fire at the approaching flock of birds and dragons.

"Why regular steel little lion?" Bronn asked pulling back on his bow and using his old name for Tyrion rather than his new, thankfully more popular one. The shot flew true, impacting a crow on the wing sending it tumbling down.

"The needs of flight." Tyrion replied grunting as hacked at the downed bird, while next to him Val grabbed up a bow of her own. "Wights can keep on coming and soak up a lot of damage, but birds need two working wings to fly regardless of any magic powering their bodies. At least I hope so."

His hope proved to be accurate. While the dragons kept on coming despite the arrows in them the flock of lesser avians around them quickly thinned out. The archers on the Wall went for number of arrows rather than accuracy. They loosed dozens of arrows each in those first few moments, thinning the attacking flock tremendously.

But then the dragons were at the Wall. The first of their number roared, breathing out deeply and a cone of immensely cold ice raced down towards the defenders. Some men were able to dodge but many were not so lucky. They died almost immediately under this attack, frozen solid between one breath and the next.

"Every fifth man out from me either side switch to fire arrows!" Tyrion bellowed over the screams of the freezing men, grabbing up the fire of his own and sticking it into a nearby brazier. "Fire arrows on the dragons!"

Unfortunately the fire arrows didn't seem to do much damage to the dragons. They were simply unable to penetrate the dragon's scales, but the fire itself did do some damage to their wing membranes, forcing the first two dragons within sight of Tyrion's position on the Wall to retreat. The last attacking Tyrion's section however suffered a much



more **interesting** fate.

It tried to touch down nearby, landing with two feet on the balustrade and two scrabbling at the northernmost face of the Wall. It was only there for a brief second, its head rearing back as a prelude to breathing in before it shrieked in agony. "GUAGGHHH!"

Tyrion heard a deep throbbing noise coming from beneath his feet, the entire Wall humming somehow, a thrum he felt through his feet. Then here and there along its length small and large runes lit up green, the green of a pine needle, the light of magic gifted by the Old Gods, though none save perhaps the ancient Targaryen Maester realized this.

Down below the first group of wights had reached the Wall and were scrambling up it, climbing almost as well as the spiders that were following in their wake probably could. However, those first wights died screaming horribly, the magic in them canceled somehow. Though weak, the magic of the Wall was still active, still buried in its stone and ice. And it would suffer no trespass.

"The Old Gods are with us!" Said a Stark man to the far west of Tyrion. "The Old Gods bless Bran the Builder!"

Tyrion nodded absentmindedly, while Val stared to either side of her at the lights of the runes, moving off into the fog shrouded distance. Later Tyrion would study them, but right now he watched the horde down below reform and quickly retreat from the Wall. The spiders hadn't even come close yet, but they were already changing their tactics. Their siege weapons fired, slamming into the Wall here and there, and some of them even reaching perilously close to the top of it despite the range.

The remains of the flock of birds too reformed, flying over the Wall now and diving down. Even as the archers turned their attention to them the birds began to act like feathery missiles the injuries to their wings no longer able to stop them from getting at the humans below them. Now the defenders once again started to take losses, but every man downed took dozens of birds with him.

Yet there were worse problems elsewhere. Not every commander had been so quick to recognize the danger the birds represented, or addressed it so well. But even worse, here and there along the Wall the magical defenses had not activated. The runes had flickered for a moment, before slowly fading. The magic in the Wall was weakened badly, and worse yet none of the people on the Wall understood how to re-energize them.

At several points along the Wall the attacking whites did indeed climb up, and the dragons attacking elsewhere along caused far more damage to the defenders. But with the Wall's natural defenses and their numbers the defenders held. Here and there, in particular by Eastwatch-By-the-Sea the defenders had to dig into their bags of tricks. Mors Usher ordered the use of his castle's supply of carefully hoarded alchemist's fire, which thankfully worked even better against the White Walkers than it had against the wildlings.

When it landed the wildfire spread quickly, engulfing several of the mastodons and the massive siege weapon they had been carrying between them. All of the mastodons who could see the fire and hear the screams of their fellows broke whatever control the White Walkers had on them, running away through and over some of the wights, and some of the White Walkers themselves.

The fire also destroyed the ice spiders or whatever they were. Even a little bit splashed on an ice spider was enough to break whatever spell that moved the massive ice and steel behemoths. In response the White Walkers swiftly pulled the ice spiders back, waiting to use them decisively rather than wasting them in penny packets.

The losses among the defenders on that first day were equal to the losses they had taken in that final push by the wildlings, and it got worse as day turned to night. The White Walkers, knowing now that the magic of the Wall was still active retreated somewhat sending in only sporadic assaults, feeling out the magic of the Wall and figuring out where it was weak. Those points were quickly reinforced from the areas that had such protection. The Order of Ardent defenders and the wildlings moved west and east respectively, doing so.

Yet despite this, every commander along the Wall knew that the attack from behind would be the true test of their mettle. Yet for days after the attacks from the north began, that assault had yet to appear.

**OOOOOO**

Lord Commander Jeor Mormont sighed, nodding his head to his second-in-command of Castle Black as the man once again took over command of their portion of the Wall allowing Lord Mormont to retire to his rooms in the tower to go over the losses for the day. Sporadic assaults along the Wall had been going on for over a week and a half now,

and they were slowly but surely taking their toll on the men. Not in numbers so much any longer, the White Walkers refusal to commit their spiders to the attacks on the Walls meant that only the dragons and the few remaining birds could truly come within range of the defenders. But in morale and energy they certainly were taking a toll.

*I need to find a way to somehow rest some of the men for longer than a few hours a day, I know the other commanders are in the same position, or worse.* He thought to himself as he pushed open the door to his room sighing wearily. The last few weeks have been hard on his old bones, and Jeor now knew for certain that he would not see the end of this war.

*I hope we can hold out. If they're able to get past us with the numbers we've seen out there then disburse all over the North... he shuddered. That would be the end. Even if the Dragonglass shipments the raven from Winterfell mentioned arrived there still wouldn't be enough weapons to go around, nor enough men to wield them to cover the entire North. It would be like trying to exterminate the rats in the city, a lost cause from the get go. Humanity would be forced to abandon everything north of the Moat, and even the Neck might not be enough to stop the White Walkers with their new tricks.*

Jeor wearily sat in his chair, leaning back and closing his eyes for what he thought would be only a few moments but which turned out to be at least half the night. Truthfully his second-in-command should've woken him up at some point, but the man had decided to let the Old Bear sleep.

It wasn't his second-in-command that woke Lord Mormont in the middle of the night either. That was the warning horns from Castle Black itself, the horns which only should've been blown if Castle Black itself was under attack. Lord Mormont roused himself with difficulty, moving out of his room at a sort of shambling gait which was the closest he could come to running with his legs as old and battered as they were. That it almost made him resemble a bear was something more than one man had commented on, though there were no jokes and jeers now.

By the time Jeor reached the at entrance to the tower, the rest of the defenders, most of whom were comprised of Night's Watchmen, and the levy forces of the North who had previously been trying to create settlements out in the Gift. Most of them had been housed in Castle Black, which proved to be an excellent move now, hopefully giving them enough men to see off a wight assault from the lands south of them.

He raced over to one of the outer walls, which had been erected in place since Ranma Stark and his friends had arrived with word of the White Walkers being active once more. Jeor was a firm believer in planning ahead, and it served him well here. The wall was little more than two stories tall, and very rough, made of wood and stone thrown together haphazardly, but even so, with the all of it having been buried in ice which had hardened almost as hard as the Wall itself, it was a decent defensive position.

Taking the defenders by surprise, the wights had gotten to the foot of the wall thanks to the snow swirling around them. And while the defenders had rallied as well as could be expected several wights had reached the top of the makeshift wall, cutting down the defenders. Ascending to what amounted to the top of the manmade hill Jeor pulled Longclaw from its sheath, charging along the stone and frozen wood to meet the nearest breach, cutting down two wights in quick succession, the magic of his dragon-fire forged blade a match for the magic animating them.

Several men of the Night's Watch followed him, wielding dragonglass daggers and steel swords rather than swords and shields. Several of them died because of this, but the dragonglass daggers did their work, ending the lives of those wights that fell from the injuries given to them by the steel weapons in their other hands. Soon the breaches along the makeshift wall closed, and more of the levy forces moved up to defend it.

Jeor nodded at his men shouting, "Spread out! Then get a runner back to the tower and make sure that every dragonglass weapon we've got is brought out!"

"We don't have that many of them to begin with my Lord." cautioned one of them.

"It won't matter if we husband them, if we lose Castle Black doing it! Go!"

Several moments after Jeor had led another charge to reclaim a portion of the defenses shouts of welcome reached his ears from behind. Moving away from the top of the crude wall and letting several of the smallfolk take his place Jeor turned. He watched as men from the Ardent Defender and House Hornwood made their way towards him.

Tyrion was at their head, and he nodded at Lord Mormont. Around them this force moved forward to aid the less trained force of the smallfolk, taking the dragonglass daggers from many of them to put them to better use. "What magical forces have they brought against us here?"

"Naught but wights at the moment. I think this is some kind of softening up action, or perhaps simply a sign of the White Walkers power going ahead of their army." Lord Mormont said shaking his head and leaning wearily on his blade where he had grounded it into the stone of the walkway beneath him. "I'm very much afraid this is only the beginning."

OOOOOO

It had taken Jon and his army two days to loot and bury the dead. Given that the mercenaries had brought much of their spoils with them, the army was now almost too weighted down with such, despite many of the men thinking such a thing was impossible. Thanks to the barges however, there were still making good time along the river. A little over a week after the battle they saw the walls of Highgarden in the distance.

Highgarden's wharfs were protected by massive towers, which while looking very ornamental were also very tall and powerfully built. The walls to either side of the port leading inland from the Mander around the city were also well manned and maintained. Despite the castle of Highgarden being known more for its gardens and beauty, the defenses along the Mander had always been maintained.

Luckily Jon and his forces were welcomed with open arms. The men lining those walls and towers were cheering lustily as Ser Kevin Conklyn and Jon stood at the prow of the first barge, shaking his head and smiling slightly. "I can only hope that the rest of the Reach welcomes us as warmly," he quipped, smiling at the knight.

Kevin laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. A young man himself, Kevin had taken to Jon Stark quite well, better than he had anticipated if he was honest. Beyond that serious Stark face was an extremely intelligent mind and a good sense of humor. "There might be a few houses here and there that are not as welcoming my Lord, but I think the majority of the smallfolk at least have made their position plain."

Jon nodded, understanding they had done that for certain. Those people were shouting "The Targaryens, the Tyrells, the Seven's Champions, the Seven bless the King and Queen! The Seven bless lady Margaery!" It was very evident that Ranma and Daenerys's work to get the smallfolk and the faithful on their side had paid off handsomely here, as did their sending Jon at all to aid Margaery.

As the barges smacked against the wharfs Kevin tapped Jon on the shoulder, motioning his head towards a small party that were sitting by possibly the most magnificent horses that Jon had ever seen. "My lady Margaery Tyrell, the Rose of the Reach." he said simply.

Moments later, while Lord Dondarrion and Sir Piper joined Kevin in organizing the unloading of their troops and their booty Jon, Arya, Nymeria and Ghost made their way towards the waiting party. As they came closer Jon slowed, pausing to take in the vision before him.

Golden-brown hair cascaded down in ringlets to halfway down Margaery's chest, surrounding a gorgeous face highlighted by high cheekbones, a small but extremely warm smile composed of full lips, and dark brown, intelligent eyes. The body underneath that hair and the magnificent green and gold rose accented gown also looked to be one of the best he had ever seen. For some reason he suddenly wondered what that hair would feel like cascading through his fingers, a thought he quickly brushed off to one side.

*Ranma was right, she is a rare beauty.* "Lady Margaery, my brother's description of you did not do the true splendor justice."

For her part Margaery was struck by the serious dark gray eyes of Jon Stark. *He looks much more like a Stark in truth than Ranma did, there is no hint of what House his mother came from. Not that this does him any injustice.*

Lanky yet clean dark brown hair cascaded down Jon Stark's head to his shoulders, a handsome if stern face dominated by those deep gray eyes, though the lips were quirked into a faint smile, and there were lines along his face that indicated he was as used to smiling as frowning. Wide shoulders, wearing decent lizard lion armor, and tall, as tall as Ranma, so tall that Margaery had to look up at him slightly, not a lot, but just enough for it to be noticeable.

When she extended hers to be kissed his hand was calloused and very powerful feeling yet the grip of his hand on her fingers was gentle, and Margaery actually shivered a little as he brought her hand up to his lips to kiss. Everything about Jon screamed that he was Ranma's brother, and yet despite that and despite Ranma having set a tremendously high standard, Jon did not lose anything in that comparison. She had not expected that, or the impact of those gray eyes on hers. "Jon Stark, your brother told me much about you as well, though he did not say you were a flatterer by nature."

"Ranma also spoke about you of course, young Arya." she said turning to Arya. "Ranma said you were a little wild thing, as quick to fight as you were to run away from your lessons? Although given what's happened since, I think that attitude seems much more sensible than most noblewomen's. I could've done with some of your skill with a sword of late myself, remind me to tell you the story of the battle of Oldflowers, hopefully before you can hear the bard's version."

"Too late for that." Arya replied promptly, smiling up at taller girl who had gotten Arya on her side immediately with that little speech. She held out her hand and the two women shook hands smiling at one another. "I heard that version from the few bards we met on the road by Bitterbridge, but I'm eager to hear the real version."

"I'll tell you about it sometime tonight then." Margaery promised, smiling at the younger girl. Then she looked at the two direwolves to either side and held out her hand palm up for them to sniff before pulling it back slightly. She looked over at the two Starks and asked tentatively, "Neither of these have problems with honey-based fragrances do they? I remember Fenris having a tough time getting used to my scent because of an incident with a beehive."

Arya and Jon laughed, shaking their heads. "Don't worry my lady," Jon said. "Neither Ghost nor Nymeria have ever gone into attacking bears overmuch or hunting down honey."

With that assurance Margaery held out her hand, allowing first Ghost then Nymeria to sniff it. Ghost went further, nuzzling Margaery's hand for a moment she reached out with her other hand to rub it his ears just the way he liked it. Nymeria was a little more standoffish, but also allowed Margaery to play with her ears slightly. Both direwolves however backed away as the cheering rebounded as the men on the barges started to disembark, their ears flattening on their skulls.

Margaery noticed this, and motioned towards her entourage. "I suggest we get on our way, unless you can control your friends when the crowd really starts to get going?"

"You mean there's more of this?" Arya asked skeptically.

"Oh yes much more. Highgarden is flooded with refugees from further downriver and more than a few from along the Blue Byrn as well. Up until word of your coming reached us, all of these people were afraid that Oberyn's army would reach us before my brother's, despite my best efforts at convincing them otherwise. They see you and your army as saviors, despite the work I've put in creating a city militia." She shrugged philosophically. "Fear has a far greater hold on people's minds than we sometimes like to admit."

"It's always better to try to fight it anyway my lady." Jon said, moving forward to help her into her saddle. He blushed slightly as her front almost went into his face as he did so, before backing away, a flush on his face.

He looked away, while Margaery simply smirked wickedly at him. Unlike Theon or Ranma, Jon had never frequented whorehouses nor had lovers. His previous relationships with women were practically nonexistent, a stolen kiss here were there with various female servants back in Winterfell, and a short dalliance with a maid in Riverrun that didn't go further than heavy petting was the sum of his experiences. Thus Margaery's beauty and outgoing nature had a heavy impact on him.

"Let's be off then." Margaery said then she grimaced a little. "My grandmother and my mother are wishful to talk to you unfortunately."

Jon nodded, moving next to her horse and looking up at her as Ghost and Nymeria quickly moved into a trot along the rather nervous horses. But those horses were magnificent examples of Willas' touch with the breed, and they moved readily under Margaery and her retainer's control. "Should I bring my sword with me? I've heard stories about the Queen of Thorns."

"I so wish I could tell you to do that." Margaery said shaking her head. "Unfortunately, my grandmother is still useful despite her **attitude**."

That word held a lot of weight to it, and Jon frowned thoughtfully as he heard it. Arya rolled her eyes however. "Don't tell me we're going to be involved in political talk! I'll take Nymeria and head downriver right now with a small scouting force instead, how's that?"

"Not a bad idea, but I'm afraid you won't be able to get out of it." Margaery said with a shrug. "It would be extremely rude too. Not..." she laughed. "That I think that would stop you Arya, judging from some of the stories I've heard about you. Is it true you tried to stitch Sansa's sleeping cloth's to her bed while she was still in them?"

Arya looked embarrassed while Jon laughed, shaking his head as they continued down the streets. Luckily for the two direwolves Margaery's attempt to race them through the city to the castle before the rest of the troops began their march through it worked. Their speed was such that only a few hundred or so people began to cheer as they raced past, though as they continued the noise still added up. By the time they reached the castle both direwolves were looking very nervous and edgy, even the normally calm and composed Ghost.

Realizing this Margaery pointed to one side even as she jumped out of the saddle in front of the largest stable Jon had ever seen. "Our godswood is that way, we don't have many worshipers of the Old Gods in the Reach, so it's normally empty but it's well kept up, and it should feel somewhat like home."

Before she finished the two direwolves had taken off in that direction and she blinked. "I'm going to have to get used to that again aren't I? I know Fenris was able to understand most of what was said around him, but extending that impossible ability to other direwolves is going to take a bit."

Arya shrugged. "You'll get used to it, we did and it and everything that comes with it is **fantastic!**" She paused, frowning as she remembered the time when she had warged too often with Nymeria, losing some of herself to the instincts of her bonded. "Well, most of it anyway. They're a lot better than horses or dogs let me tell you."

"So says someone small enough to ride on them at need." Jon said, playfully rubbing Arya's head for a moment. Arya had put on weight in terms of muscle mass and in other areas, but had only grown a few inches since they had left Winterfell.

Arya growled batting his hand the side and Margaery shook her head with a laugh. "Siblings always do that to their sisters, trust me, you're lucky you only had two older brothers. Garlan and Loras especially used to mess up my hair all the time. The worse times was right before my coming of age feast, moments before I was to be introduced into the hall. Our father was so furious! I wasn't, I just thought it was funny at the time, but it has gotten rather old since."

Then she went on to say something that got Arya on her side permanently. "By the way Arya, while you're here could I impose on you to teach me some sword work? While you might be shorter than me I have no doubt that you're stronger as well, and we're alike enough in other ways that I think I'll have an easier time learning from you than I would from a normal man at arms. If I could convince any of them to go against my grandmothers wishes in the first place, I mean."

"I'll be happy to." Arya said happily, smiling up at the taller woman. "I'm always happy to find other ladies willing to rebel against what their menfolk demand of them."

"I wouldn't go that far." Margaery said dryly. "While I've learned that one should always be prepared to defend oneself, women can wield far more power behind the scenes than you may think."

That conversation went on for some time as they walked through the gardens of Highgarden and into the castle, though Margaery did not convince Arya that her way was better than Arya's, which would've been impossible. Soon Margaery showed the two of them to their rooms, where they found servants preparing hot baths for them, and even a few changes of clothing and dresses, along with tailors and seamstresses.

An entire corridor was set aside for Jon and his commanders, with the nearest room given to Arya and his own being the large suite on the far end. He stood staring out through an actual window, not a murder hole, a **real** window, something that would never have been even contemplated in the North (or even most of the Riverlands), noticing as he did so that the room had an excellent view of the gods wood.

"We actually have three weirwood trees here, we call them the Three Singers." Margaery said. "I have to be honest and say that of late I've been drawn to them myself. If you would like Jon, I can show them to you later."

"I think I would like that my lady." Jon said with a nod. It has been far too many months since he was able to make my respects to the Old Gods. He'd done so in Riverrun, but even that was a little over than four months ago.

Margaery nodded then looked at the servants waiting nearby. "If you two don't want new clothing I'll understand, that was my mother's idea. Between the two of us, I think she's trying to overaweyou barbarian Northerners with our civilized ways. I think my stories about Ranma might have primed her to try that, not that I think she'll have any luck really."

"Some new breeches and a shirt." Arya replied promptly. "I've outgrown my clothing so much, I'd really like a new entire wardrobe, but if you think I'm going to wear any kind of dress think again." The she-wolf growled those last few words at the seamstresses, who backed away hurriedly.

"For my part new pants and new boots would be a marvel milady, the last being an area I hope my men can also partake of in the city." Jon said turning on her with a warm smile that caused Margaery to smile back automatically.

*He really is Ranma's brother, so warm under that exterior. I truly wish to meet Lady Catelyn. I was impressed by Edward, but the two of them have done a truly magnificent job with all of their children even if those children are so very different from one another.*

"In that case my lords, I will leave you to it. A servant will be sent for you when you and your commanders are expected at dinner." She grimaced a little. "You should probably consider that as Ranma put it more than once in King's Landing, a command performance. My grandmother and mother, many of the important factors from the city and many ladies from the surrounding houses will be eager to see you, and unfortunately to judge you."

"So long as they judge us by our actions rather than predetermined notions my lady, I have no issue with that idea." Jon said, though by her face Arya did not agree.

Margaery did indeed leave them to it, though Jon interrupted his fitting for new boots when he heard Sir Piper, Edric and Lord Dondarrion arrive. Margaery was with them, guiding them to their rooms as a good hostess would, though it was her words that caught both Lord Dondarrion and Jon's attention. "When I heard word from Sir Kevin that you were indeed among the army marching along the Mander Beric, I immediately sent a raven to House Dayne. Your sister Lord Dayne, will be overjoyed to hear that both of you are still alive."

"It was a near run thing at times, my lady." Said the young voice of Edric. "But we came through in the end, not undamaged, but with new friends and allies at least whole."

Beric's voice was rough with emotion. "I, I cannot thank you enough for doing that Lady Margaery. But before any bath or fitting however, might I trouble you for a quill and parchment? And, and may I hope that particular raven has returned?"

"It hasn't yet I'm afraid." Margaery's voice said softly, and Jon stuck his head out the door in time to see her lay a gentle hand on the older man's shoulder. "Take all the time you want my friend, I've already prepared writing implements," she gestured to one side. "We should hear back from Starfall in around four, maybe six days."

Lord Beric looked in that direction, then nodded brusquely to Ser Piper, bowed formally to her and turned without another word entering the room and locking it behind him.

Edric however shook his head with a faint smile. "I think I'll just leave him to his work, thank you." He said sardonically. "I'm going to be heading home in any event, and I'm sure my Lord Beric has more important things to talk about with my aunt than me."

Margaery laughed tousling his hair before gesturing to the room next to Lord Beric's. "Then you can see the tailor first, young man! Don't think I didn't notice that most of your clothing is about 5 inches too short at the leg and arms!" Edric blushed but complied quickly and Jon smiled as Margaery turned to wink at him.

Later that evening Jon and his lords were indeed called to dinner. It wasn't the sumptuous affair that a feast of this nature would've been on one occasion, indeed it was very plebian fair for Highgarden. But even so the variety and amount matched what any noble house in the North would've put on for the Feast for the declaration of Autumn.

The meal was already in full swing by the time they arrived, a small insult to Jon's status as Hand. Margaery hadn't liked it, but had been overruled by the united front of her mother and Olenna. They both wanted to see how Jon would react, and Margaery had decided it wasn't worth alienating her mother further by arguing about it. But seeing as Jon didn't realize it, their little test was worthless.

"My daughter unfortunately has convinced the cooks and butlers that we need to start husbanding food," said Lay Tyrell, sighing in fond exasperation and some chagrin. "I couldn't even prevail upon her to open the larder especially for this meal."

"That was probably a good move my lady." said Jon bowing over her hand before looking at Margaery. She sat on one side of the table rather than at the head, and Jon frowned. "My lady, my brother and his wife made certain to tell me that you would be acting as Lord Paramount. Why are you not in your rightful chair?"

Margaery laughed quietly, shaking her head. "My brother's army is around three days out along the Golden River. That is his place, and I will not usurp it."

"Yes," said a faint crackling voice, causing Jon to turn to an elderly woman who sat right beside that noble place,

almost on the corner but not quite. "That was a shrewd move on your brother's part, I'd not have thought of it from a northern wolf. Of course, he then did something remarkably stupid, elevating a baseborn, and naming him Hand? That sets a bad precedent, no matter how certain your loyalty to him might be."

Margaery stiffened noticeably, but Jon simply shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't, not really. And my loyalty to my brother, to his wife, and to House Stark is not in question old woman, blood and loyalty is the most important thing in the North. I would've thought given that the Reach has always been known as the home of chivalry you would understand that."

The old woman barked a laugh, more of a cackle than a real laugh. "Well said, though I still say the precedent is a bad one."

Jon once again shrugged his shoulders as Arya sat down without preamble, reaching for the food. Compared to the fair they had had on the road, this was a feast of epic proportions. The chicken in particular was calling to Arya. Jon changed the subject quickly, waving to the others who stood beside him "May I introduce my sister Arya, Ser Piper, Lord Edric Dayne, and Lord Beric Dondarrion. They constitute the senior commanders of my force."

"Hardly an army." Olenna scoffed. "Judging by the numbers, you barely number what five thousand or so?"

"Our fighting prowess, organization and tactics allow us to have an impact far in proportion to our size." Jon replied coldly. "Oberyn learned that to his cost."

"Because of the archers and more importantly perhaps the arrows we sent to aid you." Olenna replied. "I'll not doubt your strong, or that your army's a good one, but don't think that you're the only power here."

Jon exchanged a glance with Margaery, who shook her head slightly almost unnoticeably. This was obviously one of the old woman's power plays, her need to show that the Reach was still a major power, and one worth respecting. So Jon replied blandly "As you say. Though if that is indeed the case, perhaps you should have kept some of that vaunted strength at home?"

For a moment the conversation around the hall paused, the ladies, knights, city factors, watching as Jon stared down the old woman, until she finally cracked a smile. "Hard and unyielding you Stark boys, just like your father. True enough, my idiot son was a buffoon in his later years." She waved Alerieto silence. "Oh be quiet Alerie, you know it's true. Even so, Lord Bastard Hand, remember the might of the Reach is not just in armies, but in food and manpower. Even now with the ravages we've faced that is still true."

"Indeed my lady, which is why I as Hand was sent down to aid you. Even Ranma would not have sent me along with this expedition just out of friendship's sake." He smiled widely at Margaery. "Even if he does count you as a friend my lady. He told me of the education you tried to give him in politics, and of your rivalry with the lady Merry. That made for interesting hearing, when Merry wasn't around anyway. He said it was the funniest thing he had ever seen, though he was thankful that neither of you were like Arya in how you would deal with such competition."

"Swish and stab." Arya muttered, chewing a bit of chicken quickly to get the words out. "Swish and stab." She glanced over at Edric, who smirked back blushing slightly as she did the same before looking away.

Margaery laughed, while Olenna asked quickly "You were raised with young Ranma, do you have any idea where his strength comes from? The tales of his destroying the Mountain that Road were very graphic, and there have been more and more tales of awe-inspiring deeds like that, not just his victories in this war."

Jon shrugged, feeling no inclination share Ranma's full story with this woman. Or even with Margaery frankly. "I am a Wolfsworn my lady, I trained with Ranma since we were five or six I think? A lot of the early training was in the form of games, so it's a little vague."

He laughed suddenly, shaking his head. "I remember the early weight training though, that was an experience. In any event, whatever his skills are they can be taught, but he'll only teach those who prove themselves loyal, like Edric here, or the other Wolfsworn."

"You've begun training in this strange new way of fighting?" Margaery asked looking at young Edric.

"I have my lady, and the training bore fruit already. I wasn't a very decent blade before this all began, and even after we formed the Brothers without Borders I was only reckoned a middling swordsman. Since then, well I met my distant relative the Darkstar Gerold Dayne, and I defeated him in sword to sword combat. He was marked as one of the best blades in Dorne, and I dealt with him easily."

"I dealt the killing blow though." Arya said smiling in a manner that showed all of her teeth in a way that sent the lady of the house to shiver and even Olenna to flinch backward slightly. "Didn't want Edric to become a kinslayer."

The conversation continued from there, delving into the campaign in the Riverlands from the beginning. The trials in particular were a fascinating subject to all of the gathered magnates and noble ladies, as well as the news that the Golden Tooth had fallen, something they had heard about before, though not the how.

Olenna however continued to needle Jon on his bastard status, staring at him thoughtfully as she did so, not looking away even once despite eating as much as any of the others.

Eventually even Jon's deep well of self-control began to run out, and at last he said, "My lady, if you have a problem with me, may you please speak it plainly? My status as a bastard is not in question, it is fact and this constant needling on that subject serves no purpose to my eyes. I am what I am, a loyal man of House Stark, a loyal brother of the king and the Royal couple's Hand, whatever my status at birth might have been."

"It is that status as Hand that makes your birth a point of contention." Olenna said simply. "Only once has a bastard been placed as Hand, Lord Brynden Rivers, and some say the Seven looks on in disfavor to the Hand being a bastard, given the number of natural disasters that occurred during Bloodraven's time at the position. Yet even though I'll admit he did not do too badly at the post, bastards as a whole have spelt the ruin of Houses weak and powerful more often than not! Surely you know enough history such as the Blackfyre Rebellions and the Ninepenny Kings War. Here in the Reach there were countless wars of succession for this or that House caused by bastards. And your brother simply hands you that amount of power, that amount of autonomy! Either he and his wife are fools or there's something more going on to it."

"Or, I am simply loyal and they know it." Jon said his voice suddenly as harsh as the stone of the North. "You are coming dangerously close to impugning on my personal honor, and even in the Reach you should know how such can be taken."

"I'm only impugning on it," she said silkily. "If there isn't really anything more behind it. So I ask you, what convinced Daenerys **Targaryen** to go along with the idea of legalizing your status?"

*She knows* Jon thought to himself suddenly. *She fucking knows!* "How?" he asked aloud. Staring hard at the old woman his voice a bare whisper which did not carry over the noise of the feast going on are all around them. "How?"

"I have been Queen of Thorns for a long time boy." Said the old woman, tapping her finger on the table in front of her. "And I've heard a lot of things over that time. Now tell me true, who are you?"

Jon looked at Margaery, who was looking back at him quizzically, staring between him and her grandmother, a fact which for some reason pleased Jon. She had no idea at least. Breathing deeply he shared a glance with Arya who shrugged her shoulders in him unconcerned. "At this point does it really matter?"

"No, no I don't suppose it does. So long as you realize my lady that whatever my birth, I have no wish for the crown, and I would rather slit my own throat than fight my brother. Get that through your head now. If this is some ploy to make me come out and admit to my heritage in a way for you to play kingmaker, to start another civil war so you can put me on the throne as some kind of puppet, get that out of your head now, because I will never agree with it. I would rather burn you alive at the stake as a witch then go along with it."

"I don't want another war, and such loyalty does you credit." Olenna said, her voice losing some of its edge for the first time in the meal. "And whatever your heritage, if it is indeed as I think I would not want that kind of blood on the throne in any event. Whatever the reality of their situation, their actions did break the kingdom after all."

"I'm utterly lost right now." Margaery said, "And I don't like it. Would someone's please fill me in on what's going on here?"

"I am Jon Targaryen nee Stark," Jon said slowly his eyes still locked with the old woman "son of Lyanna Stark and Prince Rhaegar, but only by blood. By birth and by inclination, by oath of fealty, by love and honor, I am a **Stark** my lady! And that is all will say on this matter. Are we clear?"

"Perfectly." Olenna said smiling slightly, as Margaery gaped at Jon and then her grandmother. "Welcome to Highgarden, Jon Stark. I'm sure our welcome will be worth a Hand's visit."

Later on that evening Jon met with Olenna and Margaery alone, passing on the tale about what had occurred between the two love-struck lovers which Eddard had shared with him and the others. It made for a longish tale, and



Margaery was shaking her head in surprise at some bits of it, muttering about how the bards had been right, that it had been love which had broken the kingdom, not madness.

Yet after Jon finished Olenna stood by what she said earlier. "Whatever the emotions between them Lyanna and Rhaegar were fools, **insane** idiots! Your sister was besotted and blind, and Rhaegar should've known what would happen if he took her to wife, especially with the way she had to run off to meet him! That act started the rebellion, and cost thousands of lives, including his own! No, given how well your brother and Daenerys have done, I have no wish to make use of your real heritage as you fear. Nor will any others if it ever becomes public."

"I wish I had your confidence in your fellow lords," said Jon coldly. "You made me say that aloud where others might've heard, so if it does come back to bite us, it is on your head."

"I'm old boy, you think any threats you can make matter to me?" Olenna scoffed, shaking her head. "No, what's more important is that before that act Rhaegar was part of a small group of... powerful individuals who saw the Aery's dissent into insanity as the greatest threat to the kingdom in centuries. We wanted to put Rhaegar on the throne, and to that end we began to put in place a network of spies."

"Since Robert's Rebellion we have fractured badly, but most of those spies now answer to me. With King's Landing gone, Varys and others of the group either out of communication or simply dead I've been able to take command of most of it, certainly all of it in the Reach, the Stormlands and the Westerlands. Elsewhere of course war gets in the way of my abilities, but for now, you have access to, if I'm not immodest in saying so the greatest spy mistress in Westerosi history and her network."

Jon stared at her thoughtfully then nodded slowly. "My brother already employs two Masters of Whisperers, a setup which works on many levels. I'll pass on that you have your own network to them, though hopefully once Stannis has been defeated we won't face any overt threat for a while. Well, not mortal ones anyway.""

"What do you mean by that?" Margaery asked, frowning sharply.

Jon shrugged and filled them in on what he knew about the White Walkers and their gathering strength. He of course didn't know everything that had occurred of late, the raven sent from Winterfell to Highgarden was still in the air somewhere, but it was closing quickly.

That meeting seemed to drag on forever to Jon, while Margaery and her grandmother made him aware of the problems facing the Reach. Despite Margaery enforcing a very mild version of a rationing system, food itself was not an issue in Highgarden, at least not in the realm of crops. Her reasoning for doing so was in fear of having need to build up enough food which could then be sent to the other kingdoms of Westeros.

She would continue to keep the system going until she had a good read of three points: the damage caused by Oberyn, the time it would take to put the area around the Mander back under the plow, and how long it would be before winter arrived. That last point was hotly debated among the maesters at this point, with most believing the Reach had at best another two months before winter hit it's northernmost areas.

Yet even without those areas, and the lands of House Rowan and others ravaged by the swords of the Lannisters, the Reach was indeed building up the surplus Margaery wanted to see. The tales Jon had heard of crops coming in far faster than they should, of fallow fields suddenly bearing full vibrant crops once again were true. Every remaining Great House and even every remaining minor House had begun to build up a surplus.

Jon and Olenna haggled then about what to do with that food, and here Olenna found that Ranma hadn't been the only Stark youth to be taught economics and their importance. Jon insisted that the food be distributed to the Riverlands and to the Stormlands without recompense, aiding those smallfolk in those areas that could not feed themselves any longer. The Crownlands could once look after itself, without the massive drain on food King's Landing had been, and with much of its land untouched, as far as Jon knew, by war. The Westerlands too, despite the losses among their nobles, could at least feed its own population.

But Oberyn and her mercenaries had done a horrifically complete job in ruining the lands their army passed through, poisoning wells, burning houses, and leaving corpses to rot where they were slain. The smallfolk surviving in those areas would never be able to repair their lands in time for winter, not in the face of autumn's impact on the Stormlands.

And the areas south of the Red Fork which had felt the sting of Lannister occupation were just as badly ravaged. According to a message sent from Maester Vymanover a month ago, nearly all of the smallfolk who had attempted to return to their lands in those areas had returned quickly, bringing tales of horror.

Olenna however had no empathy for the plight of those lands. She argued that getting the food there would not be an easy task or a cheap one. Moreover, selling that food was some of the farmers only means of income. Highgarden and many of the other great Houses were already dealing with too many smallfolk which couldn't produce anything. Therefore it should be sold as it normally would in peacetime.

In the end they compromised. Both the shipping and payment for the food sent into the Stormlands would be covered by the Crown, while the Riverlands and the food sent there would be paid by those Houses which could afford it, or paid for by the crown if not. Since House Tully was dealing with the majority of those refugees, it would fall on Riverrun's coffers to pay for it, but with the Golden Tooth under Tully control, that could easily be borne. However, if the Seven-sent abundance continued for long enough, food would also be sent up to the North by ocean. That food would be sent free, with the cost of distribution being footed by the Reach.

However, in return Jon refused to merely aid in House Redwynes rebuilding or any of the other Houses, a task that was beyond even House Tyrells' deep coffers. They could pay for some of it, but not the entirety, especially the damage to the Arbor and the Shield Islands. Instead, the Royal House would pay for the rebuilding of the Redwyne fleet and its vineyards. In return they would become half-owner of that fleet, and be paid taxes directly of the profits from the vineyards rather than House Redwyne. This would be decent and rather steady source of income for the crown.

However on the matter of displaced smallfolk and their livelihoods Jon was much more sympathetic, saying that the Crown would cede to both aiding their return to their homes and rebuilding out of its own pocket. This was in keeping with his king and queen's past policies, so Jon knew they would back it along with the rest of his work here.

All in all, while Jon's haggling was harsh on the Great Houses, it was not so harsh that they could not meet his demands. House Tyrell in particular could do so easily enough, thanks to Highgarden not having been attacked and its own lands actually having been enlarged to House Oldflowers having been wiped out.

This brought the discussion to the real reason why Jon had been sent down to aid Margaery: the Ironborn raiders. Admittedly at the time that message had been sent those raiders were a much greater issue than they were now, but for some reason while the raiding along the Mander had mostly stopped, there were at least two crews worth of Ironborn raiders scattered along the river below Oldflowers.

"Why they're still around with the Arbor fallen and our fleet moving on the Shield Islands, we don't know." said Olenna tapping the map thoughtfully looking at her granddaughter. "They are acting more like brigands and rapists than seaborne raiders at this point. Simply mindless destruction and pillaging."

Jon nodded grimly. "Like Oberyn and the mercenaries, they've lost themselves to the joy of slaughter. Still, two crews won't be much of an issue, even if they are able to find a keep that's large enough to hold them all. But is that the only threat we face?"

"It is not." Olenna replied honestly. "Until word reaches us of the outcome of the war between Stannis and the King, Lord Bryce's army is still a threat. If Stannis prevails, we may be forced to fight him before fighting Stannis's own forces, which would be bad."

Jon smiled thinly, knowing that if Stannis won, which Jon doubted to put it mildly, Olenna at least would urge her granddaughter and grandson to abandon Jon. By that point he might well be in the field with his army they could close Highgarden against him upon his return. Caught between the walls of the city and the army under Bryce Jon would be hard-pressed to get away. But again Jon had no doubt that his brother would be Stannis. Possibly Stannis was a good strategist, a good tactician, but he doubted that he was a match for Rannar, or that the Shadow Walkers were a match for the Wolfsworn.

"Stranger still, are the Marcher Houses. While they are all moving separately, most of them seem to be moving up to meet with Bryce. One of them however is not. House Peake is marching its forces in a direction that will let them meet with forces from House Florent, which have moved from their own territory near the Honeywine down to the Roseroad." Margaery said. "I'm afraid I don't know Lord Titus Peake at all, and Lord Florent..."

Olenna sighed. "I don't have any idea what that incompetent's long term plans are either. Lord Florent might be attempting to simply enlarge his holdings, or make some other trouble hoping that we'll make concessions to him given what happened to his son up by King's Landing, and that we don't have the resources to deal with him in the field."

"What happened to his son?" Jon asked one eyebrow raised. "The last I'd heard, Selyse Florent was married to Stannis, so shouldn't they have sat out this war?"

"The Florent's hedged their bets." Margaery said dryly. "While I have no doubt that Selwyn backed Stannis, Lord Florent sent his son and heir with a small token force to join the Reach's muster. After the battle Stannis apparently executed him for gross incompetence. Unfortunately, this means their House retains much of its strength."

Olenka barked a caustic cackle. "I'd not expect anything brilliant on the battlefield from him, except possibly in how quickly he retreats from it! But they could handle most of the Houses on that side of the Mander one by one, at least until Willas returned. Frankly they might be the bigger threat in comparison to the remaining Ironborn."

"Show me where they are," Jon said thinking hard as he gestured to the map between the three of them. "And do you have any agents among House Florent his servants that can tell us anything?"

"I've a few, but they're unable to get messages to me that easily," Olenka replied, shrugging her shoulders. "And of course with Lord Florent and his people out in the field, I've lost all of those contact's usefulness. I only have one among his armstrongs, and he's not in a position to spy on his lord's thoughts."

Jon nodded, looking down at the map. Looking up however he noticed that Margaery seemed to be fighting back a yawn and smiled standing up. "I think we've done enough for one day. We'll go over the logistics and supplies for my forces tomorrow, I intend to let my man rest in the city at least until Willas arrives. Unless you think we need to set off quickly?"

Neither of the Tyrell women replied, simply nodding their heads. Jon smiled, then Tyrell, bowing from the waist towards Margaery. "Until tomorrow milady." With that he left, heading not back to his room as Margaery and her grandmother thought, but downstairs and out towards the godswood.

Behind him Olenka looked at her granddaughter, wagging her eyebrows conspiratorially. "My, he is a handsome fellow isn't he and heir to the throne for now."

Margaery rolled her eyes slapping her grandmother lightly on the hand. "Enough of that grandmother, you gave your word that you wouldn't push for such things, and you heard Jon, he'd rather slit his own throat than fight Ranma." *If I was faced with that possibility I might do that too regardless of our relationship*, Margaery thought to herself shaking her head. Ranma's physical abilities, and his string of victories in the war were hard to argue against.

"Just something to think about my dear, not the heir to the throne part you're right about that, but the handsome part. Something I think you've already noticed, haven't you?" Margaery did not deign to respond to that, which unfortunately was a response in itself. Instead she stood, kissed her grandmother lightly on the forehead and left, allowing a servant to enter and help with the old woman appear for bed.

OOOOOO

The two direwolves found Jon as he entered the godswood. With Ghost guiding him, the three of them moved through the, to Jon's mind, over civilized and fake woods, heading deep into them in search of the weirwood trees.

Soon enough Jon stood in front of the loose triangle of weirwood trees called the Three Singers. They weren't in the not center of the godswood for some reason, but off to one side, the first thing in the woods that made the godswood seem less than the constructed park that it seemed. The Three Singers themselves were much younger than the weirwood trees he was used to, or at least seemed that way. Their trunks were almost slender in comparison to the massive trunks of the tree in Riverrun or back in Winterfell. They had hundreds of willowy branches, all of them tipped with the red five pronged leaves of the breed.

The faces carved into their white trunks too reflected this, being of a trio of women, something Jon had never seen before. The detail on those faces was amazing, far more than the rough face on the tree in Riverrun, though not as natural seeming as the face on the tree in Winterfell.

*And given Lady Margaery and her importance to Highgarden, plus her grandmother's undeniable influence, it's strangely appropriate for House Tyrell to have such.* Jon thought, before stepping forward. He looked at them for a moment, before choosing the tree whose face seemed to give off the most stern, martial expression, bowing his head slightly and reaching forward with his hands to gently touch the weirwood tree trunk.

When they came to him the images were incredibly vague and very quick, so quick that he knew he was missing some. He saw Ranma running, and then armies clashing. One army was of men, the other of wights and worse things. He saw fleets moving. He saw holdfasts taken, keeps falling, and the dead rising but for these visions there were no hints as to where these battles were taking place or a sense of time, and they passed so quickly, their hold on his mind so thin he couldn't get anything from them. They faded, one after another, leaving no information he

could act on save a sense of urgency, of cold and war.

Yet there was one image that did stay in his head, not for long, but just enough to give him some useful information. It showed dragons made of rotted flesh, dark black steel and ice, attacking a longhouse Jon had seen many times before.

Taking his hand away, Jon shook his head to clear of the effects of being touched by the Old God's power. *Seven damn it, that was, that was odd. I suppose being so far south it shouldn't come as a surprise the visions weren't exactly clear, but still, it's obvious the Old Gods are calling me north. But... but I was sent into the Reach to aid it's people with the problems here, I can't just abandon that mission. Besides, I couldn't get any sense of time out of any of those visions. Are they from events happening now? Are they happening in a weeks' time, months? I can't tell!*

The next day he confided what he had seen to Arya while the girl prowled the castles training room waiting for Edric to show up for their daily sparring session, it pouring down rain outside. The boy was getting much better, and he was sneaky, which against Arya was very important, and she enjoyed their spars, despite the fact Jon, Like Ranma, would always smirk whenever he saw the two of them together.

When he finished she frowned heavily. "I don't like this! I think we should head home right away. Who knows what's been going on elsewhere, if Ranma's still fighting the Red Witch, Stannis, and Viserys then we might be the only ones able to get away at all, whatever that one glimpse of our brother running might mean! It's our duty to head home and do what we can, leave these soft southerners to their own problems!"

"It would take us months to get there, Old God's damn me, it would take you and I running with our direwolves more than two months to even get to the Neck, then another month maybe to get to Winterfell. Which might not be where we're most needed! And as good as we are Arya, alone we can only do so much. No, I have a better idea. Oldtown still retains some of its navy, and there's the army under Garlan, and under Sir Bryce and Willas to consider. When we go north, I want us to go with the entire weight of the remaining Reach forces behind us. I even think I know where we need to go, too."

The two siblings however ran into a surprise when they confided what Jon had seen to Margaery later that day. The three of them met in her room, ostensibly to discuss her training, or at least working out, with Arya. When told of Jon's visions Margaery nodded, taking it at face value despite it flying in the face of traditional Seven doctrine to acknowledge the power of other faiths.

"The maesters are being strangely coy about it, but we know that the black candles have been lit. Further one of the Archmaesters, the only one willing to aid him against the Ironborn's own magical abilities, has convinced Garlan to head north. At least, he was doing so the last time I had communications with him. He wanted to take the Shield Islands, then turn his ships northward. We haven't heard from him yet about that."

"Would he have to resupply after taking back the Shield Islands?" Jon asked intently.

"Yes. This would force him to head back to the Whispering Sound at least. From there ships from Oldtown could go out to resupply them. Or he could use Bandallon without losing much time. But since we haven't heard from him yet, I think he didn't think about that one." Margaery shrugged. "My brother is smart and reckoned a decent swordsman, but in terms of strategy he's not very experienced."

"Ouch, such a ringing endorsement." Arya laughed. "Still, that might mean we could meet with his fleet in the Whispering Sound right?"

But Jon was shaking his head. "No, at least not yet. We need to know what happened in the Shield Islands first. If we've smashed the Ironborn's remaining strength, fine, but I don't want any surprises. I don't want to march off like Mace did with the remaining strength of the Reach only to have someone else sneak in behind us."

"This is good thinking." Margaery said with a thin smile. "Does that mean you'll still deal with the raiders that are still around the Mander?"

"Yes." Jon said nodding decisively. "Besides that, I wish to remain here in Highgarden long enough to talk to your brother. Between the three of us I think we can figure out the best forces to stay and what is to go."

"Maybe," Arya said with a shrug. "We can hope at least, though I heard an interesting phrase from some of the merchants in the city the other day." She waited until the other two were looking at her before speaking, trying to affect a smallfolk accent and failing miserably, which made the line all the more amusing. "Shit in one o' yer 'ands, hope in another, see which'n yer have ta empty first."

After they finished chuckling, Margaery shook her head, looking at the two siblings. "You two are very confident Ranma will win this war. Despite my hopes in backing him however, I have to admit to having some misgivings about it. Stannis has a reputation as a very good general."

"Not good enough." Jon said with a thin wolfish smile, one Arya shared, her hands clenched on the hilt of Fang. "Not nearly good enough."

OOOOOO

Willas arrived two days later ahead of schedule, and once again the city's streets rebounded with cheers and salutations. Jon and Margaery rode out to meet him, leaving behind both Arya and the two direwolves in the godswood. There, in the center of the city Willas and Jon met for the first time, shaking hands in full view of the watching smallfolk and the army behind Willas.

"My Lord Tyrell." Jon said gravely, clasping the other man's hand in a warrior's grip. "I have heard tell of the good work you've been doing on the western front. You ended a blight on the land when you tore down Clegane Keep and did as a Lord Paramount ought in defending your people. As Hand to Ranma and Daenerys Stargaryen, first of their names, I formally, and happily, acknowledge and approve of your resumption of the Lord Paramountcy of the Reach."

"I could not have done it alone, and I have heard tell of your battle against the Dornish mercenaries my Lord Hand. Without you and your men, their ravages would've continued nigh onto the walls of Highgarden itself." Willas replied smiling briefly at the younger man.

His message said (and heard by more than Willas) Jon moved his horse backwards slightly, allowing Margaery to come close flinging her arms around her brother, nearly falling out of her own saddle with her exuberance. It was of course not very decorous of her, but neither sibling cared as they clutched one another in a hug that was as heartfelt as it was strong.

Later that day the two army's commanders met in the castle's dining hall, and the men shared the details of their campaigns. Jon found Willas to be insightful, intelligent, thoughtful, calm and very droll at times. All things Jon felt were excellent to see in a Lord Paramount, especially in a realm that has faced so much turmoil.

In a small ceremony Jon handed over marks of nobility to Toulev Simthson, bequeathing him with, after talking about it to Margaery, the wiped out House Osgrey's former holding of Coldmoat. While Coldmoat itself was still a very large and well-built castle, the lands had fallen into disrepair and it would need a lot of work to flourish again. But Toulev didn't seem them kind of man to shirk from hard work, and the smiles on nearly everyone's faces as the former armymen accepted the mark of nobility was everything Jon could hope for.

Two Knightly Houses, House Conklyn and HouseWillumwere raised to Noble status thanks to the service they and their men had given in the War. They were awarded lands along the Mander which had formerly been held by House Graves, Dunn and Westbrook. All three had been wiped out by the Ironborn. Their lords had subsequently been killed elsewhere in the war either by Stannis or through their own treachery. Of course putting those lands back into working order would be a major undertaking, but House Tyrell and the crown via Jon had already pledged their support to it.

The last portion of these proceedings however was a surprise to everyone, even Margaery. "As Hand, it would not normally fall under my power to create new knighthoods," said Jon looking around at the ladies and men gathered in Highgarden's dining hall. "However, my brother, my King and his queen bade me do this, in their name. Ser Graceford, step forward."

Still wearing his full plate armor minus his helm Graceford did so, and when Jon gestured, he knelt. "Your House has long been known to worship the Mother specifically of the Seven, and to rarely take part in wars save when one side or another made war upon the Mother's children. The king and queen have no desire to change this, rather to see this used as a platform for a new knighthood."

"Ser Graceford, I award thee the commandership of the Order of the Mother's Fist. You will have a crown remit to welcome any and all into your ranks, from both nobility and smallfolk. Your order will receive funding from the crown, and you will be able to second any armymen or knight to your service. A suitable keep will be found to house the order in time, though for now we all obviously have better things to do with our time than go house hunting."

There were some laughs at Jon's small joke, but he went on seriously, staring down into Graceford's eyes. "Your purview will be to defend those who cannot defend themselves, the smallfolk, from the depredations of any who would prey upon them, regardless of where they hide, bandits, deserters, mercenary bands, Ironborn raiders, it

matters not, it will be your task to hunt them down. Do you accept this burden before crown and god?"

"My Lord Hand, in the name of the Mother and their majesties, I do." Ser Graceford replied calmly.

"Then rise, Lord Commander Graceford." Jon said with a smile.

Later that evening as he and Jon shared a bottle of wine in Willas' personal office, Willas said. "That was well done, with both Toulev and Graceford. Appropriate, well-earned and I could not think of a better man to lead an Order with such a specific task."

While technically Willas could move into his father's rooms and his office, Willas had decided to wait until the office could be redecorated. Despite their estrangement he loved Mace and moving in when all of his things were still in there seemed a desecration. Besides, his own room was warm, familiar, and further from the wine cellar, a good thing in his opinion. Willas had no desire to fall into his father's bad habits.

"I only spoke the truth, the reports we saw of your deeds and those of your men were pretty complete as such things go. Besides which, the new knightly order will be a major aid in days to come." Considering that Knightly Orders like that could induct anyone into their ranks regardless of birth, it would be a way of getting more smallfolk into a military position, which could only aid in the knighthood's task of wiping out brigands and defending the smallfolk. And they could also serve as pointed reminders to nobles of all stripes to play nice. After this last war that might not be as necessary as it once was, but it was still a consideration.

Willas nodded, and the two of them continued to sip from the wine bottle and discuss the war and its causes, as well as what Jon felt was happening elsewhere. Rumors had begun to spread of some kind of battle that went on near the King's Road, which saw the Lannister's false king finally laid low, but no details had reached the Reach just yet.

They also of course talked about the future. Jon outlined what he and Margaery had already accomplished, with Willas adding his own points of view, before sending for a servant to bring in a map of the Reach. From there the two of them began to work on redrawing the map, working through the noble Houses which had, to their knowledge been wiped out root and branch. Dunn, Graves, Westbrook, Chester, Grimm, Risle, Hewett, Yleishire, Uffering, Kidwell, Inchfield, Redding, the list of dead Houses was long and depressing. Worse in a way was the list of Houses still alive but crippled militarily.

It made for grim work, but House Tyrell at least would come out of this war even stronger than it had been before, controlling large segments of the Mander on either side of its previous area of control. It now spread down to Oldflowers and the lands around it, and up towards House Fossoway's land. House Bushy, whose land had been between Fossoway and House Tyrell before, had been wiped out in the battle between the stags. Thanks to this, Tyrell's lands had increased by at least half again.

The other noble Houses, those that survived the coming clash between Stannis and Ranma, would also come out of it in a stronger position, at least in time. Right now however, several Houses had already proven themselves.

House Beesbury had suffered in war, but the House had many branching families and their lands had not suffered the sting of the Ironborn. While the extent of their losses in war could not be known until the War ended and the survivors came home, the House would survive, as would House Ambrose.

While most of that Houses forces were intact from last report, if they remained loyal to Stannis, that would probably cease, and the main house was small, so their long term fortunes were still in doubt. Their lands however, situated slightly southeast of where Willas had halted the Lannister reavers, had not been despoiled,. Lady Ambrose had also been open-handed in aiding the refugees that sought her lands despite sending no men to aid Willas in his efforts.

Oakheart would retain its lands and gain some more from its southern neighbors, the Kidwells and the Reddings all of whom were gone now. Rowan had been hammered badly, but while neither Jon nor Willas had any idea if Mathis Rowan was still alive, the House was still there, and it's castle still powerful and well maintained thanks to Lady Rowan, Mathis' wife they might even be awarded House Woodbright's land, since that House was also listed among the destroyed. House Crane would also enrich itself by taking command of former Westerlands land. And the Houses by Oldtown and in the Dornish Marches were still somewhat strong. House Blackbar, Bulwer, Cuy and Mullendore might have lost their lords and heirs to war, but retained their lands and some of their military strength. Frankly those houses were probably better off without the idiotic 'summer knights' that had previously led them.

Of the marcher House's only House Tarly had truly suffered in this war so far, it's lord dead with the majority of the men it had sent to war. But the Valyrian blade of the house was still in it's possession and the survivors had returned. The house would no doubt recover in time, though it would not receive any material aid in doing so. Instead, the

young lord would need to present himself to the Royal House at some point in the future.

Several hours later the wine they had consumed began to mess with their thoughts enough that they had to leave off for the day, with Willas smiling slightly as they did. "By the way, I don't suppose I could interest you in letting me introduce Ghost to some of my dogs? I doubt I've any studs who'd pass muster for Nymeria, mores the pity. Still, I'd love to see what would happen if we could somehow breed a direwolf with some of my lines."

Jon laughed. "That actually might have already happened somewhere. Ranma told me about this time with Fenris when the two of them were travelling to King's Landing with Robert Baratheon and father. According to Ranma they stayed at an inn, and Fenris was forced to stay outside in the kennels where..."

OOOOOO

The siege of the Last Hearth had become a thing of sporadic raids and attritional warfare. Most of the time the White Walkers stayed as far out of arrow range as they could, sending in clumps of wight archers in their stead. Attacking mostly under the cover of darkness or when the sky was heavily overcast, they would attack one section of the wall with a few volleys before retreating. Occasionally they would send in large clumps of wights at this or that point along the wall, testing the defenders more severely. But there were enough defenders to rest in shifts, so those on watch were always well-rested.

It was the **bitter** cold more than anything that was beginning to dampen morale. The cold of this winter was sapping even to Northerners, and too few of them had enough warm clothing to truly cover themselves adequately. Dozens of men had lost fingers or noses, or ears to the cold, more so than they had lost men to the attacks of the enemy, since that first day anyway. And the lack of any real attacks or true targets was also sapping the defenders martial ardor.

*Food at least isn't an issue,* thought Hother as he cracked his neck explosively, moving into his personal quarters with a sigh of relief when the heat from the coal stoked fire met him. *We also haven't used my final little surprise yet, and it doesn't look as if the White Walkers have any idea it's out there, which is good. Still, I can't help but feel that there's going to be worse to come. Much worse.*

This alas was true. That first assault had been directed solely by warriors, White Walkers who did not use magic save that found in their armor and weapons. Cannon fodder, in other words. The next assault began nearly two weeks after the siege began, and the first sign that it was different came from a scream from the wall. "By the Old Gods, what is that?!"

Andrew Willowtree shot to his feet, quickly bundling himself up as much as possible before racing outside. It would do no good for his men if he died because of the cold or suffered any of the dozen ailments that came from not remembering to do so. Even so, he beat Hother to the parapet simply because he was younger and in better shape. So he was the first of the commanders to see the horror that was coming towards them over the snow.

It was a giant spider like those the defenders of the Wall had seen but rather than being ten stories or more tall, this one was only a 24 feet from the tip of its head down to its feet. Yet even so, it was altogether horrifying, made of ice and bodies thrown together rather than the steel of those being used further north. It had an incomplete, haphazard look to it, but even so it and the seven others following it were things of horror to the defenders. From above that monstrous force came birds, thousands of them. It was as if the avians of a forest had been hunted down and turned to the White Walkers purpose.

With these new terrors came old ones. The defenders had hoped against hope that the horde of wights they had dealt with that first day had been the totality of their enemy's forces, but it was obviously not the case. They had been reinforced somewhat, the horde strengthened back to its original size, and more White Walkers could be seen at the back of it horde. There were even White Walkers on top of the spiders, six on each.

For a moment this site of that magical horde drew Sir Andrew's breath out of his body. Then he shook himself, and bellowed "To arms! To arms!"

The defenders began the battle firing a fusillade of fire arrows at the oncoming horde, while the best archers among them coolly waited, there gloved hands working on their bow strings as they waited for the giant spiders to come within range. They did so far faster than the defenders had hoped, moving as fast as spiders of normal size could over the hard-packed snow.

The first few dragonglass arrowheads struck, but didn't do much, the spiders shrieked like the wights would when on fire, but didn't slow down. They didn't charge the castle yet however, preferring to stay back, allowing the wights time to force the defenders to spread their fire. A few White Walkers on the back of those beasts took the better angle to

fire they allowed to fire at the defenders, causing death and injury everywhere around the wall. In return several White Walkers fell dead from dragonglass arrows. Even a nonlethal hit with one was enough to kill a White Walker, if slowly and a great deal of pain.

But it was the birds that caused the defenders the most grief. They zoomed down, far more numerous than the defenders fire could fight off. Hundreds of birds fell but thousands came on, overwhelming the defenders in places, pecking the men on the parapet or on the top of the towers to death.

Yet they didn't discriminate between the archers and the regular armymen, and attacking like this brought them within range of the swords and axes of the defenders. For every man they went down, hundreds of birds did as well. As the battle continued more of the defenders raced to the walls the attrition beginning to work in the defender's favor.

But after the last group of birds was seen off, Andrew turned and stared as the first of the wights reached the bottom of the wall. "Light the ropes! Do it now!"

To one side an armymen looked at him in surprise, while others simply raced off to carry out his orders. "Don't we want them to start climbing the outer wall first?"

Andrew shook his head grimly pointing with his sword at the spider creatures who were now circling ever closer despite what the archers with dragonglass could do to them. Worse, their own losses were beginning to mount. The White Walkers had a skill with the bow that had to be seen to be believed. "No, those things will be on us at the same time, and I don't think we want to face them both. "

"Surely the fire will scare the spiders off as well?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Andrew said shrugging philosophically. "Best to spread the word to start husbanding of the dragonglass arrows too, I don't think they're doing more than irritating those spiders."

It was well Andrew had thought of that, because the defenders had already gone through more than half their remaining dragonglass arrows, though they still retained a goodly number of dragonglass daggers. These had already seen work in this battle, dealing with the injured birds that had fallen within the confines of the Castle, as well as the dead among the defenders. It was gristly work, but necessary to keep them from rising as wights.

The battle continued for some time, with the fires of the trap on the wall lighting the evening for a time. The spiders continued to march around the castle searching for an opening where there wasn't any fire nets, but not finding any. But unlike the first day while the wights and the White Walkers kept their distance from the fire, they did not retreat entirely. Arrows continued to fly from both sides, and snow continued to fall.

Eventually the fire along the ropes went out, slowly but surely dissipating, and the horde charged forward. The spiders led the way now, but Andrew and Hother were ready. "Archers, fire at the ditches!"

With that phrase hundreds of archers all along the walls shifted targets, aiming not towards the attacking wights or spiders, but at the ditches filled with coal. Those ditches coverings had been smashed aside by the weight of the spiders leaving the coal, all of which had been soaked in vegetable oil before being placed out there open to their fire arrows.

The coal burst into flames and heat, turning the wood that had previously covered the ditches into fuel, putting up a wall of heat and fire here and there around the Last Hearth. One spider got caught directly in this trap and burned with a keening wail, along with the white walkers that had been riding it. Two others lost their front legs and fell backwards, tumbling their riders to the ground. Three more were badly burned, and only the first to attack had advanced far enough to be completely miss the trap.

It tried to ascend the walls, only to face hundreds of fire arrows, all of the defenders along that wall now retargeting on it. The magic that made it go simply couldn't protected from that number of fire arrows, and it began to collapse, allowing the defenders to retarget the rest of the injured spiders and their former riders before they could get out of range.

While their men were seeing to this, Andrew and Hother stood on top of the gatehouse frowning heavily. "I said to myself last night that we might be able to last out years if that first attack was the best they could throw at us. Now I'm afraid I might have inadvertently brought this fate upon us."

Andrew shook his head. "I don't really believe fate can be tempted like that. Although, you're right when you say we won't be lasting out years." He turned watching as man began to gather up the dead, quickly counting more than 200



bodies simply within his line of sight. "We won't last months if they can throw attacks like that at us. And worse, that coal out there won't last forever."

"Oh there's even worse than that boy." Hother growled, looking at one of the dead birds. "That there is the raven we've got trained for Winterfell. We can't even get the word out now."

Hother stared at the bird, then at Andrew, before turning to stare at the army outside their walls. Then he shrugged, threw back his shoulders and turned to organize a work party to dispose of the dead birds littering the parapet.

OOOOOO

Willas and Jon looked up from their conversation about logistics when the door to Jon's room, which they were using this evenings for their planning session, banged open. In the doorway stood Lord Dondarrion, smiling widely while behind him Edric stood, shaking his head yet still wearing an equally large smile. "She has been faithful! Allyria still wishes to marry me!" Lord Dondarrion blurted, then without another word rushing over to the wine bottle set on the table between Willas and Jon.

He poured himself a generous glass, raised it slightly to the two men still staring at him before downing it in one long gulp. When he put it down he was strangely enough sounding more sober than he had before. "We received a reason from House Dayne. They formally pledge allegiance to the new Royal House, and only ask that the Lord Dayne be allowed to return to home."

Then his smile was back, wider than ever. "She also asks specifically that I return him to the House, so that we may finally be married. She is looking forward to hearing my tales, and to seeing me again."

Willas smiled, standing up to clap the other man on the shoulder heartily. "I'm happy for you," he said simply. Then he smiled sardonically. "My own marriage doesn't seem to be on the horizon, alas."

"We'll have to look into that I suppose," Jon said with a faint smile his own. "Do you have any... preferences?"

"Bite your tongue." Willas spat back, shuddering a little. "Let me have another few years of bachelorhood before you and my grandmother conspired between the two of you to end that happy state, please."

The three men laughed, and Edric who had remained in the doorway shook his head closing the door, leaving them to it.

Smiles were remarkably absent the next evening however, when Maester Lomys and Margaery joined them. Margaery watched as Jon read the message from Winterfell, internally noting that this was yet another sign that Jon and Ranma were true brothers. Where other families would rage and shout, glare angrily, or strike out about them, the Starks did something much more terrifying. Something Ranma had shown her when he learned of the true depths of Gregor Clegane's crimes.

They **stilled**. Everything about them went hard cold and still, save for his grey eyes which seemed to snap with an inner fire, much like the lava in a volcano. What was more terrifying was that Arya, Ghost and Nymeria all went cold and quiet as well, despite not having actually read the message yet. They were simply reading Jon somehow, reacting as a pack would.

She exchanged a glance with Willas, who nodded back understanding what she had seen, before looking back at Jon. As Lord Paramount of the Castle Margaery had of course handed the message to him first, but he had immediately handed it over to Jon, not reading it. "What does it say?"

"The White Walkers have found a way around the Wall. They first took Skagos, pushed back a force my family had sent there to bring the Islanders to heel, and are now on the mainland. And this was weeks ago!" Jon replied before handing the message over to Willas. He turned to stare down at the map of the Reach, which the three of them had again been working on that evening. "How long would it take us to get Oldtown from here?"

"On a straight march 3 and 1/2 weeks... I think." Margaery said calculating quickly. "If you can march as quickly down the Roseroad as you did from the Blackwater to the Mander anyway." She looked at Arya, who nodded back having told Margaery how many days that portion of the journey had taken during one of their practice sessions. "But you can't simply head down to Oldtown immediately, there are still questions that need to be answered here in the Reach. Lord Bryce, the raiders along the Mander, House Florent and Peake in particular. Also remember what you said, you don't want to take all of the Reach's defenders with you."

Jon's hands clenched and unclenched, but he wasn't looking at her, instead looking out the window. "Those visions I

told you about were real. I can't imagine my brother leaving Stannis intact behind him, which means he's won this war. The Army is on its way back, my brothers already probably in the North somewhere, and I'm stuck here in the Reach!"

"I told you then, the Reach matters more than its men-at-arms!" Margaery said sharply, smacking her hand down on Jon's making him turn his gaze to her his eyes wide for a moment as he came back from that dark angry place. "We have to put the Reach to order, we have to get food moving into the Riverlands and the Stormlands, or else we will face famine in those places all too soon, and the chaos will spread! And to do that we need to deal with the remaining threats here. Do you think Ranma would thank you for running off and leaving those problems to fester?"

"I understand that up here but not here." Jon said after a moment staring into her eyes and tapping his forehead before tapping his chest. "Still you're right, and regardless of how slow Bryce's moving, I think it's time that we start dealing with some of these issues."

"I've already sent a messenger demanding to know his intentions to Lord Floret." said Willas. "Your men have been training ours, and both our forces are decently rested, though I think some of your horses still need some more rest. You drove them hard on the march. Still, if aren't going to wait for the pike regiments to be ready, we can march any day."

At Arya's feet Nymeria sniffed audibly, turning her nose up, as if saying that discussions about horses were beneath her dignity, causing Ghost to chuff in the laughter of his kind. Arya smirked at the two direwolves, tuning out the following discussion first time as she played with Nymeria's ears.

Jon nodded, then moved over to a larger map of Westeros. Unlike the map of the Reach this one wasn't well detailed. It had no lines denoting the borders of the various Great House's lands, only major castles were showed at all and a few scattered landmarks. "Tell me good maester, do you know if Maidenpool, Harrenhal, Harroway or Duskendale have ravens trained for Highgarden? And if so, how long would it take to get a message from them to here?"

Maester Lomys was an old man, a distant cousin of the House whose loyalty to them was unquestionable. He frowned in thought, then shook his head slowly. "I do not think Harrenhal, Harroway or Maidenpool would. At least, I have not seen any ravens from those places since before Robert's Rebellion. Duskendale might, however. If a raven comes from that city it would take possibly nine or ten days to get here."

Jon nodded, estimating times and distances in his head. "What are you thinking of?" Margaery asked, though she already had a good idea.

"I'm thinking of how quickly my brother and Daenerys could get word to us of their victory, and by my calculations it should be arriving here any day now." Any small doubt about that victory he might've had disappeared when he initially had his visions. There was no chance Ranma or Daenerys would have left any cohesive enemy behind them to take to sea or run off, which meant the war was over. *I just have to get word of that to Bryce somehow, and one of my problems at least will go away.*

He turned back to stare at the map, which denoted where Bryce Caron's army was. They were marching at a okay pace for a normal army of this time, which meant a hell of a lot slower than any army Ranma and Jon had involved with. There were still at least two days out from Highgarden, and what Bryce would do when he arrived was still a question. "I have no idea where that battle occurred between Ranma and Stannis but..."

"it wasn't just your brother and Stannis," said a familiar crackling voice from the doorway, and they all turned to see Olenna being helped in by two maids. She held up a message of her own, smirking slightly. "There was also Viserys' army coming down from Maidenpool. One of my factors, the only one I have in that town got word to me. Does that change the equation young Wolf?"

"Not at all." Jon said with a shrug. "Viserys might have a decent sized force, but it would be an untried one, and frankly there is no general in the world to match my brother. As for his dragon, it could be a problem I suppose but one Daenerys could match."

"The Red Witch could give him problems though," Margaery reposted shaking her head. "Magic on one side, a dragon on the other, I don't know Jon, Ranma is good, but it is he that good as a general?"

Jon and Arya exchanged a complacent smile. "Yes..." Arya said finally looking up from where she had been playing with Nymeria's ears. "Yes he is."

Bryce's army arrived at the gates of Highgarden two days later, by which time a message had indeed arrived from

Duskendale by raven wing, beating any message Olenna's spies could send easily. It was a short message declaring victory and Stannis's death, as well as the surprising appearance of the Golden Company under another Targaryen pretender. Olenna had looked aghast at that, shaking her head and muttering about old plans that should never have seen the light of day, but Jon frankly didn't care to question her about it. He had other fish to fry.

When informed of this message Lord Caron was relieved and immediately placed his army at Jon and Willas' service. Even though many of his commanders urged him to wait and make certain that this message was real, Bryce knew Willas, and the Starks in particular were not at home with such subterfuge.

Jon and Willas promptly began to break that force up, adding a few thousand horsemen to the force that Jon would take along the Mander to clear out the remaining Ironborn. Ser Graceford became Jon's second in command on this mission.

Willas would lead another, larger force straight to Oldtown along the Rose road for now, before the force would split in two. Lord Caron and the majority of his army would go with Lord Dondarrion, marching straight down to the southern marches to meet the Marcher Houses. Most of those Houses had stopped and turned around once word reached them through the smallfolk that the army under Oberyn had been smashed, but House Peake was still moving, heading towards a meeting with House Floret's forces. The other half of the force would continue the march to Oldtown under Willas.

At the same time Willas also send a message down to Oldtown, ordering House Hightower to prepare enough ships to embark a further 7,000 men, which was as much as Willas, Jon and Margaery could agree to add to Garlan's force, which itself would lose at least it's remaining cavalry arm. This would allow the Reach to retain a decent sized force at home.

It would leave them with enough infantry to reinvest several of the keeps along the Mander and send a force up to the Shield Islands to do the same with them. The cavalry, which would make up the larger portion of the army, would also keep up the anti-bandit activities and back up Lord Dondarrion down in the Passes. In the same vein, several of the war galleys which currently served under Garlan would also be left behind to patrol the Reach coastline and the islands.

The reason for this was because a message from Garlan had reached Highgarden about a week ago from Oldtown. In it, Garlan gave an account of the battle of the Arbor, and the aborted invasion of the Shield Islands. The fact that five or six crews worth of Ironborn that should have been in those islands were now unaccounted for was disturbing in the extreme.

They needn't have bothered worrying about them however. While he was a rapist, a murderer, a sociopath, a torturer without conscious and practically anything else anyone could think of, one thing that Euron Greyjoy was not was stupid. Nor was he interested in glory, holding lands, or proving the worth of the Old Way.

Euron was interested in power, and had come back thinking that he could gain such power through the throne of the Iron Islands. With the destruction of much of the Iron Island's military capacity, the news that the Islands themselves were being invaded, and that every hand was now turned against them, Euron had decided not to attempt anything.

Instead, he had slipped past Garlan's fleet in the night, heading to the Shield Islands. There he convinced the captains of the crews still there through violence or words to follow him now that his brothers were both dead. And instead of heading home to the Iron Islands, he had taken them on a roundabout course further south. The Summer Islands beckoned with easy spoils, easy life, slaves and women aplenty. Especially since pirates had already attacked the only town in the Summer Islands and heavily damaged its defenses in the battle.

The very next day Jon marched out at the head of his army, which did not include Arya. She had opted to go with Eddic and Lord Dondarrion, saying something about protecting her stake. Why that set Margaery into gales of laughter Jon didn't know, though the fact that the two women were grinning at one another as Arya said it made Eddic blush and stammer, something Jon found telling.

*The fact those two got on so well together was a surprise* Jon mused as he trotted at the head of the Army. Despite Willas offering him one of the finest horses Jon had ever seen as his own, he had declined to ride. Thanks to Ranma's training Jon could race any horse into the ground over a distance, and there was no point to having one simply for show at this point, everyone who mattered knew not to judge Jon by the fact he was an infantryman. *If the two of them hadn't gotten along it would've been a disaster, but they seem to have certain similar interests.*

Margaery had yearned for years to learn about anything that pointed and stabbed, a predilection that Arya was happy to cultivate. In turn Arya was interested in history, and surprisingly land management. While she wasn't interested in

all of the normal womanly duties, she certainly was interested in knowing whether or not her future husband was doing his job properly. An interest that Margaery in turn cultivated in her.

There were still some differences of course. Margaery was certain that women could wield greater power hidden behind the shadow of a man than could ever be the case in this day and age by themselves. Law, custom society, even religion did not allow for women to truly be seen the equal of men save possibly at the Royal level. Arya however was wedded to the power of combat.

He paused at the gate of Highgarden seeing lady Margaery waiting there astride a horse along with several dozen men, only two of whom looked like men at arms. "My lady, it's kind of you to see us off yourself but..."

"I am not seeing you off, my Lord Hand." Margaery said, falling in next to him smiling down at him from the saddle as she languidly reached out to pet Ghost on the back of the head. Like Fenris, Ghost was a monster of his breed, his head equal to the withers of her horse and broader across in the body. The direwolf rumbled happily under her scratching, smirking as only a wolf could at Jon's confused expression.

"I am coming along to personally survey the lands damaged by the Ironborn," Margaery went on gesturing to the men behind her, most of whom looked as if they roared just as well as a sack of potatoes. "These gentlemen are cartographers, masons, woodworkers and good men Roger and Morris who you already know. They will be able to tell me how long it will take to bring the lands that have been devastated by the Ironborn back to production and livability."

Jon looked at the two men and nodded, recognizing them now. They were the leaders of the refugees in the city, and he had met with the two of them twice before this, albeit in a more formal setting. They were farmers of some reputation, tough men who knew everything there was about farming.

"I see." Jon said with a moment. "That is useful. And now might I ask the real reason why you're coming along with us milady?"

"I no longer wish to remain behind when those I care about going to battle Jon Stark." Margaery said quietly, shaking her head. "Of those I care about marching out this day, you are most likely to face actual combat, ergo I will go with you." She smiled slightly, staring into his eyes in such a manner that Jon actually found himself blushing despite his normal self-control.

This was of course not missed by lady Margaery, who's smile widened into something almost wicked. "And, I suppose you could say that Arya and I have one thing in common, neither of us wishes to let our 'investment' out of our gaze."

Jon coughed again, ignoring Ghost's chuffing laughter and turned again towards the road, marching off without another word as Margaery fell in beside him giggling with the sound of tinkling bells.

OOOOOO

When Sansa rode into Riverrun at last the crowd of smallfolk who had gathered to see her arrive paused in their cheering for a moment. Many of these men and women were old enough to remember Lady Catelyn, and to them it was as if she had come again, only this time to stay. Sansa sat proudly on her horse, her red hair flowing in the breeze, her face unmarked by any blemish without a hint of her Stark heritage in it, though the clothing she wore certainly gave that the lie. Her gaze was regal as it surveyed the crowd, but there was a hint of a smile on her face which indicated that she was happy to be there, and happy to see them all, somehow conveying the impression that it was a thought she had about all of them in turn.

The direwolf she rode also showed what family she came from. Fenris had refused to allow Sansa to ride a horse, and had equally refused to head off to meet up with his bonded until the red-haired packmate was safely in the southern den, something which Eddie wholeheartedly agreed with. Though as a mere human he of course missed most of the nuances.

Now however Fenris began to regret it as the cheers for 'Lady Sansa' rebounded all around him. Only Sansa clapping her hands over his ears prevented him from growling and snarling at the crowd.

They moved through the city quickly, heading to the castle while Sansa nodded cordially at the crowd to either side of her, shrugging apologetically occasionally to indicate that she couldn't actually wave at present. The sight of the young lady riding the direwolf with her hands clasped over his ears sent many a man or woman into fits of laughter, though the guards following Sansa did not take part in the pleasure. Instead all of them from Edd on down scanned the crowd and the roofs all around them as they marched watching out for anything dangerous. They've been caught flat-

footed once, it would not happen again.

They were met in the courtyard of the castle by the steward Utherydes, who bowed to Sansa when she got off Fenris' back. The direwolf stood beside her, a monstrous shadow to the somewhat slight Sansa, as she smiled winsomely. "My Lord, is my castle and city ready for me?"

"It is my lady," said the elderly man. "May I present the maester of the castle, and the head maid?"

"You may." If Utherydes was uncomfortable about handing over control of the castle to what amounted to a complete stranger and a woman to boot he did not show it.

Sansa mentally put a checkmark next to the man's name for that while smiling politely at the servants when they were introduced. Yet when she was asked if she wanted to retire for the day she declined quickly. "No, I wish to meet with the town Council, the head of the city guard, and the bursar. Especially I wish to meet with any head of the refugees that have been formed."

The steward's eyebrows went up, but he nodded his head and gestured for her to follow him inside. Over the next few hours Sansa did meet with those worthies, laying out what she wanted to know about the town and what was going to happen in the future. First she installed the Stark men who had come with her in command of the city watches patrols, not the entire watch but the various small guard outposts. Those men wouldn't have been very good at organizing or leading the entire watch, but they would make excellent trainers and leaders at the squad level.

She also informed the townspeople of her plans for the refugees who were still within the town and on the western bank of the Red Fork. Sansa was happy to see that much of the work on their temporary homesteads was proceeding apace, and she opened the coffers of the castle to pay for some more housing, and more wood and coal to be brought in since winter's cold had followed her down from the Neck.

This fact dominated the discussion from start to finish. Food, preparation for, storage of, and the need to stay warm were therefore the main topics of discussion. Sansa had several ideas in particular when it came to storing wood and coal that the Riverrun natives hadn't thought of, though she was happy to hear they had heard back from Myr about the glass for the glass garden designed by Vincent Ryger. Work had already begun on that project's foundations, but it would be at least another two months before the needed glass arrived.

The idea of turning the entire courtyard into a storage area for coal and wood made the castellan and head maid nearly scream in horror, but Sansa stood firm. "It's a giant storage area gentleman, cover it with tarps here and there, and you can use it to store coal or wood or anything. Trust me, warmth will be the main issue if it gets as cold as I fear."

It was well into the evening when Sansa was finished her first day's work and meet up with Edd and Ben for an evening meal. Despite the fact he should've been happy that they had finally arrived at their destination however Edd looked anything but. "Sansa, have you talked with maester Vyman yet?"

Sansa frowned at him, dabbing at some soup with a piece of bread before chewing on it with relish. They did something to the bread here in Riverrun, added some hint of rosemary to it that just enhanced the flavor. "No, I haven't yet. I wanted to set aside an entire day to go over the plans for the Healing Hall that you mentioned, as well as anything we've heard from my siblings and Daenerys. Why?"

"That makes sense I suppose," Edd said somewhat grudgingly. "But the news from the North shouldn't wait, I'm astonished he didn't seek you out, but I suppose he doesn't want to start a panic here." He breathed in deeply then simply decided to blurt it out without trying to soften it. "The Wight Walkers really have found a way around the Wall. Lord Eddard sent a message here for Ranma detailing everything. The White Walkers are busy attacking the Bay of Seals, pushing even further south."

"You were right," he went shaking his head as Sansa stared at him in astonishment and not a little fear. "I should've left you at Crannogtown and headed back north."

"But you didn't, and despite the fact that I urged you not to, you were right." Sansa said sternly while Ben nodded in agreement.

"You can't blame yourself for something you didn't know Edd, not when you were acting in faith and honor. I take it however that you aren't going to wait around here for news of the army? You're just going to turn around?"

Sansa had already heard a broad description of the end of the war. A victory for her brother and his wife, a complete

one over three different enemies which solidified their right to rule Westeros.

"I hope that Ranma's already responded to the news from the North, but even if they haven't my duty is clear. I need to get North as fast as I can, which means unfortunately I need to leave here as quickly as possible." Edd replied affirmatively.

"You leave tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." Edd replied with a nod. "I will rest here tonight, gather what supplies I can, grab a few dozen spare horses then I'm off." He smiled wanly. "Sorry to bring that up during the meal, but it had to be said."

Sansa nodded, wolfing down her soup quickly in an unladylike matter which caused both the young men to chuckle before standing up abruptly. "I'll meet with the maester now then we'll see what aid we can send. I doubt we'll be able to send much in the way of men, but tents, braziers, warm clothing maybe other supplies if we get them on the road now would be a major boon in the north..." Her voice faded to a mumble as she strode out waving absentmindedly to the young man she had left behind.

"She will make a magnificent Lady Tully," Ben said admiringly shaking his head. "This city and this castle will become far greater than it has ever been before with her at the helm."

"I hope so," Edd said with a smile, not bringing up any thoughts about how that might not happen if they didn't survive the winter. "I also hope she's happy here."

His eyes bore into Ben's for a second, and his smile disappeared. "You will have something to do with that happiness. You and I both know you won this little battle between the two of us long since, hells I admitted that much back in Crannogtown, but that does not mean that I do not care for her. I do."

"Remember what Ranma said, Sansa needs no strong arm, she already has his and mine. Be whatever Sansa needs you to be, her husband, her confidant, her aid, her **friend** more than anything. Do not try to usurp her power, or take over for her. And if you harm Sansa, I will find out. Then I will challenge and kill you. Do not doubt it, not the challenge, nor the killing."

All this was deliberate in the same even called tone, making the words all the more frightening, though Ben did not flinch from them. He simply smiled faintly. "If I was the type to usurp her power or harm Sansa in any way I would not have won her heart, nor given her mine. I love lady Sansa, and I will not harm her, not with word or deed. You have my promise."

Edd nodded, and the two men young man returned to their meal without another word.

Edd was gone the next day as dawn broke, pausing only to bid farewell to Sansa, kissing her on the forehead before admonishing her to look after herself. He exchanged nods with Ben and the Stark and Tully men that had made the trip with them, before hopping into the saddle riding out of the castle and then Riverrun the town without another word. Behind him he lead a string of a dozen of the best horses in the castle. He would need them all if he was to make up for lost time.

Later that same day Sansa announced her upcoming marriage to Ben Blackwood and immediately began to plan out their wedding. Unlike in her dreams when she had pined for Joffrey, this ceremony however was not going to be a grandiose affair. Over the next few days it coalesced into a small service in the godswood, much to the chagrin of many of her new smallfolk, and in particular the septon assigned to Riverrun. "I am of the North, and I was raised in both faiths. When I am thinking about it, I look to the Seven, but my instincts are to the Old Gods, and my spouse too believes in them."

Ben nodded at that, and added, "Besides which, with the fact that the Seven have hailed Ranma and Daenerys their champions does it really matter which religion you worship?"

At Sansa's heels Fenris chuffed in laughter, and the septon and the other objectors among her counsel subsided quickly. Two days later, the ceremony began in the godswood, with only one real surprise. Where the bride was supposed to be walked to her new Lord by her father, Fenris stood instead, walking beside her as a visible expression of House Stark's power. It caused some consternation among the onlookers, and more than one rumor was started because of it, but Sansa and Ben didn't care. They only had eyes for one another, as she moved to stand with him in front of the ancient weirwood tree.

After the ceremony ended came the feast with Ben and Sansa sitting at the lord's table in front of a bed brought out

for their first night together, smiling politely at all the cheers and well-wishers. At the same time they were trying hard not to glance into one another's eyes for too long, blushing and stuttering every time they caught one another's expression. That this caused the crowd of guests to laugh did nothing to help their composure.

Soon enough however it was time for the portion of the ceremony this Sansa had dreaded: the bedding. Even if she had married under the Faith of the Seven this portion of the marriage would not have been any better. It was important to see the proof that the woman's maidenhead was still intact, no matter how demeaning it was. And despite the fact that she had ordered the wine spiked as Ranma had for his marriage, there were more than a few men who were still awake and moving about.

"And now for the bedding!" Shouted one of them, and two others seized Ben from behind, while two more began to pull off his clothing. Four others grabbed Sansa in turn, starting to rip off her dress.

Their hands flinched away from her however at a very loud and very deep growl from Fenris. Suddenly he wasn't simply lounging around behind Sansa, no he was standing, staring at the crowd, his fangs bared. The man all around Sansa quickly retreated, staring at the Wolf. "M-My lady, can't you send it..."

At that point Fenris bounded forward, head-butting one man into another and then smacking them both into a third with a paw that didn't have any of its claws out. All three men went down with a cry and several curses, while Fenris moved through the crowd, smacking and pushing them, never drawing blood but making it clear that they were not welcome here any longer.

"HAHAHAHAHHAHA!" Sansa knew she should have been incensed at Fenris's unilateral act, but all she felt was relief. Relief, and a sort of bubbling laughter welling up from inside as she laughed and laughed.

Ben too laughed, taking her arm in his as he looked away from her body, much of which was on display now thanks to the men's efforts before Fenris had acted. "I had not been looking forward to having an audience in any event my lady, the sheets will have to do for those old biddies and men who wish to stick their noses where they do not belong."

"My thoughts exactly my Lord husband." Sansa said with a curtsy, which looked very odd indeed considering she was only wearing her silk chemise. She flushed as she felt the heat of Ben's gaze on her, staring over at Fenris who was now making his way back towards them, his entire body signifying extreme satisfaction. "Good Wolf..." she said reaching out a hand to rub his ears. "Good Wolf. And could you make certain were not disturbed?"

Fenris chuffed in laughter, licked her face once, causing her to back away gagging a little and for Ben to roll his eyes muttering something about "Oh joy, she's going to taste like a direwolf now" causing Sansa to blush, before he turned away. Moments later the two young people were staring at one another in a hall that was devoid of other people.

The rest of that night the two of them explored one another as married couples should. While it was very painful for Sansa at first pleasure soon overrode that pain and the two of them continued to explore throughout the night.

The next morning two maids entered while Fenris padded in beside them. They took the bed sheets out to show the crowd which had gathered in the hallways. Sansa was awake and sipping something from a cup as she sat at the table, while Ben was gone, heading for a bath. She put down her cup as Fenris approached, smiling as he nuzzled into her shoulder then looked her in the eyes.

For some reason Sansa understood what the Wolf was trying to say. "You need to go don't you?" She said, scratching at his neck and shoulders. "You hear the call north just like Edd..."

Fenris nodded his head, pushing it against her shoulder for a moment and Sansa smiled. "Go then, my brother will have more need of you than I for certain. Thank you for all you've done for me and my family." she said throwing her arms around him in a sudden hug and whispering the words into his ear. "Thank you, and please keep them all safe as you did me."

Fenris huffed again, rubbing his head against the side of hers for a moment before pulling away licking her face once and then racing out of the room, out of the castle past several startled and frightened courtiers, and out into the town then beyond. He was heading home at last.

OOOOOO

"They can't be serious, can they?" Asha asked caustically, staring at the small fleet of single-masted vessels

swarming towards the southernmost cape of Harlaw. "I wonder how many of those ships capsized in the crossing? With the weather like it's been these days I wouldn't want to put it to sea in any of those."

"Ironic since you spent several days at sea in a similar boat." Rodrick said from next to her, where he too stood watching from a parapet of one of the four towers set to defend this small cape. They were very big towers, more a series of expanded caverns and murder holes hewn out of the rock of the surrounding cliff faces than man-made. They were very strong defensive positions, and if the cove they protected was bigger, this place would've been the center of House Harlaw's control rather than Ten Towers.

It wasn't however, moreover the seas were routinely choppy, no river fed into the cape allowing for faster travel deeper into Harlaw, and the surrounding land was scraggly at best, and stone at worst. The sea near the island was heavily dotted with rocks and shoals, many of which routinely sank beneath the waves only to rise later on, and no Ironborn had ever been able to correctly map fallout. In some ways it was like the Banefort, only much smaller and with slightly more treacherous seas, but without the inland farmland that made House Banefortself-sustaining.

The cove supported a small community of about 100 souls, mostly serfs with very few true Ironborn among them. It would normally have been completely ignored despite the defenses, except it was the closest cape in a straight line from the shores of Pyke, which had made the best place for any attacker to aim for if they wish to create a beachhead.

*And if the greenlanders were facing any other Ironborn Lord that might well have worked, the speed advantage and the fact Ironborn don't think like that would have worked for them. Asha thought somewhat grimly. But against Rodrick the Reader, it's too obvious a move. And he doesn't respond like other Ironborn do either: he doesn't simply attack their attackers at sea, he's perfectly happy to sit on the defensive. And this time, well he's got me and my little toy on hand too.*

"I would assume that this entire assault was pushed by the thralls rather than by the Lannister forces." Rodrick went on musingly. "They've been far too cagey about their own lives to throw them like this, but I could assume that someone among the thralls convinced them that this had a chance of working."

"And possibly tying any Ironborn response up here rather than where they're really attacking?"

"I don't suppose that they're actually attacking just yet, but it's a good idea. They might attack Great Wyk next. If they can liberate the mines of House Goodbrother, that would give them a far greater number of thralls than Saltcliffe or even a successful 'liberation' of Harlaw. And I doubt they realize we, the Ironborn as a whole, are no longer united."

Several weeks later Rodrick's guess word reached them that this was indeed the case. The Lannisters had used this attack like a diversion, not realizing they needn't have bothered, and attacked Great Wyk a few days after the battle. Unlike Rodrick's lighter touch the Great Wyk Houses never spared the rod, and had dozens of iron mines were they used thralls as their main workforce. Once a beachhead had been secured on Great Wyk and one of Goodbrother's mines secured giving the attackers more manpower, the outcome was pretty much assured.

Here and now however, Asha was going to show them that it wasn't going to go to that way with Harlaw. "What do you think old man, a little wind to start off with?"

Rodrick stared at her then down at the gauntlet she wore. It looked like a bronze gauntlet for the most with a very simple design. But along the forefinger and at each of the knuckles where extremely small etchings of lightning bolts, ships at sea, swords, and other images were carved, all immensely detailed. And on the palm of the gauntlet was a small, yellow gem stone. "You're the one with the God's Gift my dear, I believe it would behoove you to choose."

Asha laughed, then left the room heading up out onto the top of the cliff. A few archers were scattered around here and there on the cliff face, but most of them were down below where they were protected from wind and rain. These were merely spotters, whose task it was to use their higher and less obscured vantage point to spot any of the ships attacking getting too close and call in the fire of their fellows down below.

That wasn't going to happen now. Closing her eyes Asha brought the gauntlet up above her head, splaying her fingers out as if she was gripping the sky. As she did, Asha remembered what had happened in that cave, the vision she'd had. It hadn't been of the future or of events occurring at that time like Melisandre used. No this was from the past, an event that forever altered the history of the Ironborn. It showed the war in which the Storm God and the monster that was the Drowned God fought, when the Drowned God won supporters among the Storm God's followers through sweet words and a simple message.

'Whatever you do, the consequences will not matter. No consequences, no fear. Drown your enemies, drown your



selves, feed the Drowned God and sailed the seas without fear or equal. Live on in song, story and above all the fear you cause in your enemies. And live on in my halls down below, fed by the deaths you cause.'

In comparison to the Storm God's message, which was of perseverance, teamwork, and toil bringing with them reward, it was a seductive message. And it, plus the magics the Drowned God had been able to give its followers, had won the support of the Ironborn. Without that support the Storm God's power had waned dramatically until only a few Houses still called to it, like Kenning, keeping it secret even from their own members at times. But that did not mean that its artifacts had lost their power when used by one whose will was up to the task.

At Asha's gesture a monstrous wind picked up all around her, ruffling her hair and her breaches before heading out to sea, gathering power all along the way until it was a gale. Slamming down into the sea it joined the torrential downpour that was already occurring out there. Suddenly faced with far faster, more powerful winds, only one or two boats out there were skilled enough to weather those first few moments. Others relying on their oars rather than sails lasted a few seconds longer before capsizing as the wind beat at their sides, smashing them into the rocks out there or simply pushing them under the waves, letting the ocean's power do the rest.

Each of those boats probably only had ten people or so on them, but they were a little over fifteen boats out there. A lot of thralls had just lost their lives in an attack they must've known was almost doomed to failure anyway. *I wonder what that will do for the loyalty of their new subjects to their Lannister overlords? Or did they volunteer for this? DO they hate us that much?*

Asha wasn't done just yet though. There was one more thing she had to do, a sort of a signature move of the Storm God. Clenching her gauntleted hand Asha ground her teeth at the sudden exhaustion, the magic she was working feeding off her body's energy, the yellow gem began to hum. After a brief second, Asha pointed her forefinger at the single war galley out there. It had stayed far back from the invasion force, ostensibly guarding the smaller ships as they made their way from Pike to Harlaw. Really it was there to see if anything actually happened in the attack, though it was also possibly carrying a load of weapons for any locals that could be turned to their cause.

She closed her eyes, concentrating and the small gem glowed fitfully before burning into life, a bright hard yellow light shining through her fingers. A second later, a single massive bolt of lightning came out of the sky directly above the war galley, smashing into the ship's main mast, setting it and the sails alight along with the deck directly beneath. Even in pouring rain, a ship simply had too much tar, rope and canvas, even wet could be set alight by lightning such as Asha's attack. Fire bloomed everywhere and screams abounded, though from this far away Asha couldn't hear them.

Smiling grimly as the crew of the war galley got to work trying to save the ship Asha nearly collapsed as she tried to move back towards the stairwell leading down. Rodrick however was there, catching her arm under his own. "A most impressive performance, I think they'll try twice or perhaps even four or five times before taking us on here."

In fact, the Lannisters didn't even try to attack Harlaw after that. Instead, they waited, waited until the Wyks islands had both fallen to them along with Pyke and Saltcliffe. Then they did the one thing Rodrick would never have guessed they would do: they offered a truce.

OOOOOO

Despite his concern about running into White Walkers or their undead soldiers Ranma reached Castle Cerwyn without incident. He was greeted in the castle's gatehouse by Lord Medger Cerwyn, who clapped him hard on the shoulder. "When word reached our ears here of a rumor saying that you were literally running up from the Riverlands Ranma I didn't believe them! Yet here you are."

He went on more seriously frowning slightly. "But you're alone. That same rumor said you would be, and that the war in the south was done with, but when can we expect the rest of the army back?"

"The Cerwyn Pike regiment and a few thousand Northern cavalry should be passing through the Neck at this point. The rest of the Army will've taken to sea at Maidenpool, and be making for White Harbor. That was about a week and a half ago, but we were told that the voyage to White Harbor would probably take a month at best. Have you ever had any trouble here?" Ranma asked.

"Not much just yet. A few sightings of wights, but everyone among my smallfolk and lords know that the wights can be seen off by fire. I've gathered as much of them that as would come, and we have enough supplies for now. But we've been hearing word of an undead horde marching toward Winterfell, and the past two days we've seen sightings of more wights in the Wolfswood than I care for."

Medger barked a laugh, but there was no humor in it. "It was those sightings that finally forced a few of my more rock-

hard minor lords to pull up stake and join me here,. I have to say it's been... interesting... living in such close quarters with them. Thank god for my daughter and son-in-law's diplomacy, that's all I'll say."

Ranma frowned. *I'd hoped to rest here for a day before heading on to Winterfell, but if they're that close, should I push on now?*

His thoughts juddered to a halt as the interior door to the gatehouse slammed open. Jonelle stood there, her smile warm and inviting, but there was something in the depths of her eyes which made Ranma want to run away, or perhaps just roll on the floor and present his belly like a wolf would in submission. "Why hello there Ranma, the guards said you'd arrived. And where's my little boy? Is he a few days behind you?"

"I, um, no my lady, Cley remains with the main army." Ranma said cautiously, bowing to her slightly while her father quickly exited the gatehouse, causing Ranma to growl slightly. *Traitor.*

"I see, and the reason he isn't with you is... what? After all, you did promise to keep him safe didn't you, and it would be very hard to do that if he's not actually with you!" Jonelle said, the final words a snap.

But Ranma didn't take offense to them. He was in no hurry to tell the woman of the fights Cley had participated in, but he knew she was just acting like a concerned mother. And frankly, Ranma could remember all too easily looking up to her as young aunt figure, and had no wish for her or anyone else to start treating him differently.

He answered honestly, holding up his hands placatingly. "That would only be true if I wasn't anticipating running into trouble my lady, and I do, that is, I anticipate trouble soon. Cley's far safer at sea with my wife and the rest of the Wolfsworn not to mention the entire army to look after him."

"I suppose," Jonelle replied, growling slightly under her breath. She really did want to blame Ranma for not having her son with him. She wanted so desperately to see Cley again to make sure he was all right, after all, it had been nearly a year since Ranma had taken him away to war. But she couldn't argue the facts. "And how goes his training?"

"We both sort of decided that he really doesn't have the right aptitude for warrior my lady," Ranma said. "Instead he's been serving as the royal page for some months now."

Jonelle's eyes widened. "My baby boy, a page to the new Royal family? That sounds wonderful, and I think he'll be a much better fit for that role, possibly as advisor later on than he would ever have been as a warrior, no matter how skilled he could have become under your tutelage." She then smiled, reaching out to hug Ranma, who returned the gesture. "You are welcome back to the North Your Majesty, now come inside, break bread with us in our hall! Even in these dark times, we still have food and warmth aplenty for guests, especially important ones."

Ranma sighed in relief, and nodded allowing Jonelle to pull him forward, smiling happily at the welcome. Later that night, he took dinner with Lord Cerwyn and his minor lords, filling them in on the details of the war in the south, and getting some more information about what happened here in the North.

Leaning back and patting the first full stomach he'd had since Harrenhal, Ranma smiled, but his tone was all business when he spoke. "I'm glad to hear that the dragonglass already arrived and even more glad that Lord Manderly was able to get it up to Winterfell and to here. Though I'm afraid I'll be taking as much of that Dragonglass off you when Lord Reed and the expeditionary force arrives."

"Do you mean to take the White Walkers on in the field your Majesty?" said one of Lord Cerwyn's minor lords. Ranma had never met the man, who looked like a woodsman by his build, but the question was a good one.

"I intend to force them to concentrate on me, pulling some of the pressure off castles like Cerwyn and elsewhere. If I have to do that in the open field, or daring them to come at me in Winterfell, that's up to them. But I mean my army to be supplied with dragonglass weapons en masse regardless. I've already got some ideas of how to modify the pike tactics to deal with the wights, and the White Walkers themselves too."

*They tried to ambush me once and I think they are serious about eliminating me. They have to know have realized why the old gods brought me here, which makes me a target. And I bet that Winterfell already has a target painted on it. "Any other news?"*

Medger sighed. "Judging by the amount of time it took the dragonglass to reach Winterfell, we doubt it will have reached Karhold with enough time to help them. Nor was the Last Hearth, Deepwood, or Bear Island sent any. Both Karhold and Last Hearth might've been lost by this point, we just don't know. Other than that, no news has reached us here. Your father might know more of course."

'Have you lost any men yourselves?'

"About 20 all told in the past 2 and 1/2 weeks. The White Walkers themselves might still be a few days away from us here at Cerwyn, but they are within striking distance of Winterfell, and their power has gone before them. Several dozen graves have been disturbed, and I've lost men burning them out. I don't know how far their power of that sort spreads just yet south of us though, did you see any evidence of it?"

"One or two undead walking around last night but nothing major. Which should be a good sign, considering the Barrows were ancient burial sites," Ranma replied dryly.

"Ancient yes, I would bet that most of those Barrows have something within them that will stop the White Walkers from controlling their inhabitants. Much like the weirwood trees."

Ranma cocked his head and Medger smiled grimly. "Our own mausoleum here in the Castle hasn't been disturbed, and certainly Winterfell's hasn't either. That tells me that any graveyard built near weirwood trees is probably safe. For now at least. If the North falls entirely, I doubt that the old gods will have enough strength to keep it so."

Scowling at the idea Ranma nodded, and the conversation turned once again to events in the south, specifically what action Cley had seen, and other more personal matters. Neither Lord Cerwyn nor Jonelle were happy to hear that Cley might've taken up with a young lady whose House had been struck from the rules of nobility and wiped out for its treachery, but thankfully Ranma said it didn't look to be anything serious, simply puppy love. The fact the young woman in question had been sent to Riverrun after Darry's betrayal was also a factor.

Later that night before going to sleep Ranma met Katarina Cerwyn for the first time. The toddler was asleep of course, rocking slightly in her cradle thanks to a maid who sat next to the toddler in a rocking chair of her own working on some needlework.

"There she is, my little bundle of energy. I'd forgotten how inquisitive babies can be at this age," said Jonelle, smirking slightly as she reached into the crib to touch the baby's cheek gently. The baby mumbled, turning away from her touch slightly and she smiled wider. "Yet still she is beautiful."

Ranma nodded, his face showing a mixture of emotions, one of which was trepidation. Jonelle caught it, and smiled slightly. "You wonder about when you and your Daenerys will have children?"

"We've talked about it, and I know she was planning to stop taking moontea, though I don't know if she went through with that before I left. My departure was rather abrupt unfortunately."

"Your lady mother will be pleased." Jonelle said with a faint smile. "And seeing to the succession right now is probably an excellent idea. Even with winter now upon us and the troubles raising a baby in winter, it is something that needs to be seen to."

Ranma nodded but the trepidation didn't go away from his expression and her smile widened slightly. "Don't worry Ranma, you'll be an excellent father."

"Was I that transparent?" Ranma asked smiling whimsically back at her.

"To me certainly, I've known you since you were a little boy coming here with your father, who always had to be chased out of the kitchen for stealing sweetmeats. Don't worry as I said you'll be an excellent father, you've already shown that with Cley, Arya, and I have no doubt with other children. You won't ever be as stern as your own father, or as strict but you'll still be a good father nonetheless. Just let your wife handle disciplining your children for anything outside the training area? I really doubt you could be a disciplinarian you if your life depended upon it."

Ranma laughed quietly, enjoying this moment of peace and levity as the world around them continued to turn dark and cold.

OOOOOO

The next day Ranma raced on, wearing new boots thanks to Lord Cerwyn, since his old ones had been worn practically down to their soles. In only a turn of a candle he was within sight of Winterfell, which already looked to be under sporadic attack. But it was a very odd sort of sporadic attack. The town around Winterfell had been abandoned, and there were a few archers on roofs here and there which had not been torn down, firing up at the walls from where Ranma hid in the brush by the roadside, cloaked in the Umi-Sen-Ken.

But the main attack seemed to be two undead dragons, the sight of which had made Ranma stop and stare in shock

before he ducked into cover. They were large, larger by far than either of Daenerys', and he finally realized why Daenerys kept on insisting on calling the dragons 'little ones' even now when they looked anything but little. *Damn, I didn't realize how big dragons could grow.*

But even from where he hid, Ranma could tell that these were not normal dragons. They had holes in their wings, their scales were splotchy here and there, and most telling their breath attack wasn't fire. From what he could see from this far away it seemed to be some kind of steam. *Or maybe it's like that cone of cold spell from that weird game the otaku kids sometimes played at Furinkan? Freezing stuff it touches?*

Even so, it didn't seem to be doing much to the defenders. Most of the wall had been abandoned, but fire arrows and what looked like regular arrows but were probably dragonglass tipped arrows were streaking out from every tower murder hole. None of the arrows were in danger of putting the dragons down alone, but the amount coming at them seemed to deter the dragons from coming too close, and with no one on the walls, their breath weapon didn't seem as devastating as a real dragon's would be.

Though Ranma couldn't see it, this was because like the Wall itself, Winterfell had some magical defenses built into its very stone. Small dark crystals scattered here and there along the parapets and towers of Winterfell, unseen for millennia had erupted in yellow energy, protecting the castle from the White Walkers assault. It didn't do anything against the cold, but the White Walkers creations could not touch down on those stones without being destroyed. The fact that the White Walkers were still attacking seemed to indicate they felt they had a chance of bypassing those defenses, but what that could be other than sheer numbers was something Ranma couldn't discern.

Despite the surprise of the undead dragons, Ranma quickly realized that Winterfell wasn't in any real danger just yet. With that in mind, still hidden underneath the Umi-Sen-Ken Ranma moved around the castle, to get an idea of what the attacking forces looked like.

Soon Ranma found that the dragons and the scouts of the army had outdistanced the majority of the White Walkers and their wights by a several leagues. The main horde was just coming within sight of the wall as he approached directly north. And it was a horde, consisting of thousands of wights, their condition ranging from practically new to near skeletal cadavers, all marching forward powered by the will of the White Walkers.

*There has to be as many undead in that army as the entire Vale army! They must've scoured every battlefield and cemetery they could to put those numbers together. Or have we lost that many people already?!*

But it wasn't only the numbers which were staggering, because mixed in with the horde were beasts, beasts out of legend. Undead unicorns, massive sabretooth tigers, who unlike the unicorns weren't obviously undead, causing Ranma to wonder how the White Walkers controlled them. Huge polar bears, covered with armor on their shoulders and heads. Several dozen undead giants, like the ones Ranma and the Wolfsworn had run into before.

And here and there scattered among the horde were the White Walkers themselves. They looked like elves almost to Ranma's eyes, taller and thinner than man, with sort of foxy faces. Cold eyes blazed blue in those faces but not the blue of ki or sky, this was a dead kind of blue somehow, though Ranma would be hard pressed to say how. They wore heavy plate armor for the most part, marked with cruel spikes and hooks here and there, and looked to wear little else. They wielded blades of what looked like metal or the ice of a glacier, Ranma couldn't honestly tell what the blades were made of from here. More than one of them had metal bows over their shoulders while at their sides short arrows were kept in quivers.

Ranma couldn't at first see any women among them, but when he did he shook his head slightly. They were beautiful, beautiful but fell. They wore armor just like the men but only wielding staffs rather than swords, with wickedly curved blades at the end of both ends. Where the men were bald the women all had long blonde hair falling down their backs, almost as pale as that of Daenerys, though to Ranma's eyes it looked more sickly than vibrant. Even their faces were not nearly as alien looking as the man.

*I wonder if these women were chosen or maybe even bred to look appealing to normal men. It'd make sense given their tactics of using seduction with the Night's Watch King, and on Skagos according to what information my father sent us. For just a moment Ranma smirked. I wonder if you thought it was worth it Theon. The first human to ever screw a White Walker and still retain your soul!*

Using as much of the forest as he could to cover his movement while still being hidden under the Umi-Sen-Ken of course Ranma counted about 620 actual White Walkers scattered through the horde, only twelve of whom were female. *Is that normal? That there are that many males to females, or were just the women that could possibly pass for human sent on this campaign?*

Of more interest to Ranma however were the few that didn't look like warriors. Their genders were indeterminate since they wore heavy cloaks. But instead of being cloth like a normal cloak would be, these cloaks looked to be made of steel scales, or possibly simply had steel scales sewn everywhere. They seemed to shine like glass or metal anyway and covered their features from head to toe. Here and there on the cloaks were bits and pieces of what looks like ice, glowing with the fell blue power that came from all of the White Walker's eyes.

There are only about five of these, maybe six because they weren't ever in the same place all at once, and they were always surrounded by dozens of the warriors, who in turn were surrounded by dozens of the White Walker warrior types. *Are those their wizards, they damn sure look the part. I wonder how many of that type are on this side of the wall, they sure look to be damn rare if this army's makeup is any indication. But if so, why are they here at all? I'd thought they'd keep their wizards well back from any fighting.*

After contemplating that moment from where he hid behind a large pile of snow, pressing his body against an oak tree on one side while a mountain of snow hid most of his body from view Ranma frowned. *Maybe their power over those animals or the, er, more dead undead has some kind of range limiter? Or maybe the Wall is interfering with their power source so that they have to power their spells from up close? In any case, it's a good sign, a weakness we can make use of.*

Ranma continued to watch as the army finished marching on Winterfell, slowly encompassing the castle. Normally he would have already attacked hoping to disrupt their assault, but given the number of arrows coming out of the towers it was obvious Winterfell knew they were coming. So the best way he could help now, was wait for an opportunity to strike at the most viable target. *If those wizards are as important as I think they are, taking them out of the game would defang this entire army as a strategic force.*

The battle for Winterfell began in front of Ranma, and it went as well as he had thought it would. The dragons, both of whom looked much the worse for wear from the towers defenses, had retreated, allowing the defenders to rush out and man the wall. The defenders were heavily armed with fire arrows and dragonglass tipped arrows, enough so that they were using both equally. Ranma was a little concerned about that, but figured that Winterfell probably already had a supply of dragonglass arrowheads before the pirate prince and his fleet arrived with more.

It didn't seem to startle the White Walkers however, they had obviously planned for this assault for some time. Ranma watched as thousands of wights were pushed forward, all of them armed with bows and arrows, enough to overwhelm the defenders if they had any kind of height equivalent. But they didn't. The defenders had the walls and the towers, and much of the Winter Town had been knocked down, the homes demolished to create a clear zone around the Castle. Only a few of the most distant buildings remained, giving the attackers no place to put their own archers where they could try to overcome the height advantage.

*Good job father,* Ranma thought, smiling grimly.

Of course the defenders weren't having it all their own way. Some men had already fallen from the parapets, the sheer number of arrows streaking up at them making that a certainty. And the dragons had destroyed two of the catapults stationed on the towers on either side of the northern facing wall before they had been forced to retreat.

The siege seemed ready to slip into a thing of archery duels rather than anything else. The attackers didn't have any siege equipment that Ranma could see, and didn't seem to have any plan other than throwing their wights at the walls at this point. And the animals, for all their strange appearance, seemed less than useless against stone walls like Winterfell's.

Or at least it looked that way if Ranma didn't count the group of magic users. They had finally come together, and were now moving towards one of the few remaining buildings from the Winter Town. It was a farmstead on the edge of the town, one Ranma remembered as having raised sheep at one point. As Ranma watched a group of the warriors quickly went to work dismantling one of its walls, letting in the winter air.

Then Ranma spotted something he hadn't noticed before, a large palanquin carried by several warriors which had been hidden in among the mass of wights. It was covered by another strange metal looking piece of cloth, like the outfits the magic users wore. And whatever was underneath it was something of great importance to the White Walkers, judging by how the White Walkers made certain that no one from the walls of Winterfell could see it.

Inching closer Ranma continued to use both the Umi-Sen-Ken and what cover there was to get as close as possible to watch the proceedings. He watched as the cover was taken off, revealing a giant ice crystal of some kind, which was a mix of dark blue and black, looking almost like a gem but not quite. It was set reverentially on the floor, and Ranma watched as the floor of the House underneath it began to freeze quickly, covered by a thin veneer of frost.

The ones who Ranma took to be the White Walkers wizards anyway congregated around the crystal quickly. Sitting down in a semi-circle they held out their hands towards the crystal. The crystal began to glow with the fell blue light that Ranma was quickly realizing was the symbol of the White Walkers influence. At the same time even from where he was hiding several hundred feet away Ranma felt the temperature begin to drop. Nearby snowdrifts also began to change color almost, the snow somehow turning into ice.

*Yeah, I think it's time to interrupt them now.* Ranma thought to himself grimly amused. Pulling out Ice he held it in one hand as he raced forward. Leaving behind the last of the cover he continued to use the Umi-Sen-Ken as he closed, feeling that the slight drain on his ki that technique caused was well worth what he was about to attempt.

Unfortunately, while the Umi-Sen-Ken might hide him from most mortal senses, it didn't do anything to cover his tracks. This would've been bad enough but a second after he left the last of the cover behind him, Ranma learned that the Umi-Sen-Ken didn't work **at all** against the White Walkers.

Shouts of what had to be surprise went out from the group of a hundred or so guards clustered around the farmhouse, and all of them turned, their long bows coming up to face towards him. Arrows flew towards Ranma before he realized that he had been spotted, but his reflexes were such that he was able to use Ice to smack away several of them, before jumping into a roll to one side avoiding several more. Two smashed into his side and shoulder, shattering on his lizard lion armor, which for some reason gave him more protection than plate had proven elsewhere to be against those arrows. Though of course Ranma didn't know that yet, he simply put it down to his armor's durability.

Rolling along the snow laden ground Ranma came up and continued moving forward, throwing Ice into the air for a moment as he concentrated bringing his hands down to his side. "Direwolf's Claws!" With that he brought his hands forward, shooting out his vorpal blade attack. They sliced through several dozen White Walkers, then he grabbed Ice as it fell back out of the sky, leaping over several more arrows and was in among them before any of the White Walkers could get off another shot.

Almost as one of the White Walkers pulled out long thin and very ugly looking daggers, not ugly like they were poorly made, but ugly as in vile-looking. They had little tines sticking out of the blades, their points were curved, overall they looked designed to cause as much pain as possible rather than just kill.

Ice in contrast was simply a greatsword, 7 and 1/2 feet of pure gleaming steel, without anything in the way of fancy fiddly bits, save for the fact it was a Valyrian blade. The family blade of the Starks smashed into the weapons of the White Walkers, powered by all the strength and Ranma's arm, and shattered more than one sword with every blow.

Internally gasping from the effort firing off that the Direwolf's Claw had taken Ranma dueled with a dozen White Walkers, hacking them down, punching, kicking, moving constantly despite being surrounded. He did not take to the air as was his wont, since this would have allowed the White Walkers beyond his immediate vicinity to target him with their bows. He instead stayed ground-bound, cutting them down as he forged his way towards the wizards. "Winter is Coming for you, you soulless bastards!"

In response to that hated wacry the White Walkers all around him shrieked in wordless rage, their voices sounding like glass grating on glass. Whatever they yelled there it wasn't a comprehensible word, but there damn sure was a lot of feeling behind it.

Ice stuck for a second in the rib cage of one White Walker, having punched through the creature's armor as if it wasn't there. The blades of other White Walkers smashed down onto Ranma's back, causing several cuts and slashes but his lizard lion armor held, opening in places but not giving way. One blade cut into his helmet, but that White Walker died from a sideways punch that caught it right in the neck, crushing his jugular and flinging his body back into two more.

By this point the rest of the White Walkers in the attacking army knew there was something going on in the back of the actual battle. As one they had turned away from directing the wights, racing backwards. Those with bows began to fire at Ranma despite their fellows surrounding him. Their arrows didn't seem to bother their fellows, but more than one-hit Ranma despite the crowd around him, and he winced as one in particular smacked into his elbow, catching him through the joint of his armor.

"RARRGHRAA!" rattling sort of roar from above signaled a far greater threat however. Ranma pulled out Ice, swinging it around in a two-handed grip to catch another White Walker, cutting him in twain. He continued hacking and slashing, punching and kicking at the crowd around of White Walkers around him, slaying dozens before suddenly one of the armored polar bears burst through the crowd roaring. At the same time a Sabertooth tiger tried to take him from the other side.

Ranma whirled, kicking off the Sabertooth tiger's head, thrusting Ice forward in a savage lunge which caught the armored polar bear in the head, smashing through its armor and deep into its brain. Then one of the dragons which had retreated from the battle around Winterfell attacked him from above, its icy breath striking at where Ranma had been a moment before, engulfing the Sabertooth in its breath. The Sabertooth howled in agony for just a second before freezing solid.

Grounding Ice in another White Walker Ranma turned, bringing his hands backwards and shouting "Direwolf's claw!" The vorpal blades of the Yami-sen-ken shot out, slicing the dragon from head to tail into flinders, its bits scattering into the horde of White Walkers around Ranma. This caused them to scatter slightly, allowing Ranma a few seconds of breathing space, which he desperately needed. Using that attack for a second time had really taken a lot out of him. *Why the hell is that taking more out of me every time! Or is it because I haven't recovered from my run up here?*

Regardless, Ranma now knew he had maybe one more such attack in him. *Any more than that and I won't have enough energy to keep fighting.* Considering that even the wights in the army were turning toward him now, away from their assault on Winterfell, that would be a death sentence.

As he thought that Ranma ducked under the swipe of a giant, one of the few near enough to have gotten to him thanks to how slow they were from the main wight horde, returning a punch that caved in the thing's head, at the same time Ice slashed one of its legs clean off at the hip. Another Sabertooth leaped at him its fangs seeking his neck but Ranma grabbed its jaws, and with a roar and wrench of his arms in either direction, ripped it apart. It collapsed to one side, allowing Ranma to quickly run forward, getting closer to the wizards.

The White Walkers of course were able to tell where he was going, and at a sudden shouted command in that tongue that sounded like pieces of uneven glass shrieking against one another some of the wizards shouted commands to the warriors.

Two of them tried to get Ranma's way again, only to be barreled aside, while others attacked with more fervor. But Ranma was now close enough, and he halted smashing aside several more White Walkers with Ice before another giant was in his way. Dodging its monstrous blow Ranma buried Ice in the thing's chest before dodging around it, bring his hands back to his sides and forward for one final ki assault, his target the clump of wizards and the crystal they were using as a conduit for their power. "Direwolf's claw!"

But just as he fired that, a punch from the Giant, which had not died, his thrust having missed its heart, slammed into his side. He rolled with it and was relatively uninjured, but the damage was already done. His assault missed the crystal, smashing into and through five of the six wizards instead, missing the last one entirely but shredding three of them into bits of offal, the last two merely being cut into pieces.

As he rolled more White Walkers attacked, but Ranma punched out to every side, dodging another blow, staggering for a moment from the loss of his energy from that salt. *Dammit! I can't do another one! I need to retreat for now.*

Retreat however did not look to be an option. The horde had pulled back from this section of the assault on Winterfell to completely enclose Ranma, and now anyway he went he'd have to fight his way through a large portion of the horde to get out. Ironically enough, the quickest or at least weakest section was directly in front of Ranma between him and Winterfell because the White Walkers had tried to block him from running away everywhere else with their own people, the giants and the animals, and the wights coming back from attacking the Castle made up the numbers of the people on that side.

All of this action had not gone unnoticed by the defenders of Winterfell. Now they responded to it. Heavy stones, burning barrels full of cooking oil and other things began to smash down among the wights. They would have been husbanded for the first real assault against the outer wall, but now the defenders put forth their effort as a shout of "Winter is coming!" Went up from the wall, so loud it carried over the tumult of battle to Ranma.

Ranma ripped Ice up and out of the giant's chest, finally bisecting the thing's heart putting it down for good. He turned using Ice to catch a scythe swung at him by a wight then ducked under a blow from a mace, wincing as another blow got through his defenses to smash on his vambrace before he could pull Ice back.

Struck by a sudden inspiration and with a grunt of effort Ranma slipped into the Umi-Sen-Ken again, racing forward into the horde of wights, putting them between him and the White Walkers. For a moment this seemed to work. The White Walkers might be able to see him in the Umi-Sen-Kens, but their undead servants, as Ranma had hoped, could not, their senses were still that of humans for the most part. Therefore rather than becoming more enemies he had to deal with, the wights became meat shields against the White Walker arrows.

More of the catapults fiery burdens slammed into the ground in front of him. Ranma dodged several of them, but the

fire did its work, scaring the wights away from him enough that he had a somewhat clear run towards the castle.

The White Walkers tried to rally, several of them hissing out commands in that glass on crackling glass language of theirs. More than 100 White Walkers once again targeted Ranma with their bows, and Ranma felt the sting of their arrows slam into the back of his lizard lion armor.

For the most part it held, the arrows penetrating only rarely at the joints in particular right behind one shoulder, and right where the armor allowed for movement at the side. Ranma nearly stumbled from the pain of that, feeling the cold of whatever spell was on the ice grip him. But he reached down and pulled the arrows out, hobbling on while more arrows shattered all around him. Even so he did bleed, and the blood left a trail on the snow that the wights could see. Despite the little fires all around them, they began to close in once more.

Even though they couldn't see his body the defenders knew where Ranma was thanks to their enemy's fire and shouts of encouragement came from Winterfell. Now Ranma was close enough that the White Walkers and wights trying to follow him came under fire from the arrows of the defenders. Along with several hundred wights the White Walkers lost more than two dozen more warriors, including two of their women surprisingly, none of which had been close engage Ranma before this.

This forced the front-runners who had tried to cut Ranma off from entering Winterfell back in disarray, with many more wights dying there. Ranma concentrated on healing himself for a moment, sending what little remaining ki he had towards the wound in his leg. It closed quickly, and he raced on with renewed purpose, grimacing as he felt another arrow slam right between his shoulder blades. It didn't penetrate, but it did stick there, and he reached back pulling it out before it could start to send whenever cold spell was a part of it into his armor.

A long piece of rope was thrown over the side of the wall, the defenders unwilling to unbar the main gates to let him in that way. It was a good move Ranma thought, as he grabbed the rope and quickly began to haul himself up the wall to hails of "The Wolf King, the Winter King! Ranma, Ranma Stark!"

Pulling himself upwards towards the parapet Ranma felt several hands grabbed him and haul him up the last few feet, where he was met with shouts and cheers, backslaps and roars of greeting from every throat, from men he had known all his life as armsmen here in Winterfell and near strangers from the minor houses nearby alike. Then two of the men were smacked aside, and he was hauled into a bearhug looking up into his father's face. "You did not arrive in the manner I expected my son but you certainly arrived with a certain amount of fanfare!"

"Heh, well you know me father, I always like to make a good impression." Ranma laughed, hugging his father to him hard.

Eddard chuckled, turning with Ranma still in a one armed hug as he marched him along the wall towards the nearest tower, as the cheers of "the winter king! Winter is coming!" abounded all around them. As they were walking however Eddard questioned his son closely. "What did you attack out there, we saw you appear suddenly, and I know you wouldn't have just attacked randomly."

"I tried to kill all of the well, I call them wizards of the White Walkers that seem to be with this army of theirs. I think I only managed to kill five of them, not certain. Worse, I didn't destroy what looked like some kind of, of focus I suppose, would master Luwin know about such things? Anyway, hopefully the loss in numbers will keep them from using their magics against us for a while."

"And is there a reason why you're here alone?" Eddard asked setting that aside for now as Catelyn, who must've heard the commotion, raced out of the keep towards them, her arms flung open as she saw her eldest son. Behind her Bran and Rickon and their direwolves boiled out of the keep was well, clad in their normal indoor clothing, unmindful of the cold for a moment.

"I'll tell you in a moment father." Ranma said grinning happily as his mother came near. "Right now we have something more important to deal with."

His mother reached him, and Ranma put his arms around her waist lifting her into a hug and whirling her around to the cheers and jubilation of the people watchers on the wall, before putting her down and picking up little Rickon, pulling Bran into a hug as he nodded at their direwolves. Shaggydog had taken to his training with Hodor very well, and sat watching happily as the family was reunited with the alpha while Summer set up a happy yipping noise.

Later that night the family dined with their closest advisors at the head table, where Ranma regaled them and all of the others in the dining hall with the tale of the war in the south. The war was already beginning to be called the War of Reformation thanks to the sweeping changes that had already occurred to the power structure of Westeros. The



breaking of the Westerlands brought many a smile.

The fate of the Stormlands brought a frown to Eddard's face, though he could not truly argue with the fact it had to be done, disgusted both by the ferocity of the battles between the Stormlands forces and how quickly the losers had turned their coats from one Baratheon to the other. The retelling of the battle between Viserys, Stannis, the new Royal Army, and the Golden Company brought exclamations of shock from the listeners, both from the noble table and those listening from the other tables.

Ranma's last bit of news, the fact that the Vale had already put an army into the field which was marching to the North's aid before word reached them brought shouts of joy and happiness from many a throat. Eddard nodded grimly satisfied at that and nodding approval at the plans Ranma had put in place there. Ranma looked at his mother however, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, but everything we've learned about aunt Lysa said she was insane, and going crazier all the time. I, I could not in conscience leave her in charge of the Vale. And given the rumors we heard about her son, even having him in power in the Vale was just not going to happen." Ranma left his speculations about her relationship, whatever it had been, with Petyr to one side, not wanting to cloud the issue.

"I understand." Catelyn said with a sigh. "I sometimes wonder what would've happened if she could have married someone closer to her own age, someone she could have more in common with than merely the marriage oath. But such wanderings are fruitless, and serve no purpose at this point." She smiled slightly at her son, before reaching forward to hug him with one arm. "You did well, as far as I can tell you did well in all of it, not as I would have done, or as your father would've done I don't think." Here Eddard nodded his head, indicating that she was speaking nothing but the truth. "But I think better than either of us could have contrived."

"Breaking the Westerlands and the Stormlands might keep similar wars from occurring later as well." Eddard amused. "Perhaps a stronger Royal House will truly unite Westeros into one nation rather than several disparate countries."

"I hope so, I think that this winter is going to be hard enough without needing to defend our backs from the knives of our own people." Ranma smiled grimly as he paraphrased something he had said once to Daenerys, even as he felt a pang of pain, missing her and Merry terribly. Their absence and Jon's kept this from being a true family reunion in his mind.

He shook off his maudlin mood quickly however. "But as I said, the rest of the army should be here within a month and a half or at least at White Harbor by that point. And the Vale troops should be here in about a month at the most. I think the troops under Lord Reed will take around three weeks to get here to Winterfell. Can you tell me anything more about what's been going on elsewhere in the North?"

"Somewhat." Eddard said with a nod which was rather more grim than Ranma had hoped. "The last raven we had from the Wall said that the Bay of Seals was almost entirely frozen, though not deeply just yet, though it was certainly enough to stop ships from getting to Eastwatch-By-the-Sea. We have had no word from Karhold since that first message from them about Theon's misadventure, and I fear the worst."

Ranma grimaced, his teeth clenched angrily at the thought of losing a friend to the White Walkers. "Theon's a tough son of a bitch, until I hear point blank that he's dead I'll hold out hope that he still alive somewhere. Elsewhere?"

"Bear Island has come under attack, and has for the most part fallen. Maege is holding her longhouse however, and says she can hold out for a long time so long as they don't bring any more of a force against her, but she lacks the dragonglass to fight the White Walkers directly. Her losses were heavy when she met them on the beach apparently, but they haven't tried to go around their island to the rest of the western shores. At least not so far as we have heard. Of course our communications with the mountain clans isn't the best, but most of them pulled their people back here, only the Norrey stayed put, and even then most of them I think moved up to join the Wall's defenders. At least I hope so."

Eddard sighed again, showing a weariness that frankly alarmed Ranma a little, and he reached over to grab his father's shoulder and a hard grip. Eddard smiled, patting his son's hand for a moment. But then he went on. "We've had word from Hornwood and Ramsgate that they've come under assault, as well as Widows Watch, though the assault there is small and more in the way of keeping the defenders from sortieing out than anything else. The Last Hearth is under siege as we are here yet it had a number of dragonglass arrowheads and knives so it can hold out. White Harbor has not been attacked yet, nor has Oldcastle or any place south of Winterfell."

"I stopped in at Castle Cerwyn." Ranma said with a nod. "They're as prepared as they can be, but I don't think they'll be under attack until Winterfell falls. Hopefully they'll concentrate here."

"Hopefully?" Catelyn asked, though something in Eddard's face showed that he understood what his son was hinting

at.

"Hopefully," Ranma replied with a nod. "Let them sit out there, hell, let them bring as much of their army against us here as they can, add to the forces already out there. If they concentrate that much it'll just make it easier to smash their forward force. What I would hate to do is to face skirmishes and small assaults spread out across the entirety of the North. That'd bleed us dry far faster than larger set battles. But until the Army arrives, we will have to sit on the defensive."

"Now," Ranma said turning to his brother and ruffling his hair affectionately. "Tell me more about your inventions Bran, and is it true that you actually trained up some reindeer to pull carts? I understand that you also figured out a system to change barges for the White Harbor over to sleds?"

OOOOOO

Jon and his army had caught one of the two Ironborn crews still hunting along the Mander in the open. They had caught and tortured several families who had not run away quickly enough several leagues distance from the Mander itself, and were on their way back from that plunder to their temporary base when Jon and his army fell upon them. No quarter was asked and none given, and not a single Ironborn had survived for more than a turn of the candle after the battle began.

The other group of Ironborn however, must have somehow heard that they were coming, because they stopped their depredations and pulled back to House Westbrook's keep. There they had gathered several hundred women, their so-called salt wives, and when the army came within sight threaten them all with death if they were attacked. It was a tactic Jon hadn't seen before, but not one that he was going to let dissuade him.

"Those women have been through hell already, and no doubt that at least some of them are already dead up here," said Jon said tapping his head, his eyes like steel. "No, I'm not going to let be Ironborn remain in charge of even a single keep."

Margaery who had actually been working with the people she brought along to look over the lands that the Ironborn had despoiled shook her head sadly. "True, but how are you going to go about getting them out of their then?"

"Milady, I am a Wolfsworn, and trust me, my brother and the rest of us have come up with numerous ways of taking castles and keeps beyond a full frontal assault. Let me survey that place, and I'll find a way in." Jon smiled, though inwardly he shuddered, knowing he'd probably have to do some climbing at some point.

The keep was a small one, but moderately well-built a four-story tall edifice of stone shaped like a circle, with only a single entranceway, which had several portcullises barring the way inside, and no doubt a sufficient number of murder holes and other nasty surprises in the gate tunnel.

But that didn't matter to Jon, he wasn't going to go through the main doorway anyway. That night Jon made his way forwards, as silent as a shadow with Ghost beside him. He might not have his brother's Umi-Sen-Ken, but Jon could move almost as quietly as Ghost over any kind of terrain, and was quickly at the side of the wall, moving around it cautiously staring up and looking for a ready murder hole, while his hand gently ran over the stone, looking for handholds.

He found enough, and began to climb, while all the time saying a mantra in his head, *I don't like this, I don't like this, I don't like this!* But Jon wasn't about to let his fear of falling, he was not afraid of heights, it was falling that bothered him he was quick to point out, stop him tonight. Quickly ascending the wall Jon was right below one of the murder holes mere moments later.

Pulling himself up to look inside he saw four Ironborn, three of whom were busy rutting away with a woman who simply laid there, her head lolling back and her eyes, from what Jon could see in the light of the room's one torch, dead. What horrors that woman had seen over the past few months Jon didn't know, but it made his blood boil to think about it. The fourth Ironborn was asleep on another bad, snoring loud enough to wake the dead.

If he had been any less filled with rage Jon would have shaking his head at this. The Ironborn were so arrogant, so undisciplined! Even knowing that there was an enemy army surrounding them they couldn't pull themselves away from their **fun** to even set a watch. Oh, there were no doubt a few Ironborn up on the roof of the keep. But there at least half the crew should have been awake at all times, given how badly outnumbered they were.

*Stop looking a gift horse in the mouth Jon, and get on with it,* Jon thought angrily, pulling himself over the murder hole's sill as quietly as possible. The first the four Ironborn knew of his presence was when his dagger took one of

them in the kidney from behind.

The man groaned aloud, causing the other two men, who were busy fondling and forcing the comatose woman to move as they thrust into her from above and below looked up. Before either could speak Jon's swords were out, cutting forward economically. Each blade took one of them along the throat and both of them fell to one side, gasping as their life's blood trickled out. The fourth never even had a chance to wake up, Jon's blade took him through the eye and into the brain.

With that done Jon moved over to the woman, staring down at her while feeling for a pulse staring into her eyes. There was nothing there, no mind left, the horrors she had endured had broken her. Kneeling next to her body uncaring of the blood from one of his victims still dripping onto the floor from underneath the woman he murmured a prayer to the Old Gods for her soul, then gave what mercy he could before standing up, his face a stony mask of fury.

From there Jon made his way out into the corridor, all of his senses stretched to the max as he searched for any up hint that the Ironborn realized they had been invaded. There was none, and Jon made his way towards one end of the corridor, luckily finding the staircase down on the first try.

He ran into several Ironborn on the way, killing them quickly, efficiently and above all silently. More than once upon seeing the Ironborn at their fun he couldn't stop himself from entering a room and dealing with the Ironborn within, before doing what he could for the women, which alas was not much. He was a wraith in the night, a thing of vengeance and silent justice come upon them. Then he was in the gatehouse, finding within it five more Ironborn, only two of whom were awake.

Those two were near the doorway. One shouted "'Ere who are", before Jon ran forward, thrusting out his blades to both sides. One blade struck true, punching through a Ironborn's chain mail straight into his chest, but the other only skittered across one of the second Ironborn's chain mail, and Jon cursed before kicking out hard catching that man in the chest and throwing him backwards.

The remaining three Ironborn came awake at the man's cursing, but Jon was on them in a second, his short swords slashing out killing two of them before they could shout. But the other two did get shouts off before they joined their fellows, falling to the floor of the gatehouse. Shouts began to abound all through the keep, but Jon quickly dropped his twin swords and began to operate the controls on the trio of portcullises that defended the keep, opening the keep to his army.

Locking them in place he ran back to the doorway, as his army, warned by the howl of Ghost charged forward. In the lead was Ser Thomas Graceford and the men of his house, all of whom had agreed to join him becoming the heart of the new order. While they had yet to come up with their own battle-cry, their family's old one still worked just as well. **"Work Her Will! Slay every last godless bastard!"**

After the battle Margaery found Jon still in the gatehouse, cleaning his weapons and staring off out of one of the murder holes out into the dark. "Jon, are you all right?" she asked softly.

"I am unhurt." he said, but his voice was a faraway one.

"You don't sound all right," Margaery said, coming over and placing a hand on his shoulder. It moved to his chin and she gently turned his face to look at her. "Are you well?" she asked again.

"I've killed before this, this is not my first battle, or even my tenth. And the death of the Ironborn mattered not at all to me. I would've felt more compassion for butchering so many animals. That was what they were, animals." Staring up at her he described the scene he had come upon first entering into the keep, and the fact he had given what mercy could to that woman and several others as he made his way through the keep.

Margaery listened without reproach, simply gently running her fingers through his hair soothingly before saying, "Many of the women here are comatose like that, and I'm afraid that they are beyond our power to heal. Giving mercy as you did is possibly the kindest thing you could've done. Jon, you did what you had to, what you **had** to. Let the Ironborn who used my people so harshly answer to the Stranger or their foul Drowned creature for their actions, don't carry it with you."

Jon looked at her, then slowly nodded, his shoulders straightening slightly as he did so. Then he smirked suddenly. "You're quite wiser than your years should allow for my lady, how did that come about?"

"Allow me to keep some secrets my lord Hand." Margaery laughed, taking his hand and gently leading them away. By the time dawn broke, the keep was fully cleansed of the Ironborn, and the women those that responded to their

change in circumstances, were on their way towards Highgarden under heavy escort led by Ser Graceford. The army however did not camp there, the stench of the place and the horrors that had been committed upon the women and the other folk in that keep was too pervasive. No, they marched through the night and well into the other day, heading down towards Oldtown, where they would meet up with Willas and the others.

A week later they did so on the Rose Road to learn that Willas and Bryce had much easier time of it. "Lord Florent was rattling his saber, but when confronted with a larger army lost heart." Willas reported, his lips twitching as he tried to suppress a smirk. "The same went for Titus Peake. With the other marcher Houses moving up behind it and our own army in front of it they capitulated quickly, merely saying they had been moving to link up with Lord Florent and battle Oberyne themselves."

He pulled his horse around, moving in step with Jon, showing no discomfort to address Jon where he was marching along on foot. "We still have no idea what they planned, and since they didn't actually fight us or ravage the lands we don't have any reason to remove them from power. But I remain very leery of them and Florent. I've already sent a message back to Highgarden asking my grandmother to suborn more of their households to pass on information just in case."

Jon nodded, grimly satisfied and after relaying what he and his army had accomplished asked, "I don't see Lord Dondarrion Edric or Arya with you though. Where are they?"

"They continued down to the Dornish Passes, I think they intend to head to Starfall."

Jon winced. "There's no way they'll get there and back in time to join me to head north is there?"

"Possibly, remember my men and Bryce's can't move as fast as yours. It will take us at least another three weeks to get to Oldtown, whereas they are traveling light and with several horses each." Willas smirked. "They're very good horses, I should know. I'd estimate they could meet us in Oldtown if we waited a few days. Which we might have to, considering how we'll need to replenish the supplies for the fleet, make certain the fleet has enough ships and supplies for you along with Garlan's forces, then decide which way you're going to go from Oldtown."

Willas had to stay behind of course to rule the Reach, and to become one of the Royal House's voice here in the south as they dealt with the White Walkers. But he came along to organize the logistics for the fleet, as well as to introduce Jon to Garlan, so that between the three of them they could hammer out the command structure for the fleet as it went north.

And while Arya and possibly Edric might meet up with them in Oldtown, Lord Dondarrion would not. He would instead be taking formal command of his lands and the Lands of House Dayne, combining them into the new Duchy of the Passes. That would probably not be a simple task, depending on if the Dornish wanted to try and fight the annexation of the Prince's Pass and the Boneway, but regardless it would happen, especially with House Dayne enthusiastically on Lord Dondarrion's side. Dorne could no longer remain aloof and apart from the rest of Westeros.

Jon nodded. "I've been wondering about that, at first I thought we should head around the Summer Sea and up the Narrow Sea to White Harbor. That way we could stop at Planky Town, intimidate Prince Doran some more, and then stop at Dragonstone to load up on dragonglass on our own. But how long would that take us out of our way?"

"I think we'll have to go that route with at least a small portion of our forces, to meet with the Prince anyway." Willas said shrugging philosophically. "However, I can handle that, and it would indeed add at least two months, maybe more to the journey north if we went to the east rather than west. On the other hand, the Iron Islands are embroiled in a war, and I doubt Lannisport would be happy about being forced to resupply the fleet. It depends, I think on where you think you're needed most."

Jon nodded once more, though inside he knew he should go west. The vision of Bear Island, the only clear vision he had seen, pointed to that. *But if we go that way, I won't be able to arm my troops with dragonglass. Against wights numbers and discipline can tell, but against White Walkers? Is holding Bear Island worth the loss of life we'll face without being properly armed?*

The two men fell silent, simply riding or marching on as they thought of the problem. Neither noticed Margaery, riding alongside her brother, staring at the two men thoughtfully as she made her own plans.

OOOOOO

After sending off his prisoners to Crannogtown under guard to be placed on a ship for White Harbor, Timot Hammerhand pressed his men hard. After only four days they passed through the Neck to Moat Cailin, where Timot

happily handed over control of his force to Lord Reed then set about organizing the army's supply train with his normal brisk efficiency with Lord Reed's men while his army rested for several days. The horses and carts sent from Barrowton sped their army up enormously. They had been sent without a whimper from Lady Dustin, who despite her hatred of Eddard knew her duty and had no wish to see the White Walkers on her doorstep. Even so, Timot had pushed his army hard, so now their pace was slowed slightly.

Two weeks marching passed quickly in this manner. They were deep into the Barrowlands when a shout went up from the scouts guarding the back trail. "Wolf approaching down the road!"

A moment later a cry of "The Wolf" went up from more than one man, and Timot looked to the side to see a giant direwolf loping along the ground racing north. "Is that...?"

Lord Reed nodded, smiling faintly. "Yes, I was wondering where he was anyway."

Moments later another shout went up, "Horsemen, running up behind hell for leather!"

Lord Reed and Timot turned their horses, racing towards the back of the column. There they found Edd leading several horses, all of whom looked to be on their last legs, while he stood on his own, glassy eyed, his hair matted to his head and his legs wobbling, heat rising from his body to create steam in the cold air around him. "L-lord Reed?"

"Edd Karstark!" Lord Reed said reaching down to grab the younger yet far taller man by the shoulders steadying him as he let go of the reins. The horses looked as if they wanted to bolt, but were simply too tired. Instead they just moved away from the crazy human that had run them all into the ground one after another then himself covering in 3 1/2 weeks the distance between Riverrun and the army's current position. It was a feat that many would have thought impossible. They didn't know about horses that Edd had left behind at Fairmarket, or the other four he left behind at Crannogtown. All of whom he had ridden to death or near it. Or the sours, the blisters that had opened and been ignored on his ass, or the fact his feet's sole's had opened and bled so badly his boots had to be cut off him. .

"Did you try to keep up with Fenris?" Lord Reed asked incredulously.

"Not at first." Edd gasped shaking his head. "Met up with him near the Twins. Stayed with him since, though he could have left me in the dust. Damn direwolf!" He grinned suddenly, wobbly legs and all. "But my duty is in the North with my king, and by the Old Gods my witness I will be there!"

"Aye, but if you don't get any rest you won't of any use." Lord Reed said, gesturing two of his men over who helped Eddie away, moving him towards an empty cart. "Get some rest lad, will be at Cerwyn within another week, and after that, I have no doubt you'll find battle worth your mettle."

OOOOOO

Leaving the army of humans and the pack friend behind Fenris ran on, stopping only occasionally to hunt. A single bear fed him enough for the run through the Neck, and a moose made for good eating two days after he had left the Army behind him, but he began to see undead about then. They were **strange**, the stench of death yet the site of them moving spooked Fenris, making his hackles rise at the unnaturalness of it all. Every time he saw these undead creatures his instincts forced Fenris to stop long enough to rip them apart, slowing him somewhat.

And he did have to rip them apart. The magic that made the wights move could not be undone by his ki attacks for some reason unless he got their heads or hearts. He learned this the hard way, when a wight whose stomach he'd had torn apart rose behind him and bit his tail!

Fighting wights was altogether a disgusting experience. They smelled disgusting, they tasted disgusting, worse than anything he'd ever tried to actually eat, let alone simply fought. Worse, parts of your meal should not be trying to attack you after you rip out its throat!

Despite these frequent stops, Fenris quickly came on Cerwyn, passing it at midday to the shouts and cheers of the defenders. He paused, circling back and sitting on his haunches for a moment, answered this cheer with a howl of his own. That howl reverberated for leagues around, answered by the howls of wolves in the Wolf's Wood. It was a howl that echoed and reechoed again and again deep into the mountains, a trumpet of war. The howl went on and on for several moments, as the cheers of the defenders of House Cerwyn rebounded, shouts of the "Winter King, the wolf, the wolf for the king!" Making themselves heard before he turned again, racing on.

That howl had also been heard by the defenders of Winterfell, and by the time Fenris was within sight, Ranma had organized them to be ready.

The White Walkers were also ready for Fenris, and sent many of their magically domesticated beasts against him. Two polar bears and four sabretooth tigers along with a single giant waited on the road itself for Fenris, and howled as they caught sight of the massive direwolf, while the White Walkers took aim at him with their bows. They kept the wights back for now, surrounding Winterfell to keep the defenders from sortieing in support.

"AROOOOOOOO!" With another blood-chilling howl Fenris met them, his fangs and claws glowing blue with ki light. A single swipe put down a sabretooth tiger, but Fenris was smashed backwards by an overhand blow from a polar bear. He rolled with it however, coming up and lunging forward to bury his fangs deep into the polar bears stomach as it had reared for another blow.

Bearing that polar bear to the Earth Fenris lunged to one side, dodging several arrows from nearby White Walkers, using another polar bear as inadvertent armor against them. Smashing his head to flinders almost absentmindedly, he dodged under a powerful punch from a giant, taking the thing in the throat with his fangs and ripping off his head. The giant kept moving, and its next blow took Fenris in the side, but the direwolf shrugged it off.

He felt a bite on his side, and turned snarling, rolling around in the snow with another sabretooth pitting claw against claw. He won quickly, Fenris' ki armor seeing him through without much injury, but now the nearby wights were all around him. Not a single White Walker closed with him however, Ranma's assault on them had slaughtered more than half their starting number, and they had not been reinforced unlike the wights. They couldn't afford to lose more, which was a bad thing.

Suddenly the gates of Winterfell opened, and 400 men charged out armed with long spears tipped with Dragonglass spearheads, while above them the catapults and defenders went to work. The rest of the defense was left with only token watchers, as every man and archer they could fit lined this portion of the battlements and manned the towers facing the battle around Fenris.

The first rank of attackers held tower shields which covered them from head to toe and spread to either side of their bodies almost interlinking with their fellows on either side of them. They allowed just enough room for the second rank's long spears, almost as long as the Golden Company's, to thrust between them.

These men were not as well trained as the pikemen however, and as they rushed forward into the ranks of the wights trying to surround Fenris, they lost some of their careful spacing. They slammed into the wights, but got bogged down quickly, several of the shields being smashed aside by the wights and the formation collapsing backwards, the spear proving unwieldy at close range. However the third rank was armed with dragonglass daggers, and when they went for a kill shot on the wights they put them down, thankfully.

Ranma was with them too, bounding over the shield wall and into the wights, hacking and slashing out to either side as Fenris forged his own way through the portion of the wights between them. Moments later the two stood together, the beleaguered square of pike behind them.

"Welcome home Fenris!" Ranma shouted aloud laughing as he hacked White Walkers apart, putting them down permanently before falling back. "Back! Back to the castle!"

Above them the archers fired as many fire arrows and dragonglass arrows as they could, unfortunately depleting their stores somewhat more than Ranma could've hoped. Yet this did the job, both clearing their route and covering their retreat, more thanks to the fact the wights could not overcome their fear of fire than anything else. But moments later they were back inside the gate's tunnel, the portcullis slamming down behind them than the gate behind that.

Then Ranma was laughing as he hugged Fenris to him while his siblings and their bonded crowded around him as well. Fenris was home, and he was but the first ally to arrive.

OOOOOO

After leaving the Bay of Crabs behind, the Royal fleet made good time traveling north, skirting around the Fingers as much as they could, the wind usually behind them. They had to stop twice for food, taking on as much provisions as they could for the sailors and the army. They also met Salladhor Saan's fleet going the other way, both fleets doing what they could to stay within sight of land given the horrendous storms that came out of nowhere at times in the Narrow Sea in Autumn.

The pirate prince was of course brought aboard, and met Daenerys and her advisers. He came away somewhat impressed by the young queen, and more than a little frightened of her dragons. They were so much more **real** in real life than they were in pictures, paintings or old tales.

Daenerys in turn was quick to affirm the crowns backing of the deal Salladhor had struck with Lord Manderly then took it a step forward. "If you can keep up the supply of dragonglass, I will pay you your weight in gold Salladhor Saan. And if feet you or any of your man can figure out a way to speed the process up somehow, be it the trip up from Dragonstone, getting the dragonglass out of the ground, carving it up appropriately, I don't care, if you or they have any idea that works to speed it up, we will award you a noble title, and the island of Driftmark."

"With such an incentive my lady, I will of course place all of my considerable acumen against the task."

Daenerys nodded, then looked down at the map trying to figure out where they were. But she didn't have as good a grasp of distances when at sea as she did on land. She asked Sahn and Davos for their take on where they were, and how long it would take them to get to White Harbor from there.

"We've made better time than I expected my lady, far better if I'm honest. Not all of that can be explained away by my resupply idea, we've simply had favorable winds the entire way." He caught septon Ehhric's smiling expression for a moment and rolled his eyes. "I know that some of my men think it is a Seven sent miracle father, but I'm not one of them. I've been at sea for too long to have any remaining misconceptions about it, the sea is a cold stone bitch which will kill if given half the chance. It's just that it's playing nice right now, lulling us into a false sense of security."

Davos was as God-fearing as the next man, and firmly believed in the Seven, it wasn't only his code of honor which made him hate Melisandre. But he also believed that the Seven helped those that helped themselves, miracles were all too often simply charlatans' tricks, or the workings of madmen or mad women like Melisandre.

"That isn't what I asked Ser Seaworth. How long will it take to get to White Harbor?" Daenerys asked implacably, ignoring the small bit of byplay.

"Another week and a half or so to get to the entrance to the Bite, then another 2 and 1/2 weeks at best." Davos said promptly. "It depends on if the Bite has begun to freeze. It may well have by this point."

He looked over at Salladhor who nodded. "There were indeed several icebergs visible to my ships along our route both to and from White Harbor, though I didn't notice any significant difference from one leg of the trip to the other." He stroked the large and very warm fur coat that had been part of the deal between himself and Lord Manderly for clothing his sailors against the cold for a moment before going on. "I do know however, that I would not wish to travel further north than the northernmost edge of the Bite. The seas in the Bite are relatively calm, but the entrance to it, in particular near its northernmost edge, was extremely rough.

"The best idea when dealing with such cold conditions my lady is to have several of the ships out in front of the rest of the fleet. We then force the fleet to travel as closely fit together as possible, with the ships in front going extra slowly to do soundings. Ice can often hide underneath the waves, and an iceberg can rip the keel out of a ship just as easily as rock or reef." Davos said.

"Which will slow us down even more." Rickard growled. He and Greatjon exchanged glances, knowing their Family's seats would be primary targets for the White Walkers if they had indeed gotten around the Wall. While he had continued to profess his trust in his son's judgment, and the defenses of Karhold, that was a vastly different thing from being happy with the situation.

Daenerys scowled, then noticing a small mark on the map near one of the Fingers her scowl dissipated into a thoughtful stare. Tapping it she asked, "Tell me, does anyone know how close Baelish Keep is to the ocean? I didn't realize it was on one of the Fingers until just now, but if it's close enough it might behoove us to swing by and see what we can find..."

That one some particularly piratical grins from her listeners, and Davos responded for them all. "Actually, Baelish Keep is right on the water your Majesty. And it's not much of a keep either, being more of a simple enlarged holdfast with an outer wall along the approaches from further inland. At least that was the way was the last time I sailed these waters. It could've changed I suppose."

"Probably not." Merry said shaking her head. "Petyr never relied on an overt show of force, he always liked to hide as much as he could get away with. The exterior at least won't have changed much I don't think."

"In that case, I think we should take six or seven ships and head in that direction when we're close enough Ser Seaworth. My dragons could use a bit more exercise than they have been getting simply fishing anyway." Daenerys smiled thinly.

About a four days after that they came within sight of the Finger where Baelish Keep was placed, and the flagship

along with six other Royal war galleys peeled off from the rest of the fleet, moving towards the Finger. They didn't bother hiding their coming, simply sailing on certain in their power. And the dragons flew before them.

The sight of Rhaegon and Sunfyre won them the keep without a fight. Not, Daenerys reflected as she allowed Smalljon to aid her up onto the tiny wharf that served the keep that they could've put up much of a fight in the first place. There'd only been 50 armymen within the keep, a decent amount for a keep of the size, but not enough to defend it against six war galleys worth of Royal troops. Let alone the dragons.

She took a moment to look over to where Rhaegon and Sunfyre were cavorting in the ocean right by the keep. It turned out that this place was a home for crabs much like Harroway, and the two of them were guzzling the delicacy eagerly. *They're going to spoil their dinner*, she thought to himself herself, chuckling before following the Wolfsworn into the keep.

The Wolfsworn moved around her like the old Kingsguard, and Smalljon in particular growled at any of the prisoners looked at her way, keeping her far away from them. It only been a few weeks since Merry had confirmed that Daenerys was pregnant, though thankfully she hadn't begun to have morning sickness, nor had it begun to affect her figure much. Still, the news had been received jubilantly from the entire army, with the Lords in particular breathing sighs of relief at the sign that the succession would soon be made clear.

"Will you look at that your Majesty?" said Davos, staring up into the ceiling of the keep's main Hall.

Daenerys followed his gaze, and saw what looked like some pieces of a ship taken apart and hanging there in the dark. "What is it?"

"Pieces of a cutter. I wonder..." Davos frowned, and waved his hand and moved off intent on searching the property.

Daenerys let him go because Lord Blackwood came trooping in then, smirking widely. "Your Majesty, we found something you might want to see."

What the men of House Blackwood had found were several **dozen** large chests of gold. All told Daenerys would later find that it amounted to practically a million gold dragons. Not even half the amount that Petyr had diverted from the crown coffers to his own needs, but more than enough to be a kind of emergency nest egg for him.

Once he learned of that Davos simply nodded. "That makes sense when added to the boat we found hidden here my lady. It would take a skilled crew of workmen only a few days to put it together, all the pieces are here and in excellent condition. I would say that Petyr was a rat with a ship ready to leave a sinking situation."

The Wolfsworn all rolled their eyes, with Meera going so far as to shout 'Booooo' at the horrible turn of phrase, while Daenerys merely shook her head sadly at the man. "Pray do leave the quips to other men Ser Seaworth you are an excellent ship captain and admiral, you have no need to be a master jongleur."

Then she smiled, patting him on the shoulder. "Load it up. Set aside a single casket, share it out between you and the other Lords in the army then set aside two more to split up among the men. After the war they've already fought, they all deserve a bit of a bonus in beyond what they'll be paid when this is all over."

"Any plans for the rest?" Davos asked only semi-whimsically. That was a **lot** of gold after all.

"No, but gold is as important to kings as victory." Daenerys said with a faint smile. "I'm certain my husband and I will find some use for it soon enough. Though it is **not** as important as loyalty." She said smiling faintly at the Wolfsworn and Davos, who all straightened their shoulders at her words. "Now, we have a journey to get back to, and a war awaiting us at our destination. Let us be about it."

**OOOOOO**

Besides the small skirmishing parties spreading everywhere slowly, the only major White Walker Army on the move at this moment was the one that had taken Karhold. The White Walkers forces were not infinite, nor could even a large percentage of their forces be sent around the Wall on their icebergs. Even worse, reinforcing those sent was a slow laborious process. Whatever their magics, the icebergs moved incredibly slowly after all, the White Walkers had no power over moving water. Even from a distance from the Frozen Shore to Bear Island had taken more than three months.

Ranma had hurt the White Walkers badly when he killed the wizards with the army surrounding Winterfell, but there were still over a dozen wizards on this side of the Wall, their will slowly spreading through the very ground. And more than half of them were with the army that had taken Karhold. It had been the White Walker's greatest victory so far



since taking Skagos. They had killed hundreds, taken dozens of small holdfasts, families that had refused to leave, even small keeps here and there. But only Karhold of the Great Houses had fallen to them.

Gathering more and more wights to them as it went, the army marched on its next target, passing the Weeping Water and marching on. Their target, Hornwood.

OOOOOO

2 and 1/2 weeks after Fenris had passed them the expeditionary force under Lord Reed finally arrived at Castle Cerwyn. They were greeted warmly by the defenders, and to their astonishment Ranma himself. "I would've thought you'd be in Winterfell lad." Lord Reed said looking at the younger man in astonishment.

"I've been able to sneak in and out of Winterfell since the siege began. The wights, whatever they use to replace their senses don't work very well," Ranma said with a shrug, not wanting to explain the cloaking technique that he used, but also unwilling to outright lie. "They don't have enough White Walkers left to ring the entire castle, there's always some way through their cordon."

"I see you've been busy then." Lord Reed said frowning thoughtfully. "What are we actually facing here, and what's already been done?"

Ranma smiled, one arm still around Edd's shoulders. "Yeah, we were kind of busy right as I arrived. Since then it's calmed down, out of a bit of excitement when Fenris arrived. But right now, let's talk tactics."

The siege had fallen into a state of semi-constant small skirmishes. The defenders lacked the numbers to truly battle against the wights, but the animals were useless in the siege. The last remaining dragon had gotten too close at one point, and Ranma had destroyed it with a 'Direwolf Claw'. Without it, and with the defenders protected by their positions, the White Walkers were forced to begin work on siege weapons. But while they could use the giants and wights for simple fetch, hack and carry tasks, the real work on these weapons had to be done by the White Walkers personally, and it was very slow work. But thanks to the ongoing siege, the White Walkers had yet to send any organized attacks beyond Winterfell.

The siege at Winterfell had actually dragged in many of the smaller bands of wights that had been raised by the White Walker's power, and House Cerwyn's land actually hadn't seen any depredations from them for over a week by this point. This convinced Lord Cerwyn to add 700 more men of his own House and a further 420 men from his minor Houses to Ranma's expeditionary force. This impacted his own defenses cutting into the number of trained men, but Medger felt it was worth the risk.

The expeditionary force had also added light Cavalry from House Ryswell long before this, and even a force of 400 pike out from Torrhen's Square. They weren't very well trained in comparison to the Cerwyn Regiment, and most of them were un-blooded, but the inclusion of them gave Ranma around 6,300 men.

"Tell me, did you hear anything from the other side of the Neck about the Vale army arriving at Crannogtown?" Ranma asked looking at Lord Reed. Around them their men slowly progressed through Cerwyn's armory. Dragonglass arrows, spear tips and daggers depending on their place in the battlefield were handed out, along with some directions on their upkeep, since the weapons were so brittle.

"We'd heard sightings of them from my scouts before we were too far from the Neck, but I'm sorry that's about all I can tell you." Lord Reed said shrugging. However most of Lord Reed's attention was on the men around them, more importantly the looks that most of the soldiers wore. There was a lot of fear there, anger yes, and worry, which was normal enough going into battle, but there was far too much fear for his liking. He nodded around at them nudging Ranma sharply in the ribs. "You should give a speech lad."

"What?" Ranma asked looking a little confused. Then he too noticed the men's faces and sighed, nodding. "I understand. This enemy isn't like any other they faced, and they all know it too. We need to put some spine and them. Get them bedded down, we'll spend two nights here and march out before dawn on the third day. I'll give a speech then, but I'll also hold some training seminars on how to fight wights between now and then. That should show them the wights and White Walkers can be beaten, you just have to be careful about it."

"Yes, but tonight Ranma, you and I need to talk. I need to tell you about what nearly happened to Sansa." Edd scowled, his face bitter, more bitter than his run north could explain. "I nearly failed you my friend."

Ranma looked at him, then nodded. "We'll talk in a bit then."

When they did, Edd explained how Petyr had nearly kidnapped Sansa, saved only by Fenris coming on him at the right time. After he finished Ranma leaned back in the bed he had been assigned for the night, staring over at Edd who sat on his own. "I thought Fenris was trying to tell me about Sansa a time or two, but direwolves don't remember things like humans do or for as long. I'm going to have to think of something special to do for him, maybe a whole roasted brown bear or something."

He shook his head at his friend. "Don't worry Edd, I don't blame you for what almost happened. Petyr was a crafty bastard, he tricked me and my father a time or two in King's Landing, it'd be stupid to think he couldn't do the same to you for at least a little while."

"But..."

"No buts!" Ranma interrupted, smiling grimly. "You did your duty despite not having won her heart and transported Sansa to Riverrun. You did all you could there, now I need your mind and your spear here with me. Do I have it?"

Edd nodded, reaching across to clasp Ranma's forearm with his. "You have it."

The beds of Cerwyn were comfy, especially to those portions of the Army that had been on the march from Harroway nonstop for over two months now. They slept soundly that night before enjoying the down time, and many a man took heart from Ranma's lessons over the next two days. Yet the fear still lingered.

One the dawn of the third day after their when roused by their commanders and troop leaders the next morning arrival the expeditionary force mustered quickly. They ate a hot breakfast of meaty stew and bread, knowing that some of them at least would never see the like again. But despite that certain knowledge and the fear of the enemy they were to face, they marched out into Cerwyn's courtyard, grim of face and purpose.

When he spoke however, Ranma finished what his lessons had begun, replacing their fear with a will of pure steel. Ice held above his head Ranma stood between the army and the entrance to the gate tunnel out of the castle. And when he spoke his voice was almost calm at first, but every man in the army heard it with almost unnatural clarity.

"All we have done, all the North has done up until this point is hold on, defend, fall back. What else could we expect? The White Walkers attacked when most of the North was away, when **you** were away because they feared **you!** The White Walkers fear humanity, they fear you and the strength of your arms, because they know that **your** ancestors banished them beyond the wall millennia ago!"

The North has been holding on, but we are now done giving up territory for lives. **We** are back, **I** am back, **you** are back, and the rest of the army will joining us here in the North soon enough. But before they do, we will begin! We will begin the liberation of the North, the liberation of our homes!"

There was a cheer at that, and Ranma let it go on for a moment before he and continued to speak. "We liberate Winterfell and we start pushing them back! This land is **ours**, and no undead horde, no race from the past, no foreign army, no invader whatever he looks like whatever his magics whatever his gods! **No one** is going to take it from us! The White Walkers think the cold and the winter give them power, but I am the Winter King, **you** are my army, and we are going to show them what true strength, what true courage is! Who is with me!?"

Ranma was answered with a roar from every man there, and the Army shouted "The Winter King, the Winter King! The King in the North! Death to the White Walkers, death to the White Walkers!"

"Now we march!" Ranma said, sheathing Ice on his back and pointing out of the gate before trooping to the front of the army joining Edd at the front of the pike regiment, his spear having been replaced with one with a dragonglass tip. The army marched out of Cerwyn, their eyes no longer afraid but grim and determined.

Thanks to Ranma's killing five of the six mages with the army around Winterfell, the White Walkers didn't know that human reinforcements had already arrived. Worse, the single mage had been so busy pulling in more wights, hoping to gather a large enough force to simply overwhelm Winterfell in a rush, that they didn't have many scouts out. Those they had out Ranma and Edd had seen to the night before. Ranma would have normally set Fenris on that task, but Fenris could not get in and out of Winterfell as easily as Ranma. Instead he had been the one to communicate with the wolf pack's further south, keeping a tab on the army's progress so that Ranma knew when to head to Cerwyn.

Even so, and despite the fact that it was only a morning's journey from Winterfell to Cerwyn, the White Walkers were ready for them. They pulled much of their army out from around Winterfell, gathering to the south at the edge of the Winter Town in the fields which had once been Catelyn's special pride and joy, her system of crop rotation having made it the most profitable farmland in the North beyond that situated around White Harbor. .

Even with his concentration on gathering more wights, the wizard had created two ice spiders, like the ones that had attacked the Last Hearth only even more haphazardly made, with none of the black metal in their makeup. They, the undead giants and the remaining beasts from Skagos added a whole new level of fear to the army. The two spiders stayed behind guarding the wizard, but the center of the army's ragged line was centered on the giants. The beasts were held in the back, ready to be sent forward to exploit any weakness.

Yet almost worse than that was the sheer number of wights which his magics had pulled from the ground and gathered into the army. They had started out with thousands of them, and had simply added more as the siege continued, making good the losses among the White Walkers 12 to 15 times over. Indeed, it was the sheer number that they had gathered since his arrival that had convinced Ranma not to wait for the Vale forces to arrive from White Harbor but to attempt to break the siege now. Their appearance varied of course, not just in how long they had been dead but age of the individual. More than one man swore, seeing skeletons and more recent wights that had been children at one point. All told, Ranma estimated they had around 18,000 undead warriors facing his expeditionary force.

Ranma took a moment to dress his lines beyond bow range, watching as thousands of wights archers put arrows to string as his own archers did the same behind his line. The spear regiment held the center of the line, with the men of House Cerwyn and Reed spreading out to either side in a loose wing formation bent somewhat backwards. House Ryswell's cavalry remained hidden in the trees behind the army, moving forward slowly but not entering the fields where the White Walkers had opted to meet the expeditionary force. *Your first mistake bastards, you should've attacked us along the route, caught us where I couldn't fully deploy my pike thanks to the woods.*

With a final nod to Edd Ranma raced forward, as he raced towards where the giants and the beasts anchored the center of the hordes. "Winter has come for **you**, bastards!" The White Walkers turned their bows on him, but Ranma was too fast, rushing forward right into the giants faces before roaring "Direwolf's Claw!" The vorpal blades lashed out in every direction, gutting the giants all around and in front of Ranma, opening up a weakness in the army where before there had been a strength. Several of them survived, but Ice came quickly off Ranma's shoulder and he began to butcher them before the nearest wights could close on him.

Behind Ranma, Edd held a long dragonglass tipped spear just like all the men around him, leading the spear formation. This formation lacked the tower shields of the small band that Ranma had taken out to clear a path for Fenris, Cerwyn simply didn't have the ability to create such and Ranma couldn't have gotten enough of them out of Winterfell to do any good.

Instead, they were going to use the pike regiment's emphasis on depth in conjunction with the dragonglass spears. Every man in the pike regiment was now armed with a dragonglass tipped spear, as well as a dagger at their belts. Arming this force had completely wiped out the supplies Cerwyn had of dragonglass, but if they won this battle it would've been worth it. "All right boys, this is it! For the old gods and the North, for humanity, for your homes, **charge!**"

"Honor above all! Winter is Coming!" The Army shouted as one, and even as the wights archers continued to fire on them the pike Regiment charged, with the rest of the Army racing along behind it. The archers continued to fire, with the dragonglass arrows doing their work, though only hits to the head or chest registered with the wights of course. But Ranma's mad assault had done its work, breaking the center of the White Walker's line before the pike regiment slammed into its guts like an auger.

The spears thrust forward and Edd roared bearing one wight back on the tip of his spear slamming it into another, thrusting the spear all the way through their bodies watching as the light of the magic that empowered them faded in their eyes one after another.

All around Edd the Cerwyn regiment smashed into the army that outnumbered it several times over. Their flanks were defended by the armymen of House Cerwyn, and the Trident of Lord Reed's men, every third man carrying a dragonglass dagger. While their fellows hacked and crushed the bodies of the wights, these men went about purposefully performing death blows on them, stabbing down bodies in the head or heart. Even if the body had been cut into pieces before this death blow was delivered the Dragonglass dagger did its work, somehow destroying the magic that powered the undead corpse.

The archers too did their part, continually firing as fast as possible. Not aiming of course, simply trying to overpower their opposite numbers through sheer weight of fire. Wights could not fire anywhere near as fast as living people or as strongly, and there weren't enough White Walkers left in the army to make up the difference. Thousands of wights fell in that first ferocious clash, and the entire undead horde flinched back at the dragonglass weapons and the ferocity of their attackers. Then several archers changed to fire arrows, aiming at the outskirts of the horde, away from their own infantry, and the carnage spread.

But there were so **many** wights! After only a few moments the depth of their formation soaked up the initial charge of the expeditionary force, halting it in place. Then the wights began to pour around the Cerwyn Regiment, attacking the weaker sides and trying to get at the archers behind them.

But the White Walkers numbers also worked against them, keeping the beasts which could have broken the pike line for them from actually reaching the attackers. The wights were simply to clumped together to allow them through, and whatever control the White Walkers had over their servants did not extend to find maneuvers like that.

Even better, the fire arrows now killed several wights with every hit, something the archers under Jonothor Flint, Jonelle's husband, noticed. He quickly expanded the number of archers using fire arrows, ordering them to aim exclusively for the outskirts of the horde away from their fellows and for any groups which tried to close with them.

As the battle teetered in the balance, and the casualties mounted among the Northerners there was a shout from Winterfell, the sound of horns and Winterfell's gates rose. "Winter is coming!"

With that shout that defenders of Winterfell, every single man in the castle who could carry a weapon charged out, with Eddard and his House's armymen in the lead, riding on horses who had been carefully husbanded since winter began. At Eddard's side ran Shaggydog, Summer, and Fenris. The giant pack leader's fangs, paws, even his fur glowed blue, and his howl was a warcry fit to shake the heavens, joined by his brothers.

Hearing that sound the beasts at the back of the horde, whose minds had been completely taken over by the White Walkers, broke from that control for a moment, pure fear or answering battle fury overriding it. But it didn't save them.

Fenris and his brothers slammed into them like the wrath of the Old Gods themselves, bowling the armored polar bears over, smashing the sabretooth tigers to either side, snarling and killing as they broke the back of the army wide open for the humans following after.

Hearing Fenris' howl and the warcry from in front of him over the silent undead Ranma knew the time had come to throw in his own reserves. Pulling a horn from his belt he took it to his lips, sheathing Ice and jumping forward at the same time, landing with his feet on one wight. Standing on top of that wight he blew on the horn as loudly as he could, the sound echoing over the clamor of battle for a moment.

From behind the archers hidden in the Woodlands to either side of the Kingsroad galloped the light cavalry of Ryswell, shouting their battle cry "Riding Free! For the Winter King!"

They slammed into the wights assaulting Lord Reed and Lord Cerwyn's men holding the sides of the Cerwyn regiment. Though their lances were not tipped with dragonglass, there not being enough to go around, the sheer impact of their charge brought their fellows time. They recovered, and the men with the dragonglass daggers went to work once again.

With that signal given Ranma let the horn fall, pulling out Ice and howling as he hacked, slashed, and moved through the battlefield, cutting any wight or White Walker within his reach down searching for where the last Wizard and the Crystal could possibly be hidden.

Despite the pincer movement, despite the impetus of the last reserves arriving, the fact remained that the wights, even without the help of their animals most of which were now dead thanks to Fenris and his brothers, the battle was still very much in doubt. The wights simply outnumbered their attackers too much for even Ranma and his ki techniques to turn the tide. Men died, and if they were not quickly 'killed' by one of the people with Dragonglass daggers rose again to attack their friends. The pike regiment slowly began to give way, the men in the front rank going down to be killed permanently by their fellows with tears in their eyes, much of which froze in place, further hampering their effectiveness.

Yet many of the White Walkers had been at the back of the formation facing the oncoming expeditionary force, and most of them had died under the arrow onslaught from Eddard's men, the dragonglass arrowheads punching straight through their black metal armor. Without them, the wights could not coordinate very well, simply standing where they were and fighting as they could. The northerners had a chance, slim as it was.

Cutting through several wights who looked more like skeletons than anything that should be able to move let alone fight Ranma saw a glimpse of something so startlingly blue that it put the summer sky to shame. *That's it!*

Thrusting Ice forward he caught a wight slamming him back down onto the ground before bringing his hands back and ripping a dire wolf claw out. This cleared his way, and grabbing up Ice again Ranma charged forward towards the

glimmer of the crystal he had just seen.

The wizard saw him coming, and gestured, sending his two quickly and not very well created spiders towards Ranma shrieking in that grating glass on glass language of the White Walkers. But there were no more White Walker warriors to aid him, and if he thought the spiders would gain him much time he was sadly mistaken.

One spider died as it lunged forward, Ice thrusting into his mouth and bearing it backwards before Ranma leaped up using Ice's hilt as a springboard and ripping the Valyrian blade up out of the spider as he kicked out at the other one, shattering the top of its carapace before landing and rolling, bringing ice around in a whirling arc that caught the Wizard in the side, cutting him in two.

With the Wizard dead, Ranma turned to the crystal which was still glowing blue despite not having any further magic users to power it. Ranma didn't honestly understand what it was, or what it was doing, but he hoped that it was important. And he didn't need to know what it was to break it. *When in doubt destroy something, I like that.* With that he raised Ice and brought it down with a roar. "Honor above all!"

The crystal shattered, sending thousands of shards in every direction cutting down dozens of wights who had turned in Ranma's direction that too slowly to stop him from killing the Wizard or destroying the crystal. It also peppered Ranma, piercing his lizard lion armor in places and even his body beneath it, cutting and gashing him. He gasped in agony as he was flung away from by the explosion of the crystal, rolling as he hit the snow and wincing at the pain of his new injuries, but he was still game as he pulled Ice up and around him again staring at the battle.

Without the crystal, the White Walkers didn't have enough power concentrated to keep the more ancient and decrepit wights, the skeletons and the like which had been pulled from the Earth going. They were a much more power intensive sort of wight than those newly killed. And thankfully for Ranma and his men and family, they made up more than half of the horde here attacking Winterfell.

With the crystal destroyed, all of those wights collapsed to the ground dead for real at last.

The battle didn't end there of course, there were more than enough of the wights remaining to keep fighting, but without the massive numbers advantage they had, the outcome wasn't in doubt any longer. Fire, confusion, the lack of orders, and the human's sheer determination won the day.

But the death toll was high. The Cerwyn pike formation had lost nearly half of its strength, the men of the Neck and House Cerwyn were down to less than a third of their number. This was something they shared with the man of House Stark, it's minor Houses and mountain clans allies. All of them had paid a horrendous price for their courage in attacking out from Winterfell, though thankfully none of the minor lords or their heirs had perished.

The archers on the other hand had taken few losses, most of those losses coming from the arrow duel during Ranma's charge. The light cavalry of Ryswell had taken several hundred casualties. The pikemen from Torrhen's Square however hadn't taken many casualties either, and Ranma quickly placed them under Edd's command, allowing him to incorporate them into the Cerwyn pike. They didn't have the training to be on the front lines, but they could at least follow along.

Ranma rubbed his face tiredly looking over at his father, who was nursing a broken arm, where he had taken a blow from a mace one of the wights and wielded in the final few moments of the battle. Lame leg and ruined shoulder Eddard had refused to stay behind as his men went to battle. He'd also of course been chewed out about it both before and after by his wife, but the searing kiss he had given her when he returned had silenced her for at least a few moments.

"The price was higher than I had hoped, lower than I feared. Dragonglass weapons can only do so much against that these kinds of numbers. I think we'll find that most of our losses were caused by wights which had already been cut apart, pulling our men down then making them easier meat for the others. There's nothing we can do to fight that kind of tactic, except use lot and lots of fire."

Ranma had been cautious in apportioning out fire arrows to his troops because he knew he wanted to use the cavalry, and no matter their level of training no horse would willingly come near fire. This had limited the fire arrow's effectiveness to those wights attacking the archers directly and the edge of the battle.

But now Ranma had to make a choice. "I think from now on that cavalry isn't going to be the way to go against the use wights except maybe as scouts," he said looking at Lord Ryswell, who had personally led his men north to meet with Lord Reed and the expeditionary force. "Worse, the cold is going to effect even northern horses before too long as will the depth of the snow. We also got lucky that the wights were so arrogant as to fight us here in the fields rather

than the woods." *Even the spears are going to be of little use in dense woodland, horses would be even worse.*

The older man nodded his head gravely. "Agreed, until we have enough Dragonglass to give my men daggers and points for our lances, enough points to replace our lances six or seven times over a battle, we won't be able to use normal light cavalry slash and retreat tactics against these wights. They just don't feel it, they don't react, their formations will simply absorb or assaults and tie us down!"

All around them in the dining hall of Winterfell the mood was boisterous, but Ranma knew that wouldn't last. The battle been so hard-fought there could be no other response for now. But the people now cheering and laughing at the victory would soon remember the friends that weren't sitting next to them, the brothers or husbands that would never see home again. And more than one would remember how they'd been forced to stab said loved one to make certain he did not rise again as an abomination.

Looking around Ranma knew this, and he sighed. "We'll rest the army here. Portions of it have been on the road for months, and just fought one of the hardest battles I've ever been in. We'll rest the army here, retrain and wait for news that the Vale army has reached White Harbor. I'll send orders down to Lord Manderly telling him to outfit them with dragonglass weapons and send them up the White Knife. I understand he's got a few of Bran's special barges?"

"He does," Bran said, sitting next to his brother. Two years ago he might have been morose at being forced to not take part in a battle, now he was simply happy he had contributed in some fashion. "We sent them down there for safekeeping, since of course we couldn't keep them out in the open by HouseWells with no one to defend it. But there certainly weren't enough of them to transport an entire army."

"Not the Army, but it supplies yes." Ranma said a faint smile his brother. "We'll meet them where the White Knife forks and march overland with them from there to Hornwood. With no word from Karhold, I'm afraid that Hornwood will be their next logical target. And let's face facts, the Last Hearth can probably hold, Hornwood isn't that strong the castle in comparison to the Last Hearth, despite its moat especially since that moat's probably frozen solid. Hopefully by the time we liberate Hornwood, the rest of the royal army will have arrived, and we'll be able to really start pushing the White Walkers back."

"There's one thing you should worry about Ranma," Eddard said cautiously. "I haven't heard anything from the Wall in over a month now. I doubt it's fallen, even if attacked from both sides the Wall is an incredibly dangerous defensive position. But what if the hordes we've been facing, all of the White Walkers we faced so far on this side of the Wall, were but the equivalent of your expeditionary force, merely the first into the fray?"

"I've thought of that already father," Ranma replied said with a faint sigh. "That's why, when the rest of the Royal Army arrives and we meet up with it, we'll march straight up towards Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and liberate it. From there we'll be able to both reinforce the rest of the wall, and move on Skagos. I'm afraid Bear Island will have to fend for itself right now, as will the mountains."

The Wull nodded grunting agreement, knowing how few men the other mountain clans had left in those mountains. While the White Walkers influence might have raised wights there, there was simply no reason to try to sweep through them just yet. It would be hard, dangerous going, and would play to the White Walker's strengths anyway. Best to leave it until the Wall was reinforced and the rest of the North liberated.

"In that case, I'd urge you to head up the White Knife to liberate the Last Hearth." Eddard replied. "With it and our logistics back in action, it will make an excellent forward position for the rest of the march to the Wall."

"I would if I had the Vale Army here in Winterfell." Ranma said ruefully. "But I think we'll need to throw them into the battle at Hornwood before that. We'll see."

Two weeks passed with Ranma and the rest of the army recovering in Winterfell, but the Vale army did at last arrive. Lord Manderly outfitted it as quickly as possible, allowing the army to rest in his city for several days before sending them on their way up the White Knife. That this completely emptied his city of dragonglass weapons was a problem, but given the city's defenses and not knowing where the rest of the Royal army was, Manderly agreed it was a worthwhile investment.

When he received word of that, Ranma and the expeditionary force headed off down the White Knife to meet them. Lord Hornwood had proven to be made of rather stern stuff, and had kept his men patrolling his lands in large numbers armed with dragonglass weapons ever since his shipment had arrived, thanks in part to his numbers being buoyed by the force sent to deliver those weapons. Because of this, he was able to retreat in good order with the information that another White Walker army was indeed marching towards his Castle.

It took another three weeks, but the two forces finally met up and began their march toward Hornwood. And by that point, more good news had arrived. Daenerys and the rest of the Royal Army had reached the Bite.

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Daenerys stood at the prow of her flagship staring forward. It was a view she had seen before, but the giant mountains of ice scattered across the ocean's top were definitely different. Last time there had been only a few such, and they had been small barely discernible among the waves. Now there were dozens, and they were a danger she and her fleet had to respect.

Following Seaworth's suggestion several of the war galleys and all of the remaining cutters had been sent ahead of the transport ships, making their way slowly through the waters the rest of the fleet would have to traverse. In this manner they were able to steer the fleet through the ice with relatively few problems. One ship was struck prow on by an iceberg, but it was a relatively small one and the rent in the hull quickly patched. Another ship lost its rudder, but the sailors and soldiers on board were quickly taken off safely with only a few falling into the ocean during the transfer to freeze.

That wasn't the only problem they were facing. Here in the frigid north the dragons were now having serious issues with the cold. They could fly for several hours, but then they desperately needed to rest somewhere warm. The flagships supply of coal was quickly being used up now thanks to them, which was something Daenerys needed to remember when they took to the field.

But even that was secondary to the news the man standing next to her had brought. "I'd hope to see you again Theon." She said softly, turning and reaching out to touch his shoulder gently. "But I wish you had brought better news than this. Lord Rickard, I am sorry for your loss, and I know my husband will be as well. Our words cannot bring your son back, but I pledge to you that our House will do all we can to retake Karhold with you."

Rickard nodded, his face a mask against a grief so deep Daenerys couldn't even contemplate it without tears springing to her eyes. *No father should have to bury his son.* "I thank you your Majesty, your words mean much to me. But I must ask, what aid will that constitute?"

Daenerys frowned, turning her back on him for a moment before motioning to Theon to join them, making her way back to the large tent her dragons, she and Merry had been using on this journey. "How many days did it take you to get here from Karhold?"

"About a month, maybe three and a half months your majesty if you're counting the time since we set out from Karhold." Theon's voice was raspy, and his hands shook slightly. The barges had not been the best seagoing vessels, but thankfully halfway through their trip down the coast they had met with the small convoy heading up to Karhold with the dragonglass weapons. Even so, those few weeks aboard river barges put to sea during the winter would forever remain as one of the most horrifying memories in Theon's life, right up there with watching Torren Karstark die. "But I think we could possibly half that if we took actual war galleys and galleons instead of river barges."

"You're thinking of sending Rickard and a large force armed with dragonglass up to retake Karhold immediately?" Roger asked, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"Not quite." Daenerys said shaking her head. "Without knowing how the White Walkers may have reinforced it, or indeed the disposition of their total army that would put too much of our strength in a position where the rest of us could not come to aid them. No, we'll aim for a closer target but one which still will put a strong offensive force on their flank."

"Ramsgate or Widow's Watch." Greatjon replied, nodding his head. "Makes sense. But who's going to go?"

"Ramsgate, its position is more central to the rest of the North. Dacey, you and Meera will stay with me, Daryn you'll take the rest of the Wolfsworn with Theon, Lord Rickard and as many men as you can place on eight war galleys. We'll send four other war galleys along with you, just in case. Move to Ramsgate, if they're under siege relieve them. Then add any force there and the dragonglass shipment they've been sent to your stores. March along the coast from there as much as possible, add House Flint's men to yours. That will allow the war galleys to keep resupplying you with food and eventually more dragonglass weapons in the future."

"We'll retake Karhold, then move on to the Bay of Seals." Rickard said, his eyes burning with deadly light. He would have vengeance for his family, for his House, and for the North as a whole.

"The rest of the fleet will remain with me, and we will move to White Harbor. I'm afraid we'll probably have to strip the city of its own supply of dragonglass weapons, and even then we won't be able to put a dragonglass weapon into every man's hand. And I refuse to set off overland until we do." Daenerys replied, frowning. "Fire arrows and my dragons are well enough, but dragonglass is even more important. If we have to I'll order the majority of the army to wait in White Harbor until the next shipment of dragonglass arrives. Though my little ones and myself will move on as we can."

Greatjon and Smalljon both looked as if they would object, but seeing the look on their queen's face decided against it. While it was true enough men could overwhelm wights or possibly even White Walkers in time, the cost would truly be high. And according to Theon even fire arrows didn't work well on White Walkers. Though Daenerys was almost eager to see what their reaction to her little one's will be.

"If I may your majesty," Dacey began. "I think the ideas you've outlined so far are good, but don't get wedded to anything for the main army until we arrive in White Harbor. Besides Theon's tale, we haven't heard anything from the North since we left Maidenpool. We need new information to really decide what to do next."

Daenerys nodded, and with that the meeting ended, with all of the Lords returning to their own ships, and the fleet splitting. Theon and several local guides took command of the portion of the fleet under Rickard, and they moved north, while the rest of the fleet continued on their way into the Bite. White Harbor was still two weeks away, but the end of their voyage was at last in sight.

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The tide had begun to turn. With a large portion of their initial forces sent around the Wall destroyed, and the influence they could push into the North thus greatly decreased, the odds of the White Walkers now winning the North without first taking the Wall was decreasing day by day. The war at the Wall had become a stalemate, the White Walker's main army unable to make any significant headway against the defenders, the design of the Wall such that it stymied all they could do.

The assaults from behind came in too small a strength to break the defenders. This was the biggest mistake the White Walkers had made up to this point in the war, though thanks to communication lag none on either side knew it. If the White Walkers had turned their attention on Eastwatch-By-the-Sea the moment they landed on shore of the Bay of Seal's, the Wall would have fallen, and with it the North and possibly all of Westeros. But they hadn't, so blinded by the need to crush the heart of their old enemies they had neglected to think what could happen if they failed.

Yet even so, the assaults from the south had an effect. Every week that passed the defenders of the Wall were slowly cut off from even hunting south of the Wall. Every force sent out came under constant, small-scale attacks. The defenders had gathered a large amount of provisions in their castles, but they also had many mouths to feed. So siege might make the Wall fall, but that would take time.

Nor were the White Walkers yet without cards they could play south of the Wall. The two dragons and the ten giant spiders moving across the Frozen Shore, and the even larger force slowly assembling on Skagos showed that very well indeed.

The tide had begun to turn, but winter's might could still win the day.

**End chapter**

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Trying to make up forces for the White Walkers is sort of tough, but I think I've done a good job here. The humans have won a tremendous victory, but the war is far from over. The lack of dragonglass is going to hurt, I can tell you that.

Just so you all know and won't be disappointed later, I am not going to show every step of Jon and Margaery's courtship or anything but a couple scenes of their trip north, as I did Daenerys and her journey here. Nor, again, will this story end with all the problems solved entirely. Real life isn't that neat, and I mean for this story to, in some ways, be open ended like that. And frankly I am right on the edge of burnout with the AsolaF universe. There just aren't enough good fics out there that emphasize what I like - warfare, the Starks, warfare, comedy, warfare lewd humor, warfare in that order - if you know any tell me - to help me feed my muse, and it's such a huge world and all the differing POV's, and ugh!

As always, hope you all enjoyed, and please leave a review.



## \*Chapter 21\*: Chapter 21

I don't own Ranma or A Song of Ice and Fire. See, look, my story actually has an **ending!**

It's been a long, bloody path my friends, but we have at last come to the end. As always I would like to thank **Anthony444** for his aid in plot points and ASolaF facts.

This has also now been betaed by my minor mistakes man **Ultimaflare**. Please give him your thanks, as there were dozens of small mistakes here that no doubt messed with the flow of the story.

Now without further ado, let us begin the final chapter of this saga.

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### Chapter 21: War Ends, a Royal Line Begins

Traveling down the Torentine had been an exhilarating experience for Arya, by far the best part of the trip to her. Arya had never been anywhere before that had demanded such stringent water control as the Prince's Pass had. The horses, Nymeria, and the humans had all been forced to conserve water, and the pace the animals could go had suffered accordingly. By the time they were a bare five days into the pass Arya knew that any army marching through the pass would've had to carry its own weight in water to get this far.

The idea that this Pass was supposedly the easier way into Dorne was astonishing and showed Arya how Dorne had kept its semi-independence for so long. Though even so, the journey wasn't as bad as it could have been. While there was no autumnal rain here, the heat that should have hammered them during the day was markedly absent a sign that winter would have an impact even here and further south. Arya and Nymeria could feel it in the wind, winter was making its way south and even if the White Walkers were stopped it was going to be both long and bad.

During the night it was so cold that the guides House Dayne sent up to meet their lord at Nightsong, House Caron's castle, were seen to shiver in their tents despite being prepared for it. More than one man commented on it, and was fearful about what it might mean for Dorne, especially given the events of the war so far.

They didn't even go more than a fourth of the way down the Pass before their local guides led them off into a small culvert of the pass. From there they followed a trail into the Red Mountains that no army, no matter how organized or disciplined, could have followed let alone survived. The Red Mountains were as dry as the Pass, and moving through them was even more debilitating, plus the narrowness of the passage itself made it impossible.

Arya knew that without the locals leading them they would have become hopelessly lost in the passes, and then would probably have died from thirst or exposure to the elements. Hearty Wolfsworn she might have been, but Arya knew she would have died eventually all the same and wasn't afraid to admit it. Of course, Nymeria wouldn't have had as much trouble and could have gotten them both back the way they came easily enough, something she didn't even mention to Eddic.

Several days journey away from the pass found them coming out into the deep valley that the Torentine had created over millennia. It was a wild place of deep crags, rocks, and a few sparse trees, but even so, the party made their way down to the river quickly. And from there, they took the Torentine down further south.

But the Torentine was no Mander, or even the Green Fork. It was barely wide enough for two canoes to go abreast for much of its course and even when they came near Blackmont, the river was more rapids and small waterfalls than anything else. Those were a lot of fun, at least to Arya and Eddic, and they had thrown their strength into fighting the river with the guides. After High Hermitage, the seat of the now-defunct (if Eddic had anything to say about it, and as Lord Dayne he did) cadet branch of House Dayne, it became much smoother.

Yet now that their trip was smoother, Arya and Eddic were forced to sit and take lessons from Lord Dondarrion. The first few days were history lessons, then etiquette, which Arya was unable to get away from since they were all still stuck in canoes. Now, as they were nearing their destination of Starfall, it was current events and economics.

"The first thing you must understand is that economics and geography are closely linked. While Dorne produces several luxury foodstuffs, citrus fruits, olives, and other such, most Dornish lords rely on trade with the Reach and Essos to bring in bulk foods. It's taxing the trade both coming and going that allowed House Martell to build up so much liquid capital, since their land sits directly on the mouth of the Greenblood, the most important river in Dorne."

Lord Dondarrion paused, smiling grimly. "Yet even with the Greenblood, food can't be transported to enough of the

land by river, and trade from Essos is expensive at the best of times, in autumn and winter that price is going to go up far more. With their military strength gone, Prince Martell will have to sue for peace in some fashion because Dorne can't survive without its landward trade."

"Couldn't they just abandon the deeper desert? And as for bringing in food, I'm not so well up on my geography this side of the Neck, but aren't there those islands between here and Essos? Surely trading with them would be less expensive." Arya asked. She wasn't really interested, but this tied into the war, and that she was interested in.

"No, those Houses in the deep desert won't simply up and move, smashed though their militaries might have been they are too proud for that. As for those islands, most of them are controlled by pirates, and very few of them have any farmland to speak of. And while Dorne has a small merchant fleet, if House Redwyne retains even a small portion of its own fleet then our allies will be able to blockade the few ports Dorne has easily enough."

Arya shrugged her shoulders. "So they'll try to nip in fast and dirty with whatever they've got left before you and Edric's house get yourselves situated, smash your new duchy before you can get your feet under you."

"They're welcome to try, though I'd have thought you'd noticed that House Blackmont didn't try anything when we passed through their lands." Edric said the laugh. "As for any Martell supporters, they could probably burn a few of our smallfolk's out, but..." he smiled as they passed a final bend in the river, and stopped, pointing. "I don't think they'd have much luck trying to take Starfall at least."

Ahead of them the Torentine finally widened, becoming one with the sea. On a smallish island set in the center of the Torentine sat Starfall. The castle was not as imposing as others Arya had seen, but its walls rose out of the rock of the island directly on the shoreline. It had a small dock leading up to its gates, over which the main gatehouse loomed with dozens of murder holes. Its walls stood at least five stories tall, with the towers set into the walls being another two stories. The central keep was not a keep so much as another tower, which loomed even larger, possibly as tall as fourteen stories. Several of those towers had ballista or catapults on their parapets.

"Okay..." Arya said after a moment's silent contemplation of the castle. "Suddenly this whole duchy idea sounds a lot easier to make stick." Ahead of them the castle's bugles sounded a joyful note signaling they had been spotted, and more importantly the two banners they were currently flying.

Moments later the group left behind their canoes, entering the castle. Inside, they were greeted by raucous cheers. "Lord Dayne! Glory to Lord Dayne! Glory to Lord Dayne the Brave!" These cheers were for Edric, but at least one in that crowd was just as happy to see Beric as she was to see her nephew.

Lady Allyria of House Dayne was a tall woman with a somewhat thin frame, elegant features, long light blond hair and almost violet eyes like her nephew's. Her lips were full and curved into a smile as she watched the servants move to take the traveler's packs and horses, though she twitched a little at the sight of the monstrous direwolf sitting there patiently as a well-trained hound.

For now however, her curiosity was secondary to another emotion. She waited patiently until they had all handed their horses and packs over to her servants then moved forward quickly. Beric turned to her saying softly "my lady I have ridden..." but Allyria interrupted him by grabbing him by his ears and pulling him down into a kiss.

This went on for some time, until it prompted Arya to turn to Edric and say "You think they'll notice if we head off to our rooms, or should we find some way to guide them to theirs?"

That seemed to break the two lovers out of their personal world for a moment, and Beric coughed apologetically while Allyria simply pushed him away slightly reaching for Edric and pulling the young boy turned man into a hug. "And you are welcome home as well my Lord." she murmured, speaking into his hair as he came up to her chin at present. Despite his growth since joining the Royal Army Edric still had some growing to do, something Arya hoped could also be said about her.

"It's good to be home Aunt Allyria." Edric said was what dignity he could muster, which frankly wasn't a lot. "Even if for Arya and I it will be a brief visit."

Above Edric, his aunt's eyes narrowed, flicking over to Arya. Standing there in her worn travel pantaloons, her breastplate of lizard lion armor, Fang at her side and short cropped, dirty hair, Arya looked more like a simple soldier than the daughter of a Great House.

"And who is this?" she asked, trying and actually succeeding in keeping a sneer out of her voice. *In comparison to the lovelies of Dorne, or even the Reach this girl looks like a jumped up street urchin...*

Allyria's thoughts juddered to a halt as Nymeria moved from the gate, the crowd of servants, armsmen, and horses parting quickly. Arya smirked, rising to the hidden challenge in the older woman's eyes as Nymeria moved to sit beside her bonded human. "Arya Stark, Wolfsworn and sister to the king and the Hand."

Later on the three of them and Allyria met in her study, a well-appointed room with several soft fluffy Dornish style divans scattered around it with small writing desks set next to each. Scrolls and books lined two of the walls with the fourth facing a large open balcony.

They drank water infused with a hint of lemon, the common drink in this part of Dorne. Even to great Houses like Dayne, water was still a precious resource, and sharing it like this was the Dornish equivalent of breaking bread in the North.

It'd taken several hours to catch Allyria up on all of the news the three had to share with her, and even that didn't tell her everything. While the Reach had learned of Ranna and Daenerys' victory in the war, how that victory had come about had yet to reach them by the time Willas and Jon marched. And unlike House Martell, House Dayne had nothing in the way of a spy network.

But there was nothing wrong with Allyria's mind, and she sat and listened to the news of the war, what was going on in the North, and how Arya was intent to head southeast to Oldtown to join the fleet being sent north. She listened, asked questions, and took it in, never relinquishing her grip on her fiancé's hand, staring at Arya and Edric in turn.

When they finished their tails, she sat silent for a moment then looked at Beric. "You returned my nephew and Lord to me, only to have already agreed that he can simply walk off?" The question could have come out with quite a bit of bite to it, but it was more whimsical than anything else. "And what will you run off for, the love of this young rascalion? You say you are Arya Stark, and with the direwolf at your side none will believe otherwise. But even so, you are not the sort of young the lady I would choose for my nephew."

"I have chosen of my own free will, Aunt Allyria," said Edric quickly. "Arya and I have come far together, gotten to know one another in good times and trying, faced things that would have broken any normal highborn lady. And there is something to be said about a woman who can stand beside you not only in managing your lands but defending it at need."

Arya simply smirked. She knew she wasn't exactly normal fiancé material, and didn't care a whit. Ranna had told her years before all of this began to be herself, that someone who could love her as herself would come along eventually. She was somewhat surprised that it had come so quickly, but she liked Edric, and was interested to see if this whole relationship thing was as interesting as so many people made out to be.

"Very well," said Allyria smiling slightly at that response. "I know better than anyone what can happen if young love becomes unrequited. I'll give my blessing to this union, so long as we can formalize it right now. I will send you a note via raven to Highgarden for relay up to Winterfell for your mother and father, accepting their offer of your hand in marriage, in my Lord's name and my own as his regent. That should do for the proprieties."

She smirked suddenly looking at Arya and Edric with a gleam in her eyes. "However, while we here in the Dorne are very liberal when it comes to what is allowable between affianced, or even between single men and women, I don't want to become a great aunt anytime soon. Do I make myself clear?"

Both youngsters blushed, not looking at one another now as they stared in completely different directions and she laughed. But then she went on brusquely. "However, while the bulk of your news was new to me, some of it had already reached my ears, if in a roundabout way. And I have news for you to convey to your brother the hand."

Arya cocked her eyebrow and Allyria went on. "Lord Doran Martell is dead." Beric and Edric both nearly choked on their drinks at that, and she smiled thinly. "House Martell's ravens arrived with that news several days ago. He was poisoned apparently by a guest in his House, a Magister Illyrio, who has since disappeared. No one knows why the two of them had a falling out, but rumor is that Doran wanted to offer Illyrio to your brother and Daenerys if things went wrong. Areo Hotah, the Sunspear's captain of the Guard has gone in pursuit of him.

"Doran's son Quentyn is now trying to rally the great Houses to him, but the news of his father's death, and the murderer, forced many of us to think that things had gone awry with our armies. Needless to say, Quentyn is not having much luck, though that could change one way or the other if news of the disaster Martell led Dorne into spreads."

Frowning thoughtfully, Beric nodded. "So we might be able to convince the Houses between here and Blackhaven to side with us with little in the way of military action. Stability, increased trade with my own House and the other

Marcher Houses, and of course the new Royal House's approval for our actions will make for a very tasty carrot if the power of the stick becomes known."

"Indeed. Quentyn is well-thought of by some, but he doesn't have his father's diplomatic skills, or his decades of experience. House Blackmont and Manwoody have communicated via raven with us here that they will 'wait until the situation clarifies itself' before taking action. That is diplomatic speech for not wanting to take any action either way. If we can guarantee that food from the Reach will still flow into their lands we can bring both of them to our side. Manwoody in particular is dependent on that trade, and Blackmont has always been an ally of Dayne, though it must be said that is because they rely on trade up the Torentine, which we control."

"But that is enough serious talk for now." Allyria smiled, tugging Beric to his feet. "We can continue such discussion later; in particular which castle will serve our new duchy as its capital. Yet it has been a very long time since my fiancé and I were up alone together, and we have a wedding to plan. You know where Dawn is stored Edric, show your fiancé the Sword of Morning, and tomorrow we will hold a ceremony to formally pass it on to you."

The two youngsters couldn't get out of the room fast enough that after that, and spent several moments staring off in different directions outside the room, before Edric sighed, tapping his hand against Arya's but not taking it. "Come on, I'll show you Dawn. Trust me, it's a sight to see. "

They walked through the castle up several flights of stairs, Edric exchanging greetings with those servants he knew, which were most of them, while Arya smirked at the odd looks she was getting. Evidently despite knowing who she was and what her standing was, her looks still drew some disapproving looks from these soft southerners.

All of her amusement faded into nothing when they walked through a specially sealed and guarded door to stare at Dawn. It was a greatsword, not unlike Ice, though the blade was somewhat thinner along its body. The blade was a pale white almost like milkglass, the edges of it gleaming sharp in the light of the fading rays of the sun coming through a high window behind it. The hilt was long enough for the blade to be wielded two-handed, with a small tourmaline stone set in the pommel. The crossbar, much the same size of Ice's, was marked in its center by a five pointed star. It was both beautiful and deadly, conveying both majesty and danger in one.

"So, so that is Dawn." Arya said reverently. She remembered the story of how her father had fought the Sword of Morning at the Tower of Joy, how Lord Reed's intervention was the only reason the two of them had returned from that expedition. Yet what had always struck her was how even after crossing blades with him, her father, the most honorable man that ever existed, would never hear a word against Arthur Dayne. "The finest knight, the finest man in the realm," he had often said, "they often say that sometimes the sword makes the warrior, but in his case it worked both ways. His legend became its legend, and the glory of Dawn reflected his own."

"Yes." Edric said gently, reaching forward to touch the sword reverentially. "This was why I was sent away to squire with milord Beric, above his relationship with my aunt. Beric is known as a very good blade and a knight of valor, I needed someone who could teach me both honor and the blade. There are better blades, more valorous or seemingly valorous people, but he was the best when it came to possessing both qualities."

The two of them fell silent for a moment, simply walking around the sword where it hung in its case wondering about it, about the legends and the truths behind them. "It's said that only dragonglass or Valyrian steel can see off White Walkers," Arya said at last. "Somehow, I think a third name's just been added to that list."

"Yes." Edric said, smiling grimly. "Every man who has wielded this blade has added to its legend. I hope, when we face the White Walkers, that I will do half as well."

Edric remained up all night in silent vigil in front of Dawn, kneeling in front of it in full plate armor, taking no food or drink and without even Arya for company while four sworn knights of House Dayne and Lord Dondarrion watched from the five points of the room. He recited the names of those who had wielded Dawn before him, their deeds and legends, from a long scroll, committing them to memory, though he had known most of them long before this. Every time he made a mistake one of the knights would stride forward and smash him on the shoulders of his armor with the flat of the blade, and he would have to begin again. This happened only a few times, a good omen, it was said.

Then, as the light of the sun began to peak over the horizon, Allyria, Arya, and several other witnesses came into the room silently taking up places along the walls facing Edric and the raised dais which held the sword and its case. They stood there silently while tinkling chimes sounded from every tower of the castle.

The light of the sun was crawling up the side of the tower when they were joined by a sixth knight. His armor was white from the tip of his ancient, closed helmet to his feet, with a large star carved out of the chest piece. This man should have been the previous Sword of Morning, here to pass on the title and sword to his replacement. But Arthur

Dayne was not the first Sword of Morning to die without choosing his own successor.

At such times five oldest knights in residence in the castle played a game of bones to choose who took over the duty. After all, luck played a part in battle, so it seemed fitting for luck to play a role in the ceremony if needed. Afterwards none of them would speak of who had won the right, and he would fade into anonymity, a voice of the past passing on a sacred trust.

The knight strode forward to stand to one side of Dawn, staring down at Eddric. When he spoke, his voice was sepulchral in his helm, and even those who knew all the knights who had been eligible for this duty could not say for certain who it was. "Who comes before the Dawn?"

"I, Ser Eddric Dayne of House Dayne, knighted by Ser Dondarrion for actions taken in times of war, do stand before you."

"Knighthood alone does not make you of the Morning. For what reason will you bear the Dawn?"

"I will bear Dawn not for myself, but for those who come after me and for those who cannot defend themselves. Not for glory, but justice."

"Why do you think yourself worthy of the Dawn?"

"No one is worthy of Dawn if they think themselves so, but those who bear it can become worthy through their actions before and after. Through oath action and service will I honor Dawn, adding to its legend as those before me have."

"Finally, where will you bear the Dawn?"

"I will bear Dawn into darkness, lighting the way. From now until my dying days or until someone proves worthy to succeed me."

At that moment the sun's rays at last hit the windows of the room, filling it with reflected light. "Then rise Eddric Dayne, and take your sword!"

Eddric stood, reaching forward with both hands to the hilt of the greatsword in its case, lifting it out easily. It was light in his grip, lighter even than a Valyrian sword of similar size, almost as light as a longsword but not quite. This close the whiteness of the blade was even more apparent, reflecting the sun's rays like glass. Yet even so, Eddric could tell the edge was as sharp as a razor, and for all its beauty the sword was still a deadly weapon.

He held it up above his head as all of the knights in the room intoned as one. "Let the darkness and those who would do dark deeds tremble, for the Morning once more has a Sword!"

Eddric and Arya stayed the rest of the day in Starfall, taking part in the wedding between Beric and Allyria, before leaving early the next day. Beric's war was over, but the two of them still had a job to do in the North.

As the two of them and a few guards took ship out to sea, a man stood hidden in a small shadow cast by Starfall's outer wall. His face seemed to shimmer for a moment, and he sighed shaking his head irritably at his inability to join the crew of the small cutter. *This chase is not going very well.*

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"You know, if you clench your teeth any harder you're going to shatter something." Edd mused, as he slowly pulled at a flagon of watered down wine. The Vale Army didn't believe in the same rigorous strictures against drink that Ranma enforced in his own army, but at least with all the snow nearby water was easy to come by. *If only all the other problems the Vale army has could be so easily rectified, which,* Edd thought as he looked at his friend, *is why Ranma looks fit to eat rocks.*

Ranma glared at him, but the glare had no heat, and it subsided after a brief moment. Around them the army moved on, its pace laggardly in Ranma's opinion, but it was the best the Vale troops could do, and Ranma shook his head as he looked around them. "I should've stayed with the Vale army for a day or two when I was running up north, gotten a feel for them. If I had done that, I might've been able to force the Vale lords to start changing how they did things then, which would've given them more time to settle into the changes instead of now."

"And if you had, Winterfell might've fallen at the first assault given the numbers of White Walkers and mages you told me that army initially had." Edd rebuked quietly. "Don't second-guess yourself like that. That way lies madness, and too much regret will force you into stasis when you have to move."

"When the hell did you get so wise and worldly Eddy?" Ranma laughed, smacking Edd on the shoulder before becoming serious once more. "Still, I can't believe that Lord Manderly let the Vale Lords march out with so little in the way of logistical training! If Jon or Timot were here, both of them would be screaming right now. And as for Merry..." Ranma actually shuddered a little at how his blonde lover would react to how little the Vale had in terms of trained healers or medical supplies.

"You're a little biased my friend, are perhaps the word I'm looking for is spoiled." Edd laughed. "The truth is the Vale Army is moving at a decent clip for these conditions." By these conditions Ed meant the foot and a half of snow that covered the ground here in the North at this point. It had snowed practically every other day, and was of course staying on the ground. There was less snow underneath the trees of course, which allowed the Army to make its way through the forest at an okay rate for any non-Ranma trained army, but even so it definitely hampered movement.

"And at least all of the Vale troops have enough warm weather to see them through. Why I can only think about 12 instances of frostbite since we met up with them."

"It feels as if we've only covered 12 leagues since we met up with them." Ranma retorted. "But even so it's not just the speed we're moving that bothers me, it's the lack of weapons."

Ed winced. "Yeeess, there I can agree with you."

It turned out that Lord Manderly hadn't had enough dragonglass weapons on hand to fully equip the Vale Army. But rather than leave some of their troops behind, they had simply taken all he had and distributed them evenly to each of the lord's forces. Only one man in five had a dragonglass weapon, worse in terms of arrows, and even fire arrows were at a premium. While each archer Ranma had taken from Winterfell had three full quivers of fire arrows and another two of dragonglass, the Vale men barely had ten fire arrows each and a half a quiver worth of dragonglass.

"I'm glad you thought of bringing as much fire arrows and Dragonglass weapons as you did Ranma, even if we've left Winterfell badly understrength in terms of those weapons behind us." They left enough dragonglass arrows behind to arm the defenders, a group of around 600 men of the mountain clans and House Stark, but not a single spearhead or dagger of dragonglass remained in either Cerwyn or Winterfell.

Ranma shook his head again then deliberately changed the subject slightly. "How is morale among our own men?"

"They're about as irritated by the slow pace as you are," Edd reported smirking a little. "But they're holding up well enough. They aren't eager to face the White Walkers or wights again, but I think the term grim determination fits their feelings well enough."

"Good," Ranma nodded. "I'm afraid that when battle begins, the brunt of it will still fall on us."

"Wish I could argue," Edd replied with a shrug.

"We're running out of time!" Ranma growled suddenly, slamming a fist into an open palm, the crack of leather on leather audible to the men around them causing many to turn to look at their liege before looking away quickly at the anger on his face. Edd grimaced but nodded, understanding once again what worried Ranma.

The last they had heard from Hornwood was that Lord Hornwood had pulled his people out of the field, retreating into his castle. But that castle's main defense was the moat that surrounded it, and in that same report Lord Hornwood had passed on that the moat had frozen solid. He had sufficient weapons of dragonglass to see off any White Walker assault and to give them an edge against the wights but despite that and his troops being reinforced, Hornwood itself wasn't that good a castle. It could fall if the White Walkers were prepared to throw enough wights at the problem.

"I know," Edd said soberly. "But unless you want to break off our own forces and leave the Vale Lords behind, there's nothing we can do about it. Or we could stop halting the march with enough daylight left to start digging entrenchments?"

Ranma shook his head firmly. "No. I know the Vale Lords think that it's stupid and a waste of time, and I wish we could ignore it, but I don't think we can. If I were the White Walkers I'd change my tactics after what happened at Winterfell, and I'm not willing to bet that they're idiots or incompetent."

Edd nodded, but he knew that those entrenchments were a sore point between Ranma and the Vale Lords, even Lord Royce who had proven to be Ranma's greatest ally among them thanks to his friendship with Eddard. Ranma had taken the Vale Lords to task about practically everything in terms of their army's logistics, and had ordered their army to start building entrenchments every night. Those entrenchments took enough daylight, which was of course

short because of it being winter that it cut off about a third of the time they could march on a daily basis. And it hampered the army's morale, being hard, dirty work fit more for peasants than armymen. That it also highlighted the difference in the training and endurance of the Northern and Vale forces was also a sore point.

As if summoned by the discussion, two of the Vale lords, Lord Elesham and Tollett moved up out of the army to speak to Ranma again about that very issue. "Your grace, we have yet to see a single sign of a wight or White Walker. Surely that means we can stop throwing up those entrenchments every day. We could be covering more ground per day if you stopped insisting on us stopping the march so quickly."

"Lord Elesham," Ranma said, his tone such that the man flushed angrily, "in comparison to what my army could be doing even in conditions like this your army is going at a snail's pace! Adding a few more hours to that won't matter, but those entrenchments could matter a great deal. We will keep building them every night, and I will continue to personally inspect them every night to make certain that they are built just like the latrines."

The two older men glared at their young king but Ranma ignored it and went on. "We could send more men forward to clear the trail in front of us, if we can stamp the snow down in a wider area for the main army we can press forward faster, and we could also bring in more game for the army at the same time, cutting into the time needed for that every morning."

So the march went, marching through the scattered forest and rocky terrain that made up most of the North. By Ranma's estimate the army only made around six leagues a day, then they would stop and throw up what defenses they could for the night. Those defenses were decent enough, mostly fighting steps facing four feet deep trenches with stakes inside of them. But there was a lot of grumbling about them, and more than one Vale Lord was blaming the need for those defenses on their slow pace, rather than their lack of organization, their constant need to forage, and the slow pace their own troops could march. Murmurs of dissent began in more than one quarter against Ranma, and even fights between the Northern and Vale troops, but Ranma remained adamant.

A month out from where the armies had left the White Knife, those entrenchments proved their worth, as Ranma had feared they might. But the White Walkers had learned more than Ranma had feared, because they also targeted Fenris, who was on patrol at night making a circuit well around the army.

OOOOOO

Fenris prowled through the night, moving through the snow and terrain of the North as easily as a man would across an open plain. This was his home, his territory, the entire North was his in a way that it would never belong to any human. His ancestors had lived here and further north for millennia, long before the First Men had come to this section of the world. Now he used that knowledge, patrolling around the army his bonded lead.

He paused suddenly, crouching down, making his body profile almost vanish into the snow between two trees, crouching behind where a third tree had recently collapsed. There was a smell in the air, a smell of death and decay. Lips peeled back in a fierce rumbling growl Fenris rose lightly onto his feet, golden eyes staring out into the dark as he made his way forward.

Before he could reach where he felt the smell was coming from however, he paused between one step and another, then backed away slightly, bringing his eyesight down towards where his foot would've been. Where he had just been about to step was a trap. It was not a human one there was no normal iron in it merely wood and ice and one black metal spike, the same kind of metal the White Walkers wore in their armor. He snarled slightly, then backed away further and made to go around it.

Arrows suddenly flew from among the trees all around him, and Fenris snarled, ducking behind one tree for a moment before bringing up his ki to protect himself.

Then there were dozens of White Walkers all around him, thrusting forward with very oddly shaped spears. The tips of these spears were continually barbed all along their length, and it looked as if someone had wrapped the first two feet of the shaft with some kind of thorny vine.

Fenris dodged the first two that tried to spear him, paw lashing out to catch one White Walker in the leg as he lunged at the other one smashing his head into it and ripping out the White Walkers gut's with a wrench of his jaws. Then he leaped wildly away, snarling.

From the spear of the downed White Walker the thorny vine around its tip had unraveled with all the speed of a cracking whip, catching him along his side. Fenris turned, biting it in two, his teeth glowing blue gold as he ripped it apart, but by that point the others were on him.

They pressed him hard, so hard that Fenris couldn't even get a howl off, and the direwolf spent a brief moment to fear for the pack, for the army he was defending, before concentrating on his own battle.

OOOOOO

Torches glimmered in the night here and there all along the ditches, each light separated from by several yards, five archers on watch so that the men retained their night vision enough to see out into the forest around them. Most of those archers however did not expect an attack. There were guards patrolling out in the darkness after all, tramping through the snow and underbrush all around the camp to make certain they weren't surprised by a nighttime raid.

Unfortunately one thing that Ranma had never really realized was that the White Walkers had **exceptional** night vision, and even though their eyes glowed with that eerie blue light, they were exceptionally good at sneaking up on people at night. Two-thirds of the patrolmen died without a single warning sounded in return, and the first warning of the danger to the main army was a hail of arrows coming out of the darkness. More than a hundred archers died in that first assault, then their fellows quickly raised the alarm.

Screams abounded in the night, and Ranma rushed out of his tent looking around wildly. Closing his eyes for a brief moment he reached out through their mental connection to Fenris, only to get a brief mental impression of fierce combat against a weapon that Fenris hadn't seen before. *Dammit Ranma, let this be a lesson, the White Walkers can adapt and plan just as well as humans! They must've somehow drawn Fenris off then ambushed him. But I can't help Fenris right now, the army's going to be in a bad way. Night attacks like this are bad, especially against an opponent like this!*

"**Form up!** Form up on your banners!" He shouted at the top of his lungs, his voice heard vaguely over the shouts and screams coming from the camps outer edges.

Edd pulled him himself out of their tent quickly, pulling on more clothing and looking askance at Ranma who haven't bothered. "You're going to freeze." Edd commented smacking Ranma on his shoulder.

"I've got no time to freeze," Ranma said shaking his head. "Get the archers and tell them to reinforce anywhere their company commanders want along the camp's edge. Form up the spearmen in the center of the camp, do it quickly but organized you understand? So long as the army sees that someone is doing something they won't panic. That and our camps defenses should be able to keep most of the army intact whatever happens. Then send the Wull and his men after me!"

Edd nodded, and raced off quickly followed by several of the company commanders. By that point however, the rest of the Vale Lords had come out of their tents, looking confused, worried, and though most would never admit it, frightened. Lord Royce and Ser Symond Templeton however were made of sterner stuff, and they rallied the others with a few sharp words before turning to Ranma. "What would you have us do?"

"Rally your men and gather your archers, but keep them back for now. Push swordsman and spearmen forward to help defend the earthworks." Ranma said crisply.

The Wull then pushed forward out of the crowd of soft southerners, he and his men all bearing greatswords or battleaxes along with the steel armor House Stark had gifted them with. At their belts each wore a dragonglass dagger. "What'd you have us do, Young Wolf?"

"With me Wull, we have monsters to slay!" Ranma laughed, his voice more a howl than a sign of humor, and the Wull and mountain men with him barked their own laughs as Ranma turned back to Lord Royce and the Valemen. Pulling out Ice from its sheath, he pointing it where he felt the noise of combat was the loudest. "I'll be over there, get your man moving my lords!"

Lord Royce nodded, slapping his chest plate with one armor plated fist then nodding at the others. They all raced off in different directions, shouting orders and Ranma winced. Their hearts were in the right places, but that many people shouting commands all at once was going to have a bad effect on organization, and in an action like this an organized response was one of the most important things.

*Too late to change it now,* he thought, by which point he was already on the earthworks, staring at a small horde of wights which were charging the camp. Behind him the Wull and his men raced into position, having been unable to keep up with Ranma.

The White Walkers arrows however were still falling among the men, and those were the more dangerous threat. However, the men posted around the edge of the camp had already responded, archer and swordsman alike, rushing



to their designated positions. *Yes!* Ranma thought, ecstatic. *The training I forced them into has taken control thank the Old Gods!*

"Get your heads down!" He shouted. "Keep your heads down and wait until the wights get up here to engage! Anyone who has a Dragonglass dagger or spear, remember aim for the chest or head. Anyone else, chop limbs off! The dead fuckers aren't as hard to deal with if they're in pieces!"

With that Ranma put some steel into his words as he jumped back up onto the wall hacking downwards at the first few wights to try and climb the side of the ditch. Several of them fell, hacked into pieces and dead for real thanks to the Valyrian blade, but Ranma was forced to duck back under cover rather more quickly than he would've liked when several dozen White Walker arrows sought his death.

They impacted all around him, and one actually arced over the earthwork and almost took him in the side despite his rolling around, nearly smacking into the Wull's side, who laughed. He looked up to see several hundred archers already assembled, wearing two Vale House colors, Elesham and Redfort. They also all had fire arrows on their bows and he nodded grimly. Fire in a wood like this might normally have been a very bad idea to tempt fate with, but given how heavy the snow was on the ground and how cold it was out, Ranma was prepared to chance it. "Men of House Elesham, fire out into the wild to my left! Men of House Redfort, wait for targets, and if you see any White Walkers trying to gain the earthworks, target them with dragonglass arrows!"

The man all roared back in reply, and Ranma turned quickly bringing up Ice to block a farmer's hoe coming towards his face. Ice cut through the weapon, taking the man in the chest and sending him back to the grave. But there were other wights already on the earthworks and Ranma shouted, "Up and at them!"

The swordsmen, and spearmen and mountain men all around him obeyed with alacrity, regaining the small step that was on the interior of the small dike, hacking and slashing at the wights coming over the makeshift barricade. Above them they heard the thrum of arrows as the fire arrows sang past them, impacting into the woods randomly. Here and there they stuck into the trees, and slowly the woods began to burn slightly, but thanks to the snow as Ranma had predicted it didn't spread often. Here and there when the arrows impacted pine needles or large piles of leaves that for some reason weren't covered by snow it did, but those instances were very few and far between, and quickly snuffed by the snow turned into water around them.

But the fires did have an effect on the attackers. Whatever their control over them, the White Walkers could **not** force the wights to come anywhere near fire. The attack faltered at least here, and Ranma nodded at the Wull, who was cleaning his massive battleaxe of ichor as two of his men made certain if the wights on the ground by knifing their chest and tossing their hacked apart bodies onto the nearest fire. "Well done my Lord, can I leave this area of the wall to you?"

"Go on Young Wolf!" Said the man nodding his head. "I think that the fight to our left is goin' poorly, they'll need ya more'n me an' mine."

Ranma nodded, clapped the man hard on the shoulder and ran off in that direction.

The battle continued, but thanks to the earthworks and the training of the Northerners backing up the Valemen, the wights and their accompanying White Walkers couldn't break the army's morale or defenses. The attack cost them, far more dearly than what Ranma supposed the size of their force equated to, but they could not quite break through the earthworks.

Fenris showed up after Ranma had moved almost halfway around the camp. His fur was covered with slashes here and there, but nothing life threatening. He howled coming in on the attackers from one side, bowling several White Walkers who were busy aiming towards the defenders over before they knew he was there.

Seeing this Ranma rallied the men around him, men of House Tollett to charge over the earthworks, getting in close with a White Walkers and their wights before they could retreat. "Charge, charge and we can break them now!"

Lord Tollett had been among those who had most disdained Ranma's input on the running of the army, both his 'suggestions' (read orders or diatribes) on logistics and his insistence on the fortifications. Now however he was a believer, and he took up the shout. "You heard his Majesty, charge you sons of whores!"

Soon after that, the battle was over. The remaining White Walkers faded back into the dark of the night and were gone. Ranma scowled as he stared down at the bodies of four of them, wishing he could convince himself that they had cost the White Walkers more than 15 or 20 of their own number in this battle. But he couldn't. *Still, if I can come up with a way to stymie this sort of assault, I can start to really do damage to their numbers...*

Shaking that thought out for now he grabbed up a horn from his side, blowing into it twice, before shouting out orders. "All unit commanders report to your lords with your wounded! Lord Wull, Edd, take command of the defenses for now!" He shouted that several times, then grabbed some men nearby and used them as runners to carry his orders throughout the army.

Of course it wasn't that easy, the Vale Army wasn't organized anywhere near to the Royal Army's standard, and now with wounded to care for, that came to the fore again. *Where is Merry when I need her*, Ranma thought, shaking his head. *We'll need her skills, though I'd like to keep her and Dae close for more selfish reasons. On the other hand, I think I'm actually happy she wasn't here. She and Daenerys have been in danger too often as it is.*

As dawn broke, the various Vale lords came together with Ranma once again looking grim. "We've lost a little over 1,300 men my Lord, and we've got a fourth that number again in wounded. Caring for them is going to cut into our supply medical supplies badly," said Lord Royce, shaking his head. The glow of his bronze armor's runes had slowly faded since the battle, but more than one of his fellow lords were still shooting glances of awe in his direction.

He looked over at Lord Redfort, who grunted then bit the arrowhead. "You were right Your Majesty," he said bowing his head to Ranma. "You were right, and we were wrong. Building those earthworks saved this army, and it's clear by how your own the men did in that assault that your ideas of organization and training are also effective."

Ranma could have decided to grind the man's intransigence into his face, but he didn't. "An organized and disciplined army is never outnumbered my lords. I will not say that organization or discipline is of the most important things in an army, but they are high up the list. Therefore, we will leave the remaining wagons here with the wounded and say, four hundred men or so. Lord Royce, I noticed that your eldest son is not here, was he injured?"

"Slightly Your Majesty, Andar took a glancing blow from a mace to his helmet. His life is not in any danger, but it has certainly had an effect on his ability to walk and think for the moment."

"Very well, we'll leave him in charge of the wounded. They're to retrace our steps back towards the White Knife, then make their way back down to White Harbor."

"What if some of the White Walkers move around our army and attack them Your Majesty?" asked one of the other Vale lords respectfully.

"I don't intend to give them the chance. Starting tomorrow, we are going to double march this army. My own men will start clearing the path ahead of us, Fenris and I will go ahead of them, with enough of a distance between us to hopefully draw any White Walkers we can down on ourselves."

He looked over at Edd who nodded, already understanding what Ranma would have him do. "Ed, you'll be in charge of our men, keep them breaking trail for the rest of the army but don't let them separate too much in the Woodlands."

"I have done this before you know" Edd replied mildly, though his eyes glinted slightly and Ranma nodded holding up a hand. Edd nodded at the apology, and Ranma went on. "We'll want the wounded and the dead stripped of their dragonglass, those weapons are to be distributed among the men. Howland, Wull, I'll want you to start combing the Valemen for scouts, train them on the march as you would your own to move through these conditions as best you can. You'll be needed at night."

Howland Reed bowed his head, exchanging glances with the much larger Mountain chieftain. Howland and a portion of his men had been caught outside the camp during the attack having been on patrol. He and his men had evaded a group of White Walkers, ambushing them in turn before joining the battle by charging the assault from the southeast.

Ranma looked around the lords grimly. "Understand me, this was but a first round against the White Walkers between us and Hornwood. They've learned from the battle up at Winterfell somehow, and it's obvious they don't have the beasts or the magical creatures to face us in an open battle. But that might not always be the case, and we need to be prepared for it. This will be the way they fight us for now, skirmish, night assault and small scale attacks, but they cannot defeat us like this, not if we're smart."

The men around him all nodded grim agreement, and Lord Elesham gave voice to their thoughts. "We are yours your Majesty, you will hear no further complaints or arguments from us."

"Good." Ranma said briskly. "Then be about your business my lords, I expect this army on its way by midday."

OOOOOO

Merry and Daenerys both sneezed as one slamming their heads into one another as they laughingly pulled out of a

hug brought about by a comment from Daenerys. Daenerys was about to ride Rhaegon over to New Castle with Sunfyre following. The dragons were now so large that the idea of them following along on foot through the city with the rest of the army was simply untenable, and they might react badly to the noise of the cheering crowd. This plan had been worked out in advanced with Lord Manderly via his son Wylis, who controlled the Three Sisters.

Up in the air Daenerys and her dragons would still be visible, but well out of range of the shouts and cheers of the crowd. Merry, Greatjon, and the other lords would then march the Royal Army through the city.

"That hurt," Merry whined, shaking her head. She glared over at Dacey who had burst into laughter at the sight of the two younger women slamming their heads together like that. "It's not funny from this end Dacey!"

"Someone must be talking about you two." Dacey said with a laugh. "That's a superstition here in the North anyway. Nonetheless, I think we should be going Your Majesty."

The two women nodded, and followed Meera and Dacey out of the large tent, the two dragons moving to follow their queen. They could only do so one at a time given the size of the tent flap, and they were noticeably reluctant to leave the warmth of the tent, but they could bear the cold. Both dragons were already saddled as well, and knew what that meant and were looking forward to it. Flying with their queen was always more fun than flying solo for some reason.

Even on the deck of the flagship the cheering of the smallfolk of the city could be easily heard over the shouts of Ser Davos ordering his crew around or any of the myriad other sounds of the army disembarking. Much of the work on those docks had stopped, and the men on them were cheering lustily at the sight of the Royal Army returned, and of course Daenerys and her two dragons.

The dragons in particular were being cheered lustily, and Daenerys heard many a man or woman shouting her own name. "Daenerys, the Seven bless Daenerys the Just, the Old Gods bless your marriage!"

It wasn't just the fact that the dragons could be seen as the ultimate enemy of winter however, no there was more to those cheers, more to the fierce pride those cheers conveyed in every shout of "The Stark, the Stark, the North for the King and Queen! White Harbor for the King and Queen!"

That was because tales of the War of Reformation had gone before the Royal Army on the whisper of rumor, bard's songs and raven's wings. The men and women cheering Daenerys and her absent husband knew what the northern army had accomplished, the price it had paid and the tremendous victories it had won. And they knew now, that whatever else happened the North would never again be seen as a backwater to be ignored or labeled as unimportant in the great game. Through fire, blood, courage and skill the North had made itself heard, and it would never again be silenced.

Daenerys took a few moments to wave at the crowd before moving over to Rhaegon, quickly flinging herself up into the saddle behind his neck. A mental command was sent out, *Fly, my dear one!*

Rhaegon pushed himself off the deck and out to the side further than any would credit given his bulk, which was now the size of four warhorses tail to jaw. A single beat of his wings held him there above the water, then another sent him a little higher and then a third, his muscles straining. Dragons were made more to drop from a height first to gain some momentum, and flying like this was hard on them, but both dragons had trained for it from the beginning and soon enough Daenerys and Rhaegon were in the air.

They circled the fleet in the harbor once then Daenerys sent out another mental command, ordering Sunfyre up into the air to join them. Much to the delight of the crowd the two dragons began to dance in the air, rolling and twirling up and around one another then they were moving off away from the harbor deeper into the city towards House Manderly's seat.

Moments later, they were spiraling down, the courtyard of the castle purposefully cleared for them. Several local lords minor waited there along with Lord Manderly himself, sitting on a palanquin at first but as Daenerys flung herself out of the saddle he lifted himself onto his feet before bowing to her floridly. "Your Majesty, White Harbor is yours as always. And though I doubt that at this late a date I will be the first, let me add my congratulations on your pregnancy to those that have gone before me."

"Your congratulations are welcome Lord Manderly, as is your hospitality." She looked at the crowd of city delegates and minor lords then made the next words she spoke loud enough for every ear to hear. "Since leaving your lovely city, we have heard reports of how you have served my husband and I, and I thank you for that service in both our names. You have shown intelligence, probity, and above all loyalty, all things that we could wish all of our vassals both noble and not shared."

With that she moved forward, taking the man's hands when he made to bow again, leaning forward to kiss his fat cheek. "It is good to be home." she said leaning back. "Home in the North."

The two of them moved inside after sending the two dragons off to a prepared stable for them, both dragons now too large to follow Daenerys into the keep itself. They probably could still fit through the hallways, but Daenerys was worried that the close confines would make them panicky, and dragons panicking was never a good thing to contemplate.

They soon sat in Lord Manderly's conference room exchanging tales. Lord Manderly was astonished at how much his young king and queen had accomplished in the south. The breaking of the Westerlands had reached his ears but the creation of the duchies or the final battle against Stannis and Viserys had not, and learning that the Stormlands in their turn would be broken was astonishing.

Their diplomacy and mercantile endeavors also impressed him, and he shook his head smiling faintly. The only problem he had with everything that they had accomplished was the fact that the Iron Bank would almost certainly see them as enemies now. That and the fact that all of his work in trying to set up a currency based on silver had gone out the door the moment they had taken the Golden Tooth.

"I do apologize for that," Daenerys said shaking her head. "If we had known when we set off that we could take the Golden Tooth, we would not have asked you to devote so much of your time to try to come up with a new system of currency."

Lord Manderly shrugged. "It is not an issue your Majesty, it's not the first project I've done that went unneeded. The Iron Bank however, that disturbs me. While right now their influence in Westeros is limited, in time they might be able to put a lot of pressure on Westeros economically."

"I realize that, and I'm willing to let bygones be bygones with them despite the fact that they backed that, that **pretender** and the former Master of Whisperers." Daenerys replied. The Golden Company survivors were very forthcoming about who would pay them, hoping for leniency. They hadn't gotten it, Ranna and Daenerys were death on any mercenaries or lords who preyed upon the smallfolk as the Golden Company had in Duskenale and on the march.

"If we are able to hunt down any more of Littlefinger's caches I'm even willing to turn those monies back over to the bank. But my husband and I will never allow them to dictate terms to us. Furthermore, the Royal Bank will be taking a far larger role in the economy from now on."

"I have some ideas about that, mostly based around investment ideas and the concept of ownerships in various businesses." Wyman said, looking at the young woman closely.

Daenerys waved one hand, and the older lord went on. That conversation continued until the rest of the army arrived in the keep and the barracks surrounding the city's walls. Merry, Greatjon, Jason and the others came in joining them, with Merry quickly making her way over to sit beside Daenerys. She nodded her head at Lord Manderly, curtsying prettily despite wearing pants.

Lord Manderly laughed, shaking his head. "You too are welcome Princess Baratheon, or should I call you the Maiden of Healing? I've prepared plans for a Healing Hall here in the city, and have gathered as many medical supplies as I could for the army, if you are willing to look over them."

"Of course!" Merry said happily. "In fact, if my lady and the rest of you don't need any medical advice for this meeting, I can go now."

The other lords who had come in with her shook their heads while Daenerys frowned faintly, tapping her stomach, which was just beginning to show her pregnancy, something Wyman had noticed earlier. "I'll need to ask you some questions later about this little issue that I just thought of as I was flying with my Rhaegon, but that can wait until tonight."

Daenerys looked over at Wyman who nodded, gesturing to one of the footmen waiting by the doorway. "Young Eustace here will show you around the city your Majesty, I understand you have a bodyguard?"

"I do indeed, Eric's outside with Dacey and Meera."

"In that case, as I said Eustace will show you around. But... we have already prepared a place for your mother, who arrived here along with the other prisoners that were supposed to go to the wall are here in the city."

At those words Merry's face blanked and Wyman went on delicately. "It's in one of the towers here the castle, rather away from them normal hubbub of castle life, something we felt was appropriate. We've spread the other prisoners out and have only retained the Queen and the Kingslayer here in the Castle. If you wish to check up on them Eustace can show you where they are today, and you can begin your tour of the healing hall and the warehouses I've turned over for medical supplies tomorrow morning."

"I think I will do that and..." Merry paused looking at Daenerys. "Should I also take the opportunity to introduce Arianne to her new charge?"

Greatjon guffawed and more than one Lord had a wide vicious smile on their face as Daenerys laughed, nodding her head. "Please do. I've already discussed with Lord Manderly what we plan to do with the princess of Dorne and he's given me assurances that Arianne will be watched both by the Silent Sisters and by his own people."

Lord Manderly nodded, Merry curtsied once again and left the room.

After her friend/lover departed Daenerys turned back to the others, beginning the strategy meeting brusquely. "My lords, Lord Manderly and I discussed many things before you joined us, but one thing in particular impacts our plans going forward tremendously. It turns out that the Vale has decided to break its isolation. Under Lord Royce and Lord Redfort the Vale put forth an army composed of around 11,000 men. But they did not decide to join the war in the South, rather Lord Royce apparently..."

That took some while to explain, with Wyman interjecting here and there to elaborate on what the Vale lords and he had discussed, but by the end of it none of the lords with Daenerys were looking very happy. Jason put their thoughts into words, frowning angrily. "Are you telling me that there aren't any dragonglass weapons in the city? That we're stuck here until that pirate and his fleet returns on their second run?"

"I'm afraid so Jason," Wyman replied, shrugging his shoulders which set his body to jiggle. "We had no way of knowing where you were along your journeys and Ranma wanted more aid to be sent towards Hornwood as soon as possible."

Daenerys looked at Greatjon, gesturing at the massive map on the table in front of them all. "Greatjon, you and Dacey have the most experience in moving overland in the North, could you show me where on this map you think the Vale could be by this point?"

Dacey moved over from the where she had been guarding the doorway to lean over Greatjon's massive shoulder, and the both of them talked for a moment in low tones, while Jason and his son Patek quickly engaged Lord Manderly in a discussion about logistics and the defense of the city. Eventually the two looked up.

"This is the route I'd take if I was heading from White Harbor to Hornwood," he said tapping it out with his finger on the map, following the White Knife for a bit and then splitting off and making a relatively straight line towards Hornwood. "At least if I had an army anyway."

Dacey nodded agreement. "They couldn't be further than that, not if they're matching any kind of normal army's speed. What kind of baggage train did the Vale lords have?"

"They initially arrived with both horses and mules drawing carts. We were able to exchange those animals with local horses, but they refused to part from their carts. It's doubtful though that..."

"Bah, wagons'll be next to useless in the North at this time of year." Greatjon interrupted, scoffing. "The snow'll be too thick, and along that route there aren't any trails a wagon could follow, no matter how small. They'll be carrying all their foodstuffs and other supplies by this point on their horses or their own damn backs if they don't know how to care for their horses at night." Even Northern-bred horses needed blankets to cover their legs and bodies at night, or the temperature would give them frostbite as surely as a human.

"Lord Manderly you said that my husband intended to meet with the Vale army and command it along its march to Hornwood?" Lord Manderly nodded, and the queen frowned thinking as she looked at the map. "If that is the case, then my lords I believe we can leave Hornwood and the Vale army to my husband."

"We're not going to reinforce them?" Tytos asked.

"Reinforce them, with what?" Jason shook his head. "We don't have any dragonglass weapons remember?"

"Fire arrows we still have in plenty." Greatjon said looking over at Lord Manderly who nodded. "Dragonglass weapons aren't the only ways to kill wights or White Walkers. Enough fire can do it, and remember we have the dragons."

"Dragons can't do it all, but we might be able to do enough. But I will not throw away the lives of our men by sending them into battle against the White Walkers and their undead minions without the proper weaponry."

"I say we should march upriver along to Long Lake and from there over to the Last Hearth Daenerys," Greatjon said, addressing her as she would Ranna, something which made Daenerys smile despite the lack of propriety. "I've no doubt my castle's been attacked since this began. If we relieve it, it'll make a good starting point for our march up towards the Wall, I promise ya!"

"I don't like it your Majesty." said Tytos Blackwood shaking his head. "I agree that marching to the aid of the Last Hearth makes sense, but shouldn't we concentrate on driving back the White Walkers along the coast it in aiding Lord Rickard?"

"Lord Rickard will reinforce his forces twice over at Ramsgate and Widow's Watch," Jason said, shaking his head. "And those places were already supplied with dragonglass, remember?" He directed that question Lord Manderly, who nodded his head quickly. "I agree with Tytos, without dragonglass of our own, our numbers can all too easily be turned against us."

"In fact," Lord Manderly said shaking his head. "The Vale forces marched out of here with only one dragonglass knife or spear point for every five men."

Daenerys let them argue for a moment, staring at the map. She was calculating distances, thinking of plans, and most importantly what Ranna could have known when he marched out. She was also thinking of the quality of the men with him, Rickard, and the Wolfsworn. *We have the best we could possibly send reinforcing Hornwood and the eastern coast. The western coast is too far removed for us to do aught about. That leaves the Last Hearth and the straight path up to the Wall to us. That siege has been going on too long as it is, we must move to relieve it as fast as possible. Which means Greatjon is right, even if his opinion is rather biased.*

"This is what we will do." Daenerys said softly, yet even so her voice cut through that of the men around the table easily. "Lord Blackwood, Lord Jason, you will remain here in command of the army. You will keep training the men, and hopefully after he retakes Hornwood, my husband will send out word of that. If he does, we can learn more about what fighting the wights and White Walkers is like and you can take that into account."

"You make it sound as if you won't be here your Majesty." Jason said looking at her with a frown.

"I won't be. Instead myself, Greatjon, the forces of his House and say 3000 extra scouts and archers will move up the White Knife with my dragons. If my husband hasn't cleared out Winterfell and Cerwyn of their dragonglass weapons, we can supply ourselves further from them at House Wells. But since Winterfell has been cleared of enemies, and my husband is busy marching to Hornwood's aid, we probably won't see much in the way of threats until we get past Winterfell. I aim to relieve the Last Hearth, then begin to clear the Kingsroad for traffic up to the Wall."

"That's a very dangerous gamble you're making." Tytos said, though there was more approval than disapproval in his voice while Greatjon's opinion on the matter need not be said. He was anxious to go to his seat's aid, especially since the Last Hearth had not been heard from via raven for far too long.

"You'll find travel up the White Knife relatively quick your Majesty." Wyman said smiling faintly. "Young Bran's idea of putting the barges on what he calls skates makes them go like blazes over the ice of the river. And at last report the winch and pulley systems at the various waterfalls were still in working order. Your dragons though, they will require a special barge made just for them. I had commissioned one such already, but I did not realize how large they had grown until today. It should still be ready in a week however."

Daenerys frowned, then pointed to Winterfell. "Can we get a message via raven to Winterfell and back before then?"

"Possibly, given favorable winds for the raven."

"Do so, I wish to know if we should stop there, and if they have any armor for those among our archer force that still need such. I'll also want all of our archers armed with every fire arrow you can give us."

Wyman nodded complacently. Fire arrows were relatively easy to make here in a city like White Harbor, unlike in castles, where they would quickly run out of flammables.

Daenerys suddenly looked up as a feeling of disgust and irritation came through her connection to dragons. Seeing through their eyes she saw that they had been given some odd looking meat that they had never tried before, though the carcass of the animal looked familiar to her. *Is that a seal or a walrus?* Regardless of what they were, their meat

did not please the two dragons.

"I believe we have done enough for now my lords, rest yourselves for the rest of the day, then get back to work tomorrow morning on preparing the logistics for the mission to Last Hearth. I'll also want to go over the numbers for food and clothing production Lord Manderly, though we might need to talk to Davos to organize shipments of food from the Reach if possible, as well as talk to you Greatjon about how quickly your lands can get started on shipping coal elsewhere after we liberate your seat. But right now I believe I should go and make sure my dragons are settling down in their manger. Until tomorrow my lords."

With that she rose, and every lord there rose in turn bowing formally as she left the room. Lord Manderly too had stood up, and he smiled at his fellow lords. Daenerys might have started out with nearly all her power and influence coming from her marriage to Ranma, but now, now she had become a queen in truth, and Lord Manderly, for one, knew now that if they got through this winter, the future was bright indeed with her and Ranma at the helm of the nation. *Although, getting through the winter is going to be our sternest test by far...*

OOOOOO

Deciding to get the easier meeting over with first Merry had Eustace escort her and Eric to where Jaime was being kept in the basement of the castle. Staring through the bars she shook her head, rather bemused. She had thought that the loss of his dominant hand would have broken Jaime, but despite that and several months of captivity, her uncle didn't look much the worse for wear. He was standing in the center of his cell working out with a long piece of wood that one of the guards must have given him, working through several sword forms trying to get used to using his remaining hand as well as he had his dominant one.

He stopped as he caught sight of Merry, bowing sardonically. "You're looking well for a princess of a defunct dynasty, Myrcella."

"They see me as friend first, Baratheon second, and Lannister a distant third, so my looks don't count against me when it comes to Daenerys and Ranma, or indeed any of their men and lords." Merry replied dryly. "You're looking better than I expected uncle, I thought you would be either broken or angry yet you seem to be neither."

"I'm not truthfully. Oh, I was at first though, believe you me. I wanted to kill your 'friend' Ranma more than I wanted nearly anything before." Jaime replied with a shrug. "But since arriving in White Harbor most of the news has been about the White Walkers and their undead hordes. I know I'm to be sent to the Wall eventually, and if those are the kinds of threats I'll likely meet, well..."

Jaime shrugged his shoulders, his ever-present smirk on his face, but when he spoke he was deadly serious, perhaps for the first time ever in Merry's presence. "I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of in my life Merry, things that Arthur Dayne, Oswell Whent and Jonothor Darry would have struck me dead for. And a lot of things I am proud of, things they would never have done yet needed doing. But standing against such as that, that will definitely top the list. And maybe, just maybe wipe the slate clean so that when I die, my old brothers, my true brothers not the scum that replaced them in the white, will welcome me among their number. I mean to be at top form when I face them, whenever that may be."

Merry cocked her head staring at him thoughtfully. "I'm happy for you then and wish you luck. This will probably be the last time I see you uncle, so I wanted to say farewell. You weren't ever much of an uncle to me, but you at least were there for Tommy and I as we grew up, and I can't blame you for the acts of my mother or older brother. Your loyalties give you credit, even if the people you gave it to weren't worth it. I'm glad you found a cause that's actually worth your skill and I hope you find some measure of happiness in the future."

She laughed suddenly. "Especially since Tyrion is up there already with his new knightly order. I imagine the two of you will have a lot to talk about."

"I imagine we will!" Jaime laughed, and Merry turned to leave when his voice stopped her. "Myrcella, Merry, are you happy?" Merry turned to look at him and he went on. "I mean..." he faltered, seemingly at a loss for what he really wanted to say. "Are you happy with the way things are?"

Merry could tell that wasn't the question Jaime really wanted to ask, and she wondered if he wanted to tell her about her real parentage. After a moment's reflection she decided she didn't want to know. Either way that went it was nothing she was interested in now. So she simply nodded addressing the question he had it asked. "I am happy yes. I have a dream for the future, my healing halls and bettering my skills in that area, and as for my personal life..." she smiled. "That is as good as it's going to get."

Despite her rather tart words there was a happy light in her eyes, a gleam of a woman in love. Seeing it Jaime frowned but nodded. Despite the fact that he was her real father, he had never acted that way, even when he could act so as an uncle rather than a bodyguard. He'd simply never really cared for any of his three children, doing so was always Cersei's joy, not his. He always cared for Cersei and her alone, and now he realized how empty that made his life. *One child of the three alive, one of the two whose character I could have grown to love and I can't do it, he thought morbidly. It would wreck her life, and what point would it serve, a base attempt to get her to acknowledge me, for what? Too late now, too late for everything.*

After a moment Jaime simply nodded. "I'm glad you found a profession that you can be happy in I suppose. Stay safe Merry."

Merry simply nodded again and left without another word. She had one more stop to make before she could put the last of her past life behind her, and she was eager to be about it. Behind her Jaime stared after her for a time frowning and thinking of what might have been an old mistakes before shaking his head, and once more moving through his sword forms.

With the easier meeting over with, Merry followed Eustace through the castle up to a tall tower the only entrance of which was a single stairwell barred by a relatively new looking heavy door. There she found Arianne and the two men assigned to watch her, and she smiled thinly. "Are you ready to meet your charge, Arianne?"

The Dornish princess glared angrily at the stag who she knew wasn't one but words failed her. She had no friends left, no allies, no standing. Even the Sand Snakes, her own cousins, had told her to simply deal with it and then proceeded to distance themselves, getting on with their own tasks, with Dacey and Alayaya. She had made her bed, she brought a murderer and a psychopath into Westeros with a Dragon as his call, and it cost Dorne nearly all of its military strength and more than a few lords. Indeed because of her actions it would be all her brother could do to keep House Martell in power at all in Dorne, not that she knew it at the moment.

Without waiting for a reply Merry moved past Arianne, pushing the door open and leading the way up the staircase. At the top of the tower they found the suite where the former Queen had been ensconced. They also found the helper that Merry had assigned to the woman during her trip north, a northern man by the name of Robillard who had lost his arm at the elbow during the battle of Darry, one of the few casualties the rest of the army had taken in that battle. He was calm, conscientious and both elderly and happily married, so Merry had no fears that her comatose mother had been taken advantage of under his watch. At the time that had seemed much more important than it was now.

Her mother had not improved, she was still comatose. She could eat and her body was still working, but the mind behind her eyes was still not there. But thanks to the servant women here in the castle, at least she didn't look as bad as she had on the trip up, Robillard not being willing to try to bathe her or ask others to.

"There has been no change in her?" She asked.

"There've been a few moments where Cersei's woken up lady Merry, but they've been brief." said Robillard bowing deeply to her. "During those times she cried for you, for yer brothers, and her own brother a time or two." Once Cersei even cried out for her own mother, but that, Robillard would not share with Merry or anyone else. He had been the only one in the room to hear it, and that cry, that desperate, fearful, childlike cry, had struck him to the quick. For some reason sharing that with anyone seemed like an invasion of the once-powerful woman's privacy as bad as raping her would have been and he would not do it. "Yet most of the time she's been like this..."

Arianne was staring at the woman on the bed in mixed horror and fury. "Is, is taking care of this, this broken **thing** to be my fate?" She asked, anger in her voice but her face was trembling fit to break as she spoke. "Killing me would have been a kinder fate."

Merry whirled on her angrily. "I don't know why you're complaining, to my mind you and my mother have quite a bit in common! My mother broke Westeros for her son's sake, you broke it for vengeance! You brought back Viserys Targaryen, you made him a threat he could never have been on his own, and thousands paid for it in Duskenale, in Gulltown, in Dragonstone, in the battle of the Shadow's Fall and even on your own side! I think you two deserve one another."

The older woman made to reach forward Merry hands grasping angrily, but her two guards pulled on her chains holding her back.

"Remember, my mother's well-being is directly connected to yours." Merry went on staring Arianne in the eyes, her own eyes chips of unrelenting emerald. "If anything should happen under your watch, you will pay for it with your life."



With that Merry turned away visibly dismissing Arianne from her thoughts as she moved over to the bed leaning forward. She gently kissed Cersei's forehead, saying nothing. There was too much and too many emotions going through her right now to let her speak. She then stood up, staring at her mother for a few more moments before turning away exiting the room.

OOOOOO

Lord Leyton Hightower was an elderly man with a craggy face hidden by a bushy but well-trimmed and cared for beard which showed more than a hint of gray. Sharp, intelligent brown eyes deep set into his skull stared out at the world from above the beard, and wide shoulders fading under the weight of age. He wore good, expensive but above all comfortable clothing. He was a man who had lived long enough to not care what people thought of him and was secure in his own power, especially here in the center of his family's power.

He greeted Willas and Jon in Hightower's main hall, quickly ushering them, lady Margaery and their advisors into the drawing room where a meal had been placed around a table. Three men already waited them there, all three clad in the plate and tabards of warriors, though none of them had weapons at their sides for this meeting. "Please help yourself my Lords, we have much to talk about. And Lord Hand, may I present my son Garth, Ser Jon Fossoway of the Green Apple Fossoways and of course Garlan Tyrell."

Jon nodded, but quickly moved to the side when Willas moved forward, the two brothers exchanging a powerful hug before Margaery moved forward at just as quickly, throwing her arms around her brother. As the family reunion continued, including an exchange of news which included the deaths of Loras and their father, Jon moved over to the table, looking over at Lord Hightower who made a motion towards one carafe in particular.

Jon took it, poured a small amount into a goblet, sniffed and drank a sip. He nodded approval, but then set the goblet down firmly moving over to the table. They all had a lot to do, and being drunk would help no one. He looked over at the man who was inarguably the second most powerful lord in the Reach Lord, and smiled thinly. "So, how much work have you been able to do on the logistics side of things for the fleet?"

"That will depend on which direction you have decided to send the fleet my Lord Hand, as well as the size of the force." The older man replied smiling faintly. "We've gathered enough food, we think, to get your fleet to say Greenstone, but if you're going West, there's no place along the route you can be certain to be resupply until you get to Seagard."

"What of winter gear? Food is important on the voyage, but it won't matter if our men freeze before we even get to the battlefield."

"We prepared some 2040 coats gloves and hats all told, not enough for your full army of course, but..." Leyton shrugged his shoulders. "How many men are we actually sending?"

"That remains to be seen. In the North your horsemen won't be worth anything. By this point the snow is deep on the ground, and the cold will kill most of your southern horses quickly."

"I'd disagree on that, but I haven't seen a true winter, and it's true that horses take more fodder than men" Willas said with a shrug, sitting next to Jon as Margaery and Garlan made their way over behind him. "I've also heard that much of the North is covered by forest or rocky terrain, and in that kind of environment horses are more of a hindrance than an aid."

"Exactly." Jon replied with a nod. "Especially in the area of the North where we're going."

"I take it by that you've decided on your direction." Margaery asked, sitting down next to him on his other side with a salad on her plate, a sharp contrast to the heavy meats and cuts of fowl that the men had on their own. She did however steal several such cuts from her brother Garlan, who sat across from them, staring at Jon thoughtfully.

"First, Garlan I'd like you to tell us about the campaign against the Ironborn. More importantly, do you have any idea where the Ironborn ships which should've been defending the Shield Islands went? And, how much damage did they do?"

Garlan nodded, looking at Jon Fossoway, who had arrived in the city only a few days before the force under Willas and who was just as interested in Garlan's campaign. He took a long from his wine glass before putting it down. "We set off from here with around..."

"And so we returned here, receiving word from a patrol boat out from Oldtown that we were to come in to meet with

you and Willas. I have to say that Archmaester Martyn isn't pleased with the wait, though he understood when it was explained to them. He would like to talk to you by the way." Garlan concluded.

Everyone's plates had been cleared by this point and while Garth and the others had all been dismissed, Margaery, Leyton, Jon, Willas, and Garlan sat around the small fireplace. Lord Hightower and Garlan held small snifters, while Margaery, Jon and Willas both sipped from their wine glasses.

"I would like to speak to him as well, in fact I would love to have the time to go to the Citadel and talk to all the Archmaesters there. But frankly we don't have time, and I'm afraid if I do head to the Citadel, I'm likely to be embroiled in some of their politicking. Or at least so lady Margaery has so advised me."

"Lady Margaery is most wise," Leyton smiled thinly. "The Council of the Citadel plays its games with far more energy and vigor than many lords ever realize. I think they're still debating what to decide to do about the coming of the dragons and magic, but I'm getting a distinct impression that they might stick their heads in the sand and try to ignore it frankly."

"In that case I should definitely speak to them." Jon said smiling thinly. "Myself and Ghost will convince them otherwise."

"More importantly," Garlan said looking at him, his gaze direct. "Which direction are we going to go, and how many men are we taking? There have been some rumblings from many of my own men they wish to head home, especially the levy forces. They need to get out into the fields to help their fellows bring in the last harvest before winter closes in. Whatever the Seven's power, it still takes men and their hands to bring in the harvest."

Jon nodded crisply. "Agreed, any levy forces are to be sent home immediately, with full pay of course, and provisions to see them home."

"Oh?" Lord Hightower said leaning forward and with one eyebrow raised. "And where exactly will this pay be coming from, and how much are we talking about?"

"From you for now Lord Hightower, and the pay is to be two silver stags for every day they spent under arms, minus the cost of any equipment." As Leyton began to cough on the spirits in his snifter Jon went on. "I will write out a letter of credit in the name of the king that it will be paid back once we are certain the roads between here and the Golden Tooth are free of bandit activity."

"So it's true then you did take the Golden Tooth." Leyton, chuckled quietly, leaning back. So long as the young Hand wasn't intending to simply force him to pay out of the goodness of his heart he had no issue with the idea of paying the smallfolk forming the core of the levy forces, though it would cut into his family's liquid capital.

"Yes we did, not, admittedly my most favorite memory." Jon shuddered a little and the three men looked at him quizzically while Margaery chuckled. She knew that Jon was 'wary' of heights and had actually breathed a sigh of relief that the room they were meeting in didn't have any windows. Given the height of Hightower which was one of the wonders of the known world, that was definitely a good thing in Jon's opinion.

Waving aside their interest Jon went on. "Garlan, let's talk about the composition of the force we should take further, and the way the Houses under you preformed, or didn't as the case may be. House Mullendore and House Cuy in particular..."

Garlan nodded and the two began a discussion on that point, while Willas engaged Hightower in a talk about the various logistical aspects of the journey. It turned out that the levy forces of those houses had been badly hit in the battle against Balon's forces at sea, but they had served him well. The other two houses, besides Hightower whose men had served under Garlan however, Blackbar and Bulwer, had performed admirably from the get-go.

"If we send your levy forces home along with your cavalry, how much will that leave us. And Lord Leyton, could we see a map of the Reach?" Jon asked.

Leyton nodded and waved his hand to a servant. The man quickly moved over pulling out a large, detailed map from a wide drawer while Leyton and Willas moved over to join the discussion, along with Margaery. "Loyalty needs to be rewarded, and incompetence or arrogance punished..."

"Are we talking about House Florent now?" Margaery asked archly, causing the men to laugh. "But you're right Jon, and in this case it is easy enough. House Mullendore's military strength is gone, their lord, heir and cousins dead. Lady Mullendore is a... a former Crane I think, but there's no way she can hold Uplands and the lands of the House. I

would recommend we send a knight, whoever you and Garlan suggest brother, to take over the running of the House for now. But the House itself should be removed from the Great House status, and made into a House minor."

"Agreed, and I know just the man. Ser Hugh Blackbar, a cousin of that house. An older man, he served with distinction in both the battle of Oldflowers and again against Balon. But he was injured badly in that battle, and his strength is not what it was. This would be a fine way to reward him." Garlan said enthusiastically, looking at Jon.

Jon laughed. "These are your people my lords, I will not argue. Very well that was simple enough, the lands of the House will be divided in half, half falling under Hightower control, as part of your recompense for your loyalty."

Leyton's eyes widened, but Willas and Margaery merely nodded. Hightower was powerful already, adding that land, all decent farmland but nothing special, wouldn't matter in the long run. Especially since House Tyrell's own land had grown so much itself.

"House Cuy I think is in the same position as Mullendore, correct?" Jon asked, and Jon and her brothers all nodded. Like Martyn Mullendore, Branston Cuy had handed their levy forces over to Garlan before leading their trained armsmen and knights north to join Renly, only to die under one Baratheon or the other. "But Sunflower Hall's position makes it important, and an interesting strategic position not only for us, but for the new Duchy of the Passes."

At that Garlan cocked his head quizzically, and Willas cut in to tell him and Leyton the plans there. Both were astonished at the idea, but after a few moments understood the why of it, as well as why the Royal House had no worries about instigating another time of many kings. The Royal pikes and the training which had produced the Wolfsworn and to a lesser extent Edric Dayne and even Patrek, was a very big stick indeed. That was not even considering the fierce, passionate loyalty Ranma and Daenerys had been able to invoke in their subjects, lords and smallfolk alike.

When Jon spoke again however, Garlan smiled widely. "I think that because of that, and the fact it is on the sea as it is, it should be gifted to Desmond Redwyne."

"An excellent idea! I think that Desmera will do well enough as lady Redwyne, so long as someone else can handle the military side of things, and she has someone helping her with the numbers aspect of rebuilding the Arbor. But Desmond showed true grit, intelligence and loyalty from the beginning of this war, and truly deserves to be rewarded for it above what he could expect as a cousin of the main Redwyne line." Garlan enthused. "And of course taking Sunflower Hall might be hard, which will give my cavalry and the Redwyne forces with us here in Oldtown something to do while the rest of us head north."

The meeting went on from there, as Willas and Leyton, under Jon's direction began to redraw the borders of the Great Houses around Oldtown. Blackbar and Bulwer were formally given Great House status, removing them from being under Hightower's control, though Beesbury and Honeyholt were gifted to Gunthor Hightower for his role in the war effort, and that house removed from the rolls of Great Houses, placed under Hightower as Mullendore remained. So despite losing the taxes those two houses, along with Cuy, would have paid into his house's coffers, Leyton was well-pleased by what they had gained instead.

With that discussion done, Jon and Garlan got to grips with the force that would be sent north. Garlan would remain behind in Oldtown with Willas to provide another proven field commander to his brother, just in case. Garth, the older of the Hightower brothers, would travel north with Vigilance, the House's Valyrian sword, and their men.

The total force sent would be a little over 5,100 men, coming from Tyrell, Bulwer, and Blackbar for the most part, with a bit under a thousand pulled from Florent and Peake, though they would not include any of the lords or knights of those houses. Jon and Willas wanted to remove some of the men from Lord Florent and Peake, hoping that would curtail any trouble from that quarter in the future.

That this would leave Willas and Garlan with more than enough men to smash any lord with delusions of grandeur were not lost on any of them. Especially after Margaery, in a clear, concise tone, enunciated the lords who might cause trouble in the future given their losses in the war, inclination, or, as she put it 'gross stupidity'. That Florent and Peake fell into two out of three of those categories was a given.

Instead of providing men Hightower would provide supplies, including both new weapons and shields, not just food or winter apparel. After Jon explained this, Leyton frowned. "Those men already carry weapons my Lord Hand. Why do you then talk about new weapons being supplied by my city?"

"I've been thinking about this for a while, and I've decided that the spear phalanx or pike regiment tactics isn't going to work against wights as well as it does against humans. Yes the pike does a lot of damage, but wights don't feel pain,

so killing blows to them are meaningless save with dragonglass. So instead, we should think about maiming them." Jon stood up, moving towards the door "I'll be right back."

As the door closed behind Jon, Leyton turned to look at Willas and Margaery. "I am impressed, I didn't expect to be, but he's a most intelligent young man despite his northern upbringing. He listens, he's insightful and quick, as well as very dangerous. I thought he had been given the status as Hand simply so the new king wouldn't need to appoint anyone whose loyalty he was not utterly certain of to the post, but now..."

"You should meet his brother sometime, the two of them are so alike in many ways it's almost scary." Margaery laughed, cuddling under her brother Willas' arm on the couch the two of them were sharing. "He even impressed my grandmother, and you know how hard that can be."

A moment later Jon returned, holding in one hand a pike, and in the other another kind of polearm. Garlan and Willas looked at it shrewdly, noting that the blade made for half the length of the entire weapon, and that the blade was curved slightly and sharp on both edges. The length of the pole itself was about six feet rather than the fifteen feet of the pike. "The overall weight looks to be similar to a pike," Garlan murmured, moving to take the blade.

Jon handed it over equably then moved over into a clear space. "A normal pike is thrust forward like so," he said demonstrating with the pike he still held. "This causes tremendous wounds of course, and can kill or maim even through plate given enough strength behind the thrust."

Margaery giggled suddenly, and Jon realized what he had said. Both of the girl's brothers looked at her askance, and Garlan shook his head while Leyton looked astonished and appalled. "You still haven't grown out of that dirty little mind of yours, have you sister?"

"Nope." Margaery said with a chuckle. "Not even a little."

"If I could have your attention over here." Jon said, his face a little red at the smirk Margaery was giving him. "As I was saying, that's fine for living opponents, but wights don't feel pain, and can keep coming regardless of wounds like that. Indeed, from what Dacey told me even Dragonglass can only put them down if they take out the heart or brain."

Garlan turned back from looking at his sister, hefting up the other polearm that Jon had brought in. "This looks more for slashing attack, is that so?"

"Garlan has the right of it." Jon said, exchanging pole arms with the slightly older man. Instead of thrusting as he did with pike, Jon brought this polearm down in a slash. "Again, this can cause tremendous wounds but the main objective is to cripple by taking off arms or hacking off legs."

Lord Hightower looked over at Margaery, expecting to see the girl looking a little pale at the rather bland explanation of the weapon's purpose, but she was simply looking on interestedly. Next to her Willas frowned thoughtfully tapping one finger against his lips. "How do you see this playing out in a mass attack?"

"The front line will be divided into two groups, spaced one to one in the formation. One group will hold shields, large tower shields big enough to cover themselves and the person directly to their right. That person will in turn wield a glaive like this. It won't be perfect especially given the time we have to train the men, and we'll be doing most of that training on the ships, but it should be easier to learn than the pike anyway."

"How many of these do you think your city could make in around two weeks milord?" He asked Leyton.

Hightower frowned then moved over to a small desk to ring a bell. Moments later a servant man appeared, and Willas and Lord Hightower talked to the man quickly. "I'll have a blacksmith here momentarily I don't know enough about the art myself to give you an answer."

Jon nodded then went on, moving over to the table where Willas and Leyton had been working earlier. "The next question is tents, and braziers, you cannot understand how important it will be to keep warm at night on the march."

"You still haven't told us which direction you'll go. And you're planning this out is if you don't expect us to stop for dragonglass." Garlan objected.

"We're going west." Jon replied bluntly. "You have heard about the miracles occurring here in the Reach which are credited to the Seven? I tell you now that they are not the only gods who have risen to fight the White Walkers. In front of the Three Singers in Highgarden I received a vision. That vision told me that I personally need to be on Bear Island or the island will fall, and with it the western defense of the North and eventually the Wall."

"I can't bring it to mind." Garlan muttered looking over at Lord Hightower who shook his head.

Leyton shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't have any map of the North that I would rely upon. I have one which shows the coastlines of course, but not in enough detail to matter."

"My map is up here." Jon laughed, tapping his forehead. "If the White Walkers can take Bear Island, they can move against Deepwood Motte, a small town set on the shores of the Bay of Ice. Worse, they'll be able to march inland into the Wolfswood and up into the mountains. The Wolfswood is..." he paused trying to think of the words that would get across the true impact of that woodland. "Ancient, immense, deep. No army could move through it with any kind of organization no matter how well trained or led, and even making camp would take hours at best, be impossible at worst for an army of any size. In that kind of environment it'll come down to individual skill and weapons. Worse, it might force us to fall back out of the Wolfswood to try and defend its borders, and given the size of it, that's impossible."

"All good solid strategic reasons my Lord, but without Dragonglass, we have nothing that can kill the White Walkers." Willas objected.

"Fire, Valerian steel, Ghost, Nymeria, myself, Arya, and anyone wielding a Valyrian blade," Jon said, listing the people on his fingers.

Garlan sat back down, frowning thoughtfully. "We don't have many Valyrian blades you know, they don't exactly grow on trees even here in the Reach. Indeed throughout the Reach I don't think there are more than ten of them. Other than House Tarly's and Hightower's blade, the other three are all with the army your brother apparently smashed."

"As I said, there is myself and Arya when she arrives. Besides, I don't think it's ever been proven that regular weapons can't kill White Walkers if you get in a killing blow that ignores their armor. It will be costly, but more costly than trying to fight them in the Wolfswood, no."

Garlan tried another tack. "Surely the North has enough resources left to send to Bear Island itself?"

"Again the Wolfswood blocks most of the Northern forces from getting there easily, and we haven't heard anything recently from the North at all. Certainly they wouldn't be able to send dragonglass to the Island before this, and the mainland probably is facing its own issues."

"But surely that's another indication that we should go the other way and pick up dragonglass weapons." Garlan objected.

"There is another consideration here to think about." Lord Hightower broke in reluctantly. "Braziers and tents. Braziers will call upon my blacksmiths' time and skill, just like your glaives will. We might be able to meet one area of demand, but not the other. The same issue faces us when talking about clothing and tents."

"And Seagard isn't that large a town, it could maybe make braziers for us but tents? As far as I know it doesn't have that larger a tanning industry does it?" Garlan asked.

"It doesn't, but Lannisport does." Jon said, smiling thinly. "Could you gather enough food to get the fleet to Lannisport in two weeks Lord Hightower?"

"Yes I believe so..." Leyton said, looking at Jon shrewdly.

"You would trust the Lannisters?" Willas asked, not condemning just questioning, though his brother was looking rather angry at the very idea.

"We're not trusting them, we're not asking them for men, but for goods." Margaery said thoughtfully. "I'm uncertain that we should trust any food Lannisport could give us, but tents are easy enough to check the quality of, as is clothing and braziers."

"Have any of you ever met Kevan Lannister?" Jon asked.

"I met him once at a tournament at the Rock." Garlan said musingly. "He is an intelligent man who likes to work in the background. He never pushed himself forward, but I think he'll be an effective ruler for the Rock and Lannisport. If you're asking if he's trustworthy I think he is so long as he remembers that Westerland's no longer has an army, and has no desire to seek vengeance in a way that could bring on more pain for his family."

"We have two of his sons as captives along with Daven Lannister in Riverrun, I think that is enough of an incentive."

"I liked Daven." Garlan said suddenly looking over at Jon. "He was a decent enough blade, and wasn't anywhere near as arrogant as most Lannisters. He was arrogant of course, most lords are, but not so unthinking or cold."

Jon shrugged. "He acquitted himself honorably in the Riverlands and has been treated as such, but he's still a hostage, at least for now. Right now however, let's talk with your smithy expert Lord Hightower, that'll give us an idea of the numbers we need, then we'll talk about the number of ships we can afford to send, and what else we might need House Redwyne's naval power for..."

As the four men put their heads together, Margaery leaned back. She didn't have much of a head for numbers, and so had little to offer to this portion of the discussion. So instead, she thought, and wondered, and made her own plans.

It turned out that Lord Hightower's initial impression was correct, Oldtown could produce enough glaives for the infantry portion of the army, or enough braziers. If they tried to concentrate on both, even if they used simple iron for the braziers, it would cut dramatically into the numbers they could produce. The tower shields too would take time to build up in sufficient numbers, and their rims too would take time away from the blacksmith's other tasks. And the tanners and clothing merchants couldn't supply both winter clothing and tents in sufficient quantities before Jon's deadline. Indeed, even the raw resources needed for all these tasks became a bottleneck.

With that in mind Jon asked Lord Hightower to concentrate on the weapons rather than the braziers, and wrote out a message for Lannisport and Riverrun, which would send it on to Seagard. Lannisport would be able to supply the brazier's and the tents Oldtown could not, and Seagard could make up the numbers in terms of their shields and arrowheads.

Seven ships would be left behind to guard the Shield Islands, with seven more to guard the Straits into Oldtown. Five others were sent down to 'show the banners' in Dorne then head further north to start shipping up dragonglass to White Harbor with Saan. Further, Jon extended his promissory note to Lord Hightower to begin building more six ships, which would join those five in transporting dragonglass up to White Harbor.

Several days later Edric, Arya, and their men arrived at the city's wharfs having taken a ship from Starfall. They were immediately ushered through the city and up to the massive Hightower, where they found Jon and the others. Jon got to his feet, moving over and pulling his younger sister into a hug smiling and waving a raven message. "We received a new message from Riverrun. They passed it down to here from Highgarden, and it details Ranna and Daenerys' victory. They're calling it the Battle of the Shadow's Fall! It makes for some interesting reading, especially since there was another enemy, an army called the Golden Company, we didn't even expect."

Arya quickly grabbed the note out of his hand, rushing over to a chair and plopping herself into it without another word. Jon laughed, and turned to Edric. "And how went to your own mission?"

Without a word Edric pulled out Dawn, holding it up in both of his hands one hand underneath the blade. "Dawn." He said simply. "I am now the Sword of Morning."

Jon chuckled and nodded. "Good, we might need you and that sword on Bear Island when we get there."

OOOOOO

"My Lord, I can't find lady Margaery, do you know where she is?" Asked Domic Wythers.

Willas looked up from where he and Lord Hightower were going over the numbers for the construction yards. Simple affairs in comparison to war galleys, galleons still cost quite a bit, almost as much as the rest of the work that had been put into providing for the army sent north that morning. "I have no idea where my sister could be, she finished a write up on Lord Peake for me yesterday, and left it on my desk. Why, did you need her for something?"

"We were supposed to return to Highgarden today as soon as the fleet left, your grandmother was most specific, my lord, so I..."

Willas turned a little frosty. "Really, and what if I had told you I needed my sister's aid here?" The man stuttered a little, and Willas went in for the kill. "Understand me Ser, I am Lord Paramount of the Reach and Lord Tyrell. I rule my House, not my grandmother. Any orders that do not come from me should at the very least be brought to my attention. Do I make myself clear?"

The man stuttered and Willas nodded. "Now, find a few of the others knights, and search my sister. If she is not found anywhere in the Castle, then feel free to barge in on me again, understood?"

The man nodded quickly and left, and Lord Hightower looked at Willas. "You do a very good Tywin impression my Lord."

"Thank you," Willas said with a nod, then he began to laugh. Lord Hightower looked at him in surprise, and Willas tried to compose his features only succeeding after several moments. He held his hand to his face, moaning dramatically. "Oh no, my sister is missing oh no, whatever will I do. Just as the fleet carrying Jon and the army departed too. But I suppose that's just a coincidence..."

"You think she hid away on one of the ships?" Lord Hightower asked in surprise. Then he frowned. That could be dangerous they are going into a war zone after all, and sailors are not the most controlled bunch at the best of times."

"My sister has that wild wolf girl to look after her, and Jon as well. I doubt anything will happen to her, though my grandmother and mother will both probably be put out about it."

Lord Hightower shook his head. "She was always a willful girl, but I didn't think she was so precipitous, to go haring off like that. I pity the man who'll have to put up with her."

"Jon at least has some practice in that area." Willas replied then burst into laughter again.

OOOOOO

The White Walker commander of the army marching on Hornwood was a wily man, and older for his race than most sent on the expedition to Skagos. He was one who had first looked askance at the very idea of sending an iceberg out to sea but since Skagos fell he'd become a believer, and had begun to modify his own tactics. With no news coming from Winterfell, he knew that the assault on their Old Enemy had failed, and Hornwood and the ancient keep of the giant lovers would be reinforced quickly.

When one of his small patrols and the wights it could gather did not report back, the man knew that the Old Enemy would be coming after him and planned accordingly. He sent several thousand wights to invest Hornwood, more to keep the defenders inside than anything else, along with several White Walkers from his own band, a force 200 strong. Then the rest of the army kept marching determined to catch the force under the Old Enemy out in the woods where his men's better individual abilities would come into play. Above the army, flew the one dragon they still had.

OOOOOO

While the White Walkers came with winter and could in some small fashion control the temperature around their influence, they did not control the full power of it. No one could control the seasons like that, not even the gods.

Winter passed through the Neck heading south bringing far colder temperatures, sleet and even snow. Harvests ended in the Riverlands and in the Vale, which was already having issues.

The Vale mountain clans, having grown bold in recent years, now were forced down into the lowlands in ever greater numbers. Despite the war now going against them thanks to the forces under Silas attacking one mountain clan after another, they were a growing problem, along with the weather itself.

But that wasn't the only sign of winter, others could be seen floating in the ocean. Watching one such near the last of the fingers Salladhor Saan frowned. And when he spoke, he voiced the thought of thousands, millions spread out around Westeros. "Even if you don't count the undead and their masters, this winter is going to be truly foul."

OOOOOO

Rickard and those with him would have possibly responded to that phrase rather coarsely considering that while winter was still extending its grip elsewhere, here in the Narrow sea between the Bite and the Bay of Seals, it had already clenched its fists around the land and ocean. Floating ice was everywhere in large quantities, and the winds and waves were tumultuous at the best of times. They had lost two ships outright and three more had been forced to turn back with damages before they reached Ramsgate.

Transferring the men two of them carried, the last having been a war galley out of White Harbor, had been a nightmare, costing hundreds of lives. Luckily of the two ships that had sunk, only one had been a transport strip. Yet even so 500 plus men going down in a nighttime squall was a bad blow to morale, made worse by the ships which had been forced to turn around. In all the expedition had lost a little over eight hundred and forty men, leaving them with a little over 3000, mostly Karstark and Riverlands men.

Their destination, Ramsgate, was somewhat like Karhold, only smaller. It had a small dock at the back leading out

onto the Broken Branch river, with a small two-story tall wall around a central keep, which was circular in nature and only about six stories tall. Across from the castle along the river was another tower guarding the other side of the river, but that tower had fallen into disrepair over the centuries. The men of House Woolfield had tried their best to put it back into working order since the war began, but their best hadn't done much.

Lord Woolfield was a short man coming up only to Rickard's chest, but he was wide across the shoulders, and had a sort of ram-like approach to life in general, yet in many ways more resembled a dew than a ram. "I can spare some 600 men," he said to Rickard bluntly. "And I'll give you two-thirds of our store of dragonglass weapons but I and the rest of my House will remain here."

He shook his head sadly. "We've lost several minor Houses. Too many of my folk refused to evacuate their homes, only those closest to my seat were willing to do so really. But we've got too many people here, we're too good a target if we just let you take all of my fighting men."

Rickard shrugged. "So long as those men of yours know the lay of the land between here and Widow's Watch, I don't care. What about food?"

"None to spare. We can give you a few deer, a few loaves of bread but that's about it. Like I said, we've got a lot of mouths to feed here."

Rickard walked off looking over at Daryn who shook his head. "A lot of mouths to feed is a matter of perspective I suppose. I guess they've got around eight or nine hundred smallfolk, including women and children here, plus the House's own population. I'd bet Hornwood has double that or more. Roger and Hathan are checking the stores now, we'll see if we can convince Lord Woolfield to be a slightly more honest with us if need be."

That was in fact the case the man had badly exaggerated how low on food they were, nor were they actually in a siege situation just yet either, which allowed the hunters to keep bringing in food. Using both of those facts Rickard browbeat the man into giving him several horse-loads worth of food, mostly salted meat and bread, simple fare which would last for a long while. With that and the supplies they had brought with them, Rickard and his men marched out.

Luckily, Gustav Woolfield was made from a different cloth than his uncle. The head of the scouts which had been seconded to the army was a middle-aged but still vigorous man, a widower who had recently lost his wife to a cold. He understood his duty and was aggressive and the pursuit of it.

Looking around at Rickard and the Wolfsworn, Gustav gestured at a map of the area. This map wasn't quite as good as House Stark, Manderly or Cerwyn could produce of their own lands, but it was decent enough. He placed small pebbles here and there around the map saying, "These are the places where we have seen or heard of White Walkers attacking, mostly wights up to this point." He pointed to five stones in particular. "My uncle probably told you we've lost several minor Houses, and he's right about that, in fact we've lost all of them to our north and northwest. Keeps and holdfasts can only slow the wights, they can't stop them."

"How large a force do you think we're dealing with?" Smalljon asked.

"Depends on what you're talking about. Thousands of wights at least but there's been no sight of the White Walkers." Gustav said with a shrug. "As to where, I think they've moved west. They took these Houses going that way anyway, here, here and there." he said drawing a very crooked line, but one that led westward along the isthmus point towards Widow's Watch.

Rickard scowled. "House Flint of Widow's Watch might not be the most powerful Great House, but it's still a Great House, and one that didn't commit any forces to the war in the south. Why would they attack such a strong position?"

"That I don't know, but if I had to guess I'd say it's because House Flint did a lot better at the job than my own house did in forcing its people to pull back to the castle. Think of all those people there, if they can get inside its might double or even triple their numbers."

"Widow's Watch doesn't have that good a defense either," Daryn said, frowning. "I've been there, it was a good, solid castle when it was built, but it's rather run down in several areas these days. I don't think it could withstand a long siege. It also can't be supplied by sea, since it sits on top of a bluff."

With the sea the way it is we couldn't supply them from the ocean anyway." Theon said shaking his head. "Frankly I'm astonished we didn't lose more ships than we did."

"That brings up an interesting question." Roger said thoughtfully. "Will we even be able to attack Skagos if we push



the White Walkers back that far?"

"The Bay of Ice has probably already frozen solid. Moving over it won't be easy, but we could do it, there's a trick to moving over ice like that." Rickard said frowning. "But we'll cross that bridge when we have to, right now there's a force of White Walkers out there, and I mean to destroy it."

The Wolfsworn all smiled, showing their teeth and nodded as one.

While White Walkers could move quickly, wights, while of course not needing to stop to eat, drink, shit or sleep, didn't move very quickly as a large group. They just weren't maneuverable enough to move through heavy snow quickly, and their passage tamped it down just as much as any human army.

The force of the Royal Army however had marched and fought for months now, and had gotten very good at it. Even without Merry and Ranma around to organize their camps, Rickard and the others were easily up to the task of organizing them. Every man carried either a small brazier, a tent, or food, and they marched from right before dawn to evening before throwing up simple earthworks around their camp. So unlike the Valemen, they made excellent time.

But they could not catch up to the force of wights marching on Widow's Watch since that army was marching away from them, forcing them into a chase. Marching after them, they came upon several holdfasts which had been either deserted or taken, their people wiped out. Searching these ruins augmented the army's own stores slightly, though Rickard and the Wolfsworn were quick to point out that at the moment any riches would have to be carried by the people who purloined them. That stopped any looting in its tracks, and the march quickly continued.

Daryn and the rest of the Wolfsworn moved out in front of the army, racing along both before and to the sides of the army's route of march to find and hopefully trigger any ambushes before the rest of the army arrived. They didn't run into anything however, but they did spot some signs of the White Walkers and their wights passing by.

Rickard looked up spotting Roger waiting in sight of where he led the army. It wasn't long Rickard was beside the younger man and he looked at him quizzically. "I thought Daryn was the one who normally stopped by."

"Daryn and I found something out there, he's busy burying it."

"What did you find?" Rickard asked cautiously.

"Evidence that the White Walkers don't want to just kill us, they want to take their time about it." Roger's voice could've been made of beaten metal, and his face behind the beard was set in a rictus snarl. "They don't have any place for babies or children too young to be of use in their armies."

"Children..." Rickard said slowly "they use children in their armies?"

"Above a certain age, possibly. We came upon a farmstead, it looked pretty well designed, a decent enough place built on top of a tiny hill. But it didn't save the people there, and a babe and two young children were there. If the White Walkers can't turn you into something useful for them, they... play with you."

Rickard's jaw clenched imagining the twelve or so children who worked or lived in Karhold, thankful that almost all of his people including the servants had gotten out. "We will avenge them." He said simply.

"Oh yes," Roger nodded, slowly, calmly the calm before a storm. "That I can promise."

Four days later the scattered forest and farmsteads began to give way to rocky clearings, too rocky for horses to live on, but there were still a few scattered farms here and there. Covered in snow now of course, as all the land was. Despite it being clearer now, thanks to the snow it was actually tougher going. But here the White Walkers and their wights had done the humans a favor, beating down a path in the snow they could use to follow the undead horde.

Even so, Rickard knew they were coming within another day or so march of Widow's Watch, and wasn't about to trust to the trail of the wights to tell them where they were. He ordered the army to rest, sending the Wolfsworn further out to find the White Walkers.

He had just sat down to dinner when Daryn ran into the camp, skidding in the snow and frozen mud of the ground of the camp. "We found them," He said quickly.

Kneeling down next to the fiery pot Daryn poured himself some of the stew nodding his head respectfully towards Rickard who nodded back, handing over some utensils quickly. "Where away?"

"They might be within a half days march of Widow's Watch, maybe the same for us if we double time it."

Rickard frowned thoughtfully. "Tell me, have you seen any sign that the White Walkers have killed or turned any of the animals? Theon said something about that, didn't he?"

"He did, but we haven't seen any sign that they've continued that trend. I, I don't think this is the army that took Karhold, at least not all of it."

Rickard frowned. He wasn't the strategist that Ranma was, or even the tactician. He had never led a full army like this, portions certainly and done it well but planning out an entire battle was something he had never had to do except for in the Saltpans, which was rather an easy one. Yet he was not afraid to ask advice. "What do you think we should do?"

Daryn smiled a wolfish expression on his face. "I think the White Walkers need a lesson in always looking around them rather than concentrating on one target. What I suggest we do is march through the night, then rest without cook fires and when they attack Widow's Watch, attack them in turn from behind. We'll pin them in place against the walls of the castle, and wipe them out."

"Get the rest of the Wolfsworn here," Rickard said after a moment. "I want their opinions."

The sun was starting to go down by the time the Wolfsworn returned to the army. By the time they did arrive however, the Army had thrown up its normal defenses, and every man had gotten some hot food inside of them. Rickard wanted all of his men to have a good meal if they were going into battle tomorrow.

When the Wolfsworn assembled Rickard began to outline the plan. "Daryn has a suggestion, and I think it's a workable, but I want your opinions."

After he finished Roger shook his head as did Hathan while Theon simply looked irritated. "It'd be a good plan, if our men could charge through snow as they can down the cleared trail the White Walkers left. They can't. Sorry Daryn, but the idea of enveloping them like that isn't going to work. Not unless House Flint's kept the snow off the ground somehow in a wide area around its castle anyway.

"In this kind of terrain, with the amount of snow on the ground we just have to charge into them." Hathan said with a shrug. He and Roger were the best trained cavalymen among them, and had been most irritated by the need to leave their horses behind when coming on this expedition, the calculation being one horse for six men in terms of room and eight in terms of space for food making them too expensive. "I think we might have a numbers advantage against this force, I say we use it."

After a moment Rickard nodded. "Very well, I've already given orders for the army to rest. We'll rest for several turns of the glass, then march through the night, camp closer to the Widow's Watch and then fall upon the White Walkers as they attack the castle. That's the best plan we're going to make."

"Prior planning might prevent poor performance, but trying to plan ahead can often times lead to indecision." Theon said, mangling together two phrases that Ranma had said occasionally. "Let's get it stuck in, wipe these bastards out and move on."

The first part of the plan such as it was worked well enough. The White Walkers had no scouts out behind them or even to their sides, intent on attacking and taking Widow's Watch and turning every human in it into their thralls. The army was therefore able to march through the night unmolested, camping within three leagues of Widow's Watch.

In the distance the Army could hear the attack began, but Rickard was not about to order their own attack until the morning. He instinctively felt that attacking the White Walkers out in the open at night was a recipe for disaster and so long as the White Walkers could not bring a dragon against the castle, it should stand for at least a day or so.

The next morning commanders and sub-commanders relayed orders through gestures and low hisses as men prepared for battle. The Stark Pike-now spear regiment formed up in the center of the formation, with the men of House Karstark to either side, and the archers and scouts forming up behind them. In front of this force Theon and the rest of the Wolfsworn moved forward rapidly.

Rickard a given them specific orders: get in close unseen, and take out the White Walkers before retreating. All of them held Valyrian blades, even Theon had a Valyrian dagger, a stiletto about eight inches long with a wickedly sharp point that Roger had picked up for him.

Once they came within sight of Widow's Watch they spread out, with Theon going down to one knee and pulling out

his bow fitting a dragonglass tipped arrow to it as he stared at the castle. The White Walkers were throwing their wights against the castle walls indiscriminately. He watched as dozens possibly more than 100 siege ladders being carried forward by those wights. The White Walkers however were well back of their army, spread out in a line, firing up at the castle occasionally, but not hitting anything. *They think themselves safe out of bow range, and they might be from though Castle, but damn sure not from me.*

Daryn and the rest of the Wolfsworn however couldn't get close. As they had feared, outside of the direct route the wights had trampled down, the snow was too thick on the ground to allow for a fast passage. Worse it would make their movements too loud.

Quickly realizing this, they moved in front of Theon. "No chance of subtlety working here, we'll just have to charge!" Roger actually sounded happy as he lifted his Valyrian longsword, which he had named Sunset.

Theon nodded. Hathan wasn't looking forward to this, much preferring to fight on horse. Still, it wasn't the first or even fifth time he'd have to go into battle on his own two hooves. He lifted the longsword he had been given from the treasures taken from the Golden Company, which he had named Oathkeeper.

"As soon as they spot you, I can have arrows in the air." Theon said, still staring down the length of his arrow at the distant targets. "But a lot of them are archers too, and I told you what those arrowheads could do."

"Well, Ranma dodged arrows sometimes, how hard can it be?" Daryn asked, smiling weakly. Yet even so he too held up his own Valyrian blade, Woodhart.

Smalljon grinned cracking his neck and hefting up the Giant Cleaver, a Valyrian claymore he had taken from among the wreckage of the Golden Company's elephant charge. "Did you decide on a name for that little prick of yours Theon?"

"Iron Thrust." Theon said, smirking evilly but not looking away from his targets. "Heh, innuendo, boast and threat all in one."

"No." Said all the others around him, shaking their heads, but it was Daryn who spoke up. "Just no, even Valyrian **daggers** need better names than that. How about Archer's Kiss?"

"Feh, sounds too feminine for my tastes. We can talk about this later I suppose, but right now boys, we've got a battle to win."

With a final nod at their friend the others moved off, each went slapping Theon on the shoulder as they went. Even Smalljon gripped Theon's shoulder once before joining the others, their differences forgotten.

Between one step and the next the Wolfsworn charged. Giving up any pretense of trying to sneak up on the White Walkers they raced forward covering the distance between them, 50 yards or so, in seconds.

Even so the White Walkers heard them coming through the mud and frozen ground and turned. The first two to race bows to shoulders died swiftly. One of Theon's dragonglass tipped arrows took one through an eyeball. The second died from an arrow slamming into and through his chest plate.

For a moment the White Walkers were torn by indecision, most of them going for their swords, while a few fell back away from this unexpected assault lifting up their bows and arrows. Those men died, Theon cutting them down with a speed and accuracy that was astonishing.

Daryn it was the first to reach them, his lizard lion armor, like that of Edd, Ranma, and Jon, lighter than even the chain mail the others wore. "Righteous in wrath!" He howled, bringing his sword up and around smashing a White Walker blade so hard the man lost his grip on it, and could only stare in stupefaction as Daryn's return blow caught him in the neck severing his head and sending it flying through the air in the spray of yellow blood.

Then Smalljon hit them like a rather small but very concentrated avalanche, bearing four of the White Walkers who had grouped together to the ground, his Claymore stabbing into them repeatedly as he laughed, smashing their own blades aside with his gauntleted fists pummeling and ripping them apart with his bare hands.

The others too smashed heavily into the White Walkers, killing and scattering them. Those that scattered too widely died under Theon's fire. But their luck against any of the Wolfsworn one on one was very bad, and they had lost too many in that initial charge to regain any equilibrium. Before the horde of wights could turn to attack them, the last White Walker died under a blow from Hathan.

There was a roar behind Theon, and he turned. "The Sun of Winter!"

The army marched up behind him. Then halfway between him and the Wolfsworn, who had begun to fall back now that the White Walkers were dead and the wights attacking, the spears came down, and that march became a charge. "Honor above all, for the king and Queen of the North!" At the same time the archers on the wall redoubled their assaults, and the gate gave down, allowing the men within to sortie.

Leaderless, being attacked from both sides by weapons that could kill them, the wights had no chance. Worse, they were almost evenly matched in numbers for the first and possibly only time in this entire war. All told the wights attacking Widow's Watch numbered around 6000, which meant the humans, with their combined forces, almost matched them.

Lord Flint and Rickard met in the battle, nodding into one another as the cleanup went up all around them. "Your intervention was most timely Rickard," said the older man, wheezing slightly as he leaned on his sword. Nearby Robin Flint waved his own longsword in the air in a salute to the two older men then reached down and picked up a still weekly hand tossing it into a nearby bonfire. "My stores are yours, and my men if you need them."

OOOOOO

About a week after their ships left the Whispering Sound Jon and Arya finished practicing for the day, and he smiled at her, ruffling her hair. "I think it's about time that you let Margaery out of your room don't you think? She must be going stir crazy confined in there."

His younger sister gaped up at him for a moment then shook her head looking over at Ghost. "Let me guess, Ghost smelled her?"

Jon nodded, and Arya laughed before heading down below. She came back a moment later with Margaery dressed as a pageboy, rather badly if Jon was honest. Some women might be able to wear clothing like that and play the part of a man, but not one like Margaery. *You can't hide those hips whatever you do* Jon thought to himself, trying not to stare at said hips, *though I'm surprised that she was able to tie a breast band so tight as to not make those obvious as well.*

"So my game was up from the moment it started." Margaery said with a theatrical sigh, before cocking her head at Jon. "Why then did you let me aboard at all?" Around them several dozen of the Reach knights and armsmen were gaping at her, while Garth was looking both amused and shocked.

"Ghost smelled you the moment you boarded, though I will say that I was surprised that he decided to keep it to himself for so long. I get the impression that Nymeria actually sat on him at one point to enforce that." The idea of the smaller Nymeria sitting on the larger Ghost caused Arya and Margaery to laugh, but Jon was actually serious. Ghost was a much more laid-back, calm sort of fellow than Nymeria, who was extremely bossy at times.

"I noticed that you are making no attempt to turn the ship around Jon Stark." Margaery said, moving forward to place a hand on Jon's chest. Jon was bare to the waist at the moment, having exercised with both Garth and Arya and Edric one after another. He was rather sweaty despite the cold ocean air, but something told him not to try to clean himself up, indeed Margaery's eyes were roving his body in a way that made him want to blush.

"It would set us back at least a week and a half, more like a month to get back to this point. That would serve no purpose, and I like having you around my lady." Jon said, before coughing and looking away blushing lightly. "Your, your um, diplomatic skills have proven themselves useful in the past, and I might need them when we get near Lannisport."

"I am so glad that my 'diplomatic skills' will be of use on this trip my Lord Hand." Margaery said curtsying mockingly, her eyes laughing at him before she turned to head back below with Arya. Now that the jig was up, she could get out of these irritating breast bands and put on a comfortable blouse instead.

Jon sent Ghost with her, ordering the direwolf to guard her door from now on whenever she was present and Nymeria wasn't, a job that Ghost took to readily enough, huffing in amusement to himself at the human mating rituals. Direwolves had it so much simpler, not, mind you, that Ghost had found a lifemate of his own just yet. The quiet stalker made a mental note to look into that issue when they returned to the home range, and followed the honeysuckle smelling female down one into the large wooden thing.

Behind them Garth shook his head. "Now she's an interesting one isn't she? I'd heard tales of Margaery, and I know roses are supposed to have thorns one and all. But they aren't supposed to latch onto and follow you no matter

where you go."

"No woman likes to have her investment get away from her my Lord." Arya said, laughing and following the other older woman, while Eddric and Jon just shared a look shaking their heads before pointedly ignoring that comment.

OOOOOOO

Since the Vale lords had lost their last bits of intransigence against the way Ranma and Edd did things and they had at last gotten rid of the last of the carts along with the wounded, they had made a much better time. Even so, this area of the North was dense woodland and scattered rocky plains with the occasional cleared farm or holdfast scattered seemingly at random. There were a few trails here and there, but nothing anyone in their right mind would call a road, which made marching across it difficult at the best of times.

Winter was not the best of times. There was a reason, Ranma reflected, that most armies in medieval times did not move during winter. It was the next best thing to a frozen hell. Keeping warm was a trial, keeping the army moving was a trial, staving off sickness, frostbite and keeping your horse warm, all of these were trials which slowed the army's march to a crawl. Even Ranma's northern troops had problems, though frostbite and keeping the horses warm were not among them.

But against the White Walkers humanity could not afford to bivouac somewhere safe until winter was over. Especially given how long winter could last in this weird world.

Because of the terrain the Army column had slowly begun to get strung out. Howland watched their back trail while the Wull and his men, used to moving in these conditions to a degree even the other northerners couldn't match, watched the flanks. The northern contingent under Edd continued to break trail for the rest of the Army, stamping down the snow when they had to, finding the best route forward, and generally making it easier for the Vale troops behind them.

They even chopped down wood for the nighttime fires which were the difference between life and death for the Army. It became so cold at night, that if your tent ran out of wood to burn on the brazier you were very unlikely to wake up the next day. Even during the march there were still cases of frostbite. No amount of organization or discipline about always covering up or making certain you wore your gloves at all times could hold up against the little mistakes that sometimes crept into the men.

And the northerners hadn't brought enough min-heaters, as Ranma called Bran's small iron heaters, to go around. Worse, they didn't work as long or as well with wood instead of coal. The Vale Lords, their sons and commanders got a few, but the majority of the men had to do without.

Since that first attack however they had only seen a scattering of wights. Those scattered sightings were dealt with by the scouts, all of whom had a few dragonglass arrows and knives. Only twice did the wights amass in large enough numbers to pose a threat, and both times Fenris and Ranma saw them coming.

The two of them also changed how they were acting, leaving Edd and the other lords to follow Ranma's orders with the army the two of them went out day by day, scouring the woods around the army well beyond even the scouts. Because of that, the White Walkers were unable to ambush the army, and began to lose numbers in small penny packets themselves, both wights and their masters.

At night while Ranma rested Fenris would use his mental domination to control nearby wolf packs and send them searching for wights or White Walkers. They ambushed them several times, though the wolves of course paid for this, except for the times when Fenris was able to home in on them before the battle began. The scouts still lost men, and occasionally a trap caught portions of the army, but the losses so far were under control.

At times instead of attacking the main army, the White Walkers attempted to ambush Ranma and Fenris. It didn't work, costing them nearly fifty warriors in one battle. But that, and the fact they saw so few wights gave Ranma a clue as to how the next battle would go. When they broke out of the wildlands southwest of Hornwood's main holdings, Ranma called Edd aside.

As the hustle and bustle of the army making camp went on around them, Ranma confided his plans with Edd. "The White Walkers are cuing in on me." He said without preamble. "They're learning, and they know I am a primary target, they've tried several times over the past few weeks to attack Fenris and I in isolation, and I don't see that changing anytime soon."

Edd nodded, turning from where he had just rolled out his bedroll on the floor of the tent the two of them shared.

There weren't enough small camp beds to go around, and both young men had volunteered theirs for some of the older Vale lords who needed the extra comfort. "It makes sense, if they can communicate over distances the same way they spread their influence, if I was them I'd damn make you my primary target."

"Agreed. I think they'll try for another battle, but it will be a night battle instead of a daytime one. Something that can allow them to cause a lot of chaos and confusion, and take advantage of the fact Fenris or I are often outside the camp, isolated."

"Even after the drubbing they took last time when they tried to attack the army when it was in encamped?" Edd asked skeptically. "I'd think they'd try to attack us while we're on the move."

"No, they know they've got a big advantage at night over our troops, they'll think that'll allow them to overwhelm the guard, and once the perimeter breaks, chaos and confusion will do some of their work for them, especially if I can be 'caught' outside the camp. But that's given me an idea. Do you remember me talking about that giant crystal that the White Walker mages were using as some kind of focus?"

"I remember, almost as big as a man and twice as fat, made of something that looked like blue quartz? I remember its effect much better though, if we'd had to fight all of the wights in that army..." Edd shuddered a little. "I don't think more than one in forty of our men would've gotten out of that alive. But still, why would they change back to open combat rather than continuing their hit-and-run tactics?"

"Because they're losing troops too." Ranma said grimly. "The wights aren't smart enough to be used on hit-and-run tactics, they're barely up to ambushing regular patrols, and even there they aren't a big threat. I know they are still taking a toll, and morale sinks like a stone every time they appear, but they aren't going to stop us like that."

"The White Walkers are good enough to be used in that fashion, and their assaults, when they get past Fenris and I, are bad, but I think they're susceptible to casualties. We've not seen any of them for five days, and they weren't able to bring up reinforcements in that army outside Winterfell."

Edd nodded. "So what is your plan?"

"Tonight I'm going to switch up with Fenris." Ranma said. "I'm going to keep doing that until we reach Hornwood. Hopefully that change will draw the wights and their masters in where we can crush them on our defense. I don't want to face another army of the size they had attacking Winterfell in the open field." Ranma finished feelingly.

"You're going to try to draw them into attack you personally?"

"Lord Royce the others have absorbed enough about how I do things I think, and really once the battle actually begins they're decent enough commanders. But I don't think I'll be able to draw in all of the White Walkers, and damn sure not enough of the wights. That leaves me to what I wanted to talk to you about."

Edd cocked his head thoughtfully staring at Ranma then out the tent flaps into the darkening night, and when he spoke it was a flat statement rather than a question. "You want me to hunt up that crystal. You think it has to be nearby?"

"I think that distance **really** effects how much influence they can bring to bear, we saw that with the army attacking Winterfell." Ranma said with a shrug. "I won't deny that they've probably scrounged up several thousand new corpses, but I'm betting that most of their numbers come from older corpses looted from old battlefields. So if we take out that crystal, we shut down another White Walker army, or at least remove a lot of their numbers."

"Their mages will be with the Crystal." Edd said, another simple statement of fact. "Those giant spider things, possibly some bodyguards. Any direct magic?"

"None that I saw, though they can definitely do something with the temperature around them, you might have to be careful about that. And remember, those arrows of theirs are deadly if they stick you with enough of them." Even Ranma had been weakened badly for a few days after the first battle of Winterfell, and Edd didn't have the excess ki he did.

Ranma looked at his friend, wondering if he was sentencing Edd to die, but knowing that if he wanted to bring the White Walkers into a decisive battle, he had to offer them an irresistible carrot. That was himself, and the army without him or Fenris with it. That meant that Edd had to be the one to hunt up the crystal.

"How am I going to find that Crystal?" Edd asked.

"Fenris and the wolves. Fenris can control the local wolf packs but instead of attacking they'll search for the crystal. Even White Walkers have trouble spotting them moving around at night."

Edd looked off into the distance again then nodded slowly. "All right then, it sounds like we have a plan."

Needless to say the Vale lords were not very happy about their Army being offered as half of the bait for this trap. That was until Ranma described how they were going to bait the trap. While they wouldn't be throwing up any of the normal fortifications they did every night, there would be fortifications deeper into the camp hidden by the bulk of the tents and horses. With that bit of surprise and a few other surprises thrown in, they would seem an easy target without actually being one

They were still two days away from breaking out of this piece of woodland when the attacks stepped up as Ranma had feared. Wights were seen once again, and several normal patrols both during the day and night were lost, their men killed, their dragonglass weapons destroyed and ground to powder. Ranma and Fenris in turn trapped and wiped out a White Walker force of twenty. This convinced the Vale lords that Ranma's plan had merit, and they withdrew their objections.

Several days after that battle they reached the spot Ranma had thought they were heading towards: the ruins of a small keep, which had a single outer wall still standing, the ground of the keep itself creating a large mound of uneven stone directly next to the wall. This mound and the wall centered one corner of the camp's defenses.

More importantly, there was a riverbed nearby that made for a Reedy ditch, covering another portion of the camp. The riverbed was filled with stakes, but there was no bulwark added to it back it up, and other than posting more than the average number of guards on top of the mound of stones that marked the keep there weren't any defenses there either.

Unless one could look deeper into the camp, where they would notice that the Northerners, who normally were camped in small lots scattered throughout the camp in order to be able to bolster the defenses quickly had concentrated right behind the mound. Lord Royce's men also backed up the empty riverbed, with the archers of House Elesham well back from the guards on the riverbed directly behind tents set up touching one another in a long u-shape. They were the most disciplined among the Vale troops, with House Templeton coming a close second.

That House however had its men spread throughout the defensive perimeter, not on it, but backing it up in several places. They would work as small reserve forces in the battle to come, along with the mountain clan troops.

After taking one final look around the camp, Ranma nodded over to Edd, who nodded back before heading out with the patrol which he would ditch quickly, going to ground before full night hit. Once he did, he would have to wait for Fenris to find him then direct him where he needed to go. That would be the chanciest time, if Edd was spotted, the game was up. But the White Walkers weren't nearly as adept at ambushes during the day, and so long as he was well hidden behind snow and rock before night came, he would be fine.

He turned to Lord Royce nodded his head. Ranma had wanted to put Howland in charge, but that was politically impossible, and Ranma had merely named him to command the northern men, his own, the Stark archers and the Cerwyn/Tallhart spearmen. "You have control of the army my Lord, fight well."

The older man nodded grimly, clapping Ranma on the shoulder and Ranma nodded back before turning and running off, heading out into the woodland beyond the camp. Fenris was already gone, having left the army around midday.

Ranma patrolled around the camp for several turns of the glass watching as the moon rose higher and higher into the sky, frowning and wondering if he had been wrong. That maybe the White Walkers would be willing to continue trading troops as they had been.

*Or maybe they just aren't able to get a large enough force of wights in position. No, that makes no sense, we've been heading for this spot for more than a week, they had to know it was my target, and in that time they should've been able to concentrate their forces.*

As the moon above the forest disappeared behind a heavy cloud cover, Ranma found out he was correct. Arrows suddenly flew at him from out of the darkness all around him and eyes which had been closed or narrowed into slits so that the light in them could not be seen opened.

Ranma dodged those first few arrows more by luck than anything else, his night vision was good but not up to spotting arrows in the dark with no moonlight. Even so he was able to take cover behind a log, a flung rock killing the only White Walker that could train on him from that position, taking the creature in the eye with enough force to fling

him back, his neck broken if his skull and eyeball hadn't.

Two warriors charged from both sides at Ranma while the archers continued to try to pin him down. Ranma waited until they were right on him, then whipped out Ice from over his shoulder, cutting down one before jumping up over the other's spear thrust, grabbing his head in passing, before landing and twisting him around to use him as a shield against several arrows from the others. The White Walker screamed and shrieked in his own tongue for a moment then Ranma snapped his neck, the arrows not doing anything against him.

"Interestin', these bastards really are immune to their own weapons. I wonder if that kind of thing can be overcome with numbers. Though it's doubtful seeing as this guy looks like a pincushion," Ranma muttered, tossing the body aside and leaping for nearby tree. He trusted his lizard lion armor, but it had really taken a pounding in the second battle of Winterfell, and Ranma had no wish to join his former shield in looking more like a hedgehog than a human.

The White Walkers numbered around ninety, gathered in from practically every hunting party or skirmishing group which heard the call from Hornwood. From down deep into House Manderly lands or up into the mountains they came for this assault. Yet despite their numbers they were cautious as they approached the area where Ranma had gone to ground, murmuring to one another in their harsh, grating language. What they were saying Ranma couldn't tell, but they obviously realized the ambush had already gone awry. *Boys, ya don't know the half of it.*

Several of them dropped bows and pulled out swords, moving forward cautiously to where Ranma was hiding. Behind them came six others, and as the four in front White Walkers charged over the small stump, the ones with bows raced forward to either side, peppering the area where Ranma should've been with arrows.

But he wasn't there. Ice was, the point of which had been sticking up out of the position, which was why they had thought he was still there. But not Ranma.

For a moment that they all shouted and argued, then turned as one as shrieks abounded from further away. Ranma dropped out of the treetops, slamming into a group of White Walker archers, kicking and punching. He sent several of them flying away their bodies broken before being forced to dive for more cover from other White Walkers, who had turned quickly and fired without any hesitation into their fellows.

Ranma took to the treetops again, only to stop as several of the White Walkers pointed up at him. Their night vision was almost as good as cats, and they reacted quickly to the fact that he could travel the treetops, far faster than humans would've been able to. *Damnit but they adapt quickly!*

With that thought Ranma threw himself out of the tree, having to use his hands to block several arrows coming at him in midair. But his mastery of the aerial style stood him in good stead as always, allowing him to change his direction quickly enough to get by them, then using a slim tree trunk to pull himself into a different direction, going to ground with a roll that surprised the few archers that could still accurately train on him. *This is going to be tougher than I hoped.*

OOOOOO

While the force of White Walkers tried to pin Ranma down the wights they had assembled attacked the Army coming at it from two directions. Just as Ranma had predicted, they didn't try to attack the stronger seeming earthworks to the east and west of the camp, knowing that they would've faced greater casualties that way.

Instead, they came at the bivouacked army over the hump or stone from the old keep and through the riverbed. The suddenness of the attack took the defenders aback, allowing the wight's archers to kill several dozen of the men on watch, but their deaths brought the rest of the army the warning it needed.

Under Howland the men of the North quickly readied themselves, half of their number having simply been waiting in their tents for the call up. They rushed to their position at the base of the small mound of stone the spearmen to the fore the archers behind them and Howland's men spreading out to either side, covering the area near the end of the wall and the undefended flank.

The horde of undead clambered down the hill towards them, met by a hail of arrows. But that didn't slow them, and they were thousands strong. Much like the horde up in Winterfell these wights came in all states of decay, ages and gender, and more than one man blanched at seeing women or teens among them.

Elsewhere the defenders began to stir. The Valemens under Lord Tollett and Rothermont rushed to attack the horde coming down the small hill with their arrows from all directions, fire arrows and dragonglass, killing the wights in their hundreds. The fires did better than the dragonglass here, breaking up the assault so that when it rammed into the



modified pike line, they didn't break through that first line of defenders.

"Hold!" shouted Howland, his voice even coarser sounding than normal. "Hold!"

Elsewhere, the wights had pushed their way through the riverbed and up into the camp, only to run into the surprise that Ranma and Lord Royce had designed. Facing the riverbed was several dozen tents set in a half circle around it. These had been placed in such a way to cover small four foot tall bulwarks complete with a fighting step made of the hard earth behind them and logs from nearby trees.

This allowed the men to have a reach advantage, which the spearmen and swordsmen used ruthlessly. The archers on this flank too began to have a field day, but most of their arrows were fire arrows rather than dragonglass. Thanks to the fires they caused this attack became even more broken than the one of the other flank.

Nonetheless, the sheer weight of numbers was telling, and none of the fires survived for long, snuffed out by snow and a cold that began to drag at the men's bodies and even their minds. More and more of the rest of defenders facing the normal earthworks to either flank of the camp were called in, and casualties began to mount quickly.

The heavy armor and reach of the spears allowed the Northerners to keep their losses down, but it was their discipline that truly allowed them to hold the line, as well as the depth of their line. The Vale men however were being pressed and pressed hard despite having more numbers and more archers.

Lord Royce observed all this from a small makeshift platform made of a large log cut flat that allowed him a few extra feet in height, enough to see the battle from the thousands of torches and fires scattered everywhere. He shook his head grimly, turning to Ser Templeton. "Signal your men, pull at least two companies back from backing up the rest of the earthworks. My men need more aid."

"Done." said the Head of the powerful Knightly House replied grimly.

Lord Royce quickly turned away from him, nodding to another man. "Pull back a few hundred of your own, but make sure they're all armed with dragonglass daggers then send them to reinforce the Northerners. They're holding now, but Howland's men on the east might soon find themselves pressed hard.

Overall the battle seemed to be at a stalemate, but all the lords knew that would only last until the White Walkers decided to switch some of their wights from attacking the two obvious weaknesses in their defenses. Once they did, the defenders would lose the ability to concentrate their numbers, and would quickly be overwhelmed.

Unfortunately the White Walkers were actually quite quick at such things, as Ranma had discovered. And the nature of their next gambit also came as a nasty surprise. A shout from the eastern edge of camp when up, more of a scream than a shout really. "Spiders! Giant spiders!"

Lord Royce quickly turned in that direction, staring through the torch lit night to see several spiders like Ranma had described facing up in the second battle of Winterfell. Though he didn't know it these spiders were not nearly as large as the ones that had been sent against the Last Hearth, but nor were they as impromptu looking as the ones Ranma had faced up at Winterfell. They lacked the metal portions of their construction and were small, only about twelve feet high, thus able to move through the woodlands without being seen or causing much commotion even during the day. But there were dozens of them, and they raced towards the ditches facing them with disturbing speed.

He turned to the Lord who commanded that section of the camp, Lord Redfort, ordering briskly "fire arrows! Order your archers to concentrate their fire arrows on those things! Don't let them pass the ditch!"

The man nodded warily and moved off to take personal command of his troops reluctantly, but his men didn't need to be told. They had already begun to rain fire down on the creatures, but they weren't having much success in actually downing them. The spiders hit the ditch, smashing aside several of the stakes set into it, before facing dragonglass armed spearmen. Though spread out, the spearmen were able to halt the advance of the spiders. Spiders didn't have any weapons they could use against someone facing them from above like that.

But the damage was done. Where the spiders died, the snow and ice that made them started to fill in the ditch. This allowed the wights amassed behind them road into the defenders. And worse was waiting, high up in the nighttime air, its presence an unseen shadow.

"Ordering the reserves," Lord Royce bellowed gesturing at another Lord who nodded and raced off. But that was it, almost all of their forces were committed now, either at the two prepared defensive zones, or at the new breakthrough.

Lord Royce realized this was it if they could hold, then maybe they could win this battle. But it all depended not on them, but on Edd, Fenris, and Ranma's ability to keep the White Walkers themselves from joining the battle. He spared a brief moment to send a prayer their way before hopping down from his vantage and rallying his bodyguard. "Time to get it stuck in boys, who's with me?!"

OOOOOO

Though almost buried underneath the snow in his little hideaway Edd could still hear the battle going on at least a league away through the trees. Sound carried on a night like this, and the trees didn't so much muffle as amplify the sounds of battle. *I hope this works, it sounds like it's getting close over there.*

He stayed as still as he could, slowly starting to lose feeling in some of his toes and his fingers because of the cold. But just as he was wondering if Fenris had somehow have been intercepted, he heard a faint growl, and something began to dig him out from his little hideaway.

Pushing himself out of the snow quickly, Edd came face to snout with Fenris, something that no sane person would enjoy. But Edd had no fear of Fenris and he was all business as he whispered, "Did you find it?"

Fenris nodded huffing slightly in response, and Edd breathed a sigh of relief. "Lead me to them. Then it'll be up to you to decide what you should do, join me in the attack on them, or join the rest of the battle. Do you know how Ranma's doing?"

Fenris shrugged his shoulders in a very odd move for a direwolf, then pulled at Edd's sleeve again, motioning him to follow. Edd followed Fenris for what seemed like hours through the woods, but was only a bare half turn of the moon hidden high above them, the two of them moving quickly and silently through the woods.

Suddenly Fenris stopped, whipping his head around to block Edd's progress through the hard-packed snow. From there they moved forward much slower, until over the next slight rise in the ground Edd finally spotted what had caused Fenris to stop. It was a slight dip in the ground on the other side, and therein lay the crystal he was seeking. It was surrounded by three White Walkers mages and four guards. *More than I'd hoped but less than I figured. If I can get close, I think I can take them.*

The warrior types seemed to be alert at their posts though, which wasn't so good. Edd turned to look at Fenris, the direwolf's breath wafting into his face. At any other moment he would've made a joke about it, but not right now.

Before he could speak however, Fenris twitched his head, looking back towards the battle and letting loose a very low whine. "It's that bad?" Edd asked quietly, so quietly you couldn't have heard him even if you were standing within inches of his face.

But the direwolf heard, and again nodded his head. Indeed, that moment had been the one where the spiders had appeared, with the second wave of attackers smashing into the eastern defenses. Several wolves hidden nearby had seen it, and set up a howl, which none of the army could hear over the din of battle but which carried easily to Fenris.

"No time for subtlety then," Edd grunted standing up and charging from their hiding place. "The Sun of Winter!"

For a moment his sudden assaults took even Fenris by surprise, but then the direwolf howled and charged with him.

Despite their element of surprise, the first two warriors on guard turned to them quickly, moving as one to engage Edd. Edd locked their blades together with his spear, forcing them backwards and to one side through sheer strength, while Fenris raced on. Two more turned to engage Edd, but Edd killed one of his opponents with a neat lunge before coming back to block their blades, knocking one off balance and then catching him with a kick to the head that snapped his neck.

But they hadn't seen all the defenders the mages had. Four other warriors quickly made themselves known, bursting out of the trees around them where they had been hiding so well even Fenris hadn't smelled them. These four were armed with spears, and they engaged the direwolf forcing him back and further back, this strange vine-like steel whips around their weapons smacking out forcing Fenris to dodge and retreat, unable to close with the mages.

The mages quickly turned their attention on their attackers. Elsewhere in the battle this caused a brief moment of hesitation among the wights, or at least those wights that were of more ancient stock. Their commands faltered for a brief moment, before starting up once more.

In that small clearing however the mages made their power felt directly. Stalactites of ice appeared from the snow covering the ground, trying to impale both direwolf and man. Fenris was able to dodge easily, but Edd, locked with the

two White Walkers in close combat was nearly hit.

He was forced to dodge at the last moment to one side and one of the White Walkers nearly skewered him while he was off balance, the warrior's ice blade skittering off his gorget with punishing force but not penetrating. His return thrust however caught the White Walker in the center, of his chest plate, punching through easily.

The last warrior pressed Edd hard, pushing his spear out of position before Edd could recover from his thrust. But Edd let go of his spear with one hand, punching out hard and catching the warrior on the jaw. A normal human wouldn't have been able to put much power into that kind of a punch against a White Walker to matter.

But Edd was a Wolfsworn, not the strongest of them, but he was strong enough. The White Walker screamed and flew backwards, it's jaw shattered, and it's odd yellow blood dribbling from gums cut by splinter's of its teeth. Before it could gather itself Edd had come back, twirling his spear around like a staff, the end slamming with bone-crushing force into the White Walker's skull.

With Fenris fully occupied with the four spear wielders, Edd quickly dodged still more stalactites, moving toward the three mages purposefully. One of them was taller than the others and was dressed more like a warrior than a mage, black steel armor rather than the flowing steel cloaks that the mages wore. He turned away from the crystal quickly, bringing out a sword that was slightly larger than the normal White Walker blade as well. He seems to sneer at Edd, and then glided forward with the preternatural speed of his kind.

Edd engaged him, knocking his sword to one side and trying to go for a quick kill, but the warrior recovered quickly, bringing his sword around faster than any of the others had moved. Edd was forced to dodge way, and the two circled one another, dragonglass against whatever fell amalgamation of ice and steel made the White Walker blades.

Despite Edd's reach advantage the White Walker was faster and a deadly swordsman besides, far better than the others had been. Edd winced as his cauldron received a cut, feeling the strange ice-deadness that the White Walkers weapons could cause seeping into his system for a moment before disappearing. He gritted his teeth and fought on, bringing the butt of his spear around almost catching the White Walker before he could move back. But then his sword flashed, and Edd's spear was cut into.

But that didn't dissuade Edd. Instead he came on, using the blunt end as a makeshift club, changing his grip on the other to use it like a short stabbing spear instead.

By this time Fenris had killed three of his four opponents, but he was limping. One of the men had caught him on the front paw, and the weird metal whip from another spear had raked his side despite his ki strengthening his fur. All three were dead however, forcing the last two mages to turn their attention entirely to Fenris rather than Edd or the main battle. Stalactites and even faster spears of ice shot up from the ground, trying to aid the last warrior facing Fenris.

Just like before this caused a loll in the battle though this time it lasted long enough to be noticed. Lord Royce was quick to take advantage of it, and at the same time Ranma had finished with the rest of the White Walker warriors, racing back to take part in the battle, crashing into the attackers attacking Lord Royce's men by the riverbed.

The White Walker facing Edd quickly compensated for his new style, smashing the club to flinders with one blow, before dodging Edd's spear. His sword then came back slicing into Edd's shoulder before Edd could dodge in turn.

He grimaced, feeling the cold of the weapons of the White Walkers slowly seeping into his system. But he was a Wolfsworn, unlike anyone else he and his brethren more life energy than the White Walker's weapons could suck away.

Another slice to his thigh made Edd realize something however. *I can't beat him. Not with my spear like it is, and not with me wounded already. Not without taking a risk...*

So thinking Edd pushed hard when next he locked his short spear against the White Walker's sword pushing the man off-balance. Then he stepped back quickly, grabbing his belt and the dragonglass dagger there. As he had expected, the White Walker didn't give him a chance to pull it out. He recovered from being off balance quickly, and thrust hard.

Edd dodged just enough for the blow to not be an immediately killing one, letting it penetrate his side rather than his chest full on. He grimaced, but his free hand rose from the hilt of his dragonglass dagger. Quick as a striking snake that hand lashed out, grabbing the White Walkers hand, holding him in place. The White Walker had only a moment to realize that he was dead, before Edd brought his spear up, thrusting it into the thing's chest.

Edd then collapsed to his knees, gasping as he wrenched the warrior's blade out of his side, breathing in deeply and trying to force the cold out of his body with willpower alone. It didn't work very well.

He looked up as Fenris moved to his side, wining a little. Behind the wolf the bodies of the mages and the last spear-wielding warrior was scattered around, their yellow blood splattering the snow and ground, but strangely not steaming. The direwolf pressed into Edd's shoulder gently, motioning with his head over to the crystal.

Fenris' ki was somewhat depleted at the moment, and he remembered what Ranma's armor had looked like after he was near a crystal when it exploded. The direwolf had no wish to see what would happen to him ki strengthening technique or no if he was that close to the crystal when it blew.

Realizing what Fenris was trying to tell him, Edd groaned, but threw one of his arms over the direwolf's neck. "Just get me away from the fucking thing."

Complying quickly Fenris dragged Edd about twenty feet before stopping, placing his bulk between Edd and the crystal. Still propping himself up Edd reared back holding his short spear. He faltered for a moment, his free hand fisting in Fenris' fur to hold him upright as the cold of the last warrior's blade began to eat at his vitality, combined with the feel of the cold night creeping into the openings in his armor and clothing.

He stood there for a moment, then gathered himself and hurled his spear forward. "The Sun of Winter!"

The spear flew straight and true, the dragonglass tip impacting the crystal dead on. Unlike when Ranma used ice however, the crystal didn't explode. Rather it simply shattered, fragments going everywhere, but not with concussive force.

Edd saw nothing of this having slumped against Fenris' side in a dead faint. The direwolf took a brief moment to stare hard at the crystal, watching as the light which had imbued it went out between one blink and the next. Then he began to howl, at the same time opening up his mental connection to his bonded.

OOOOOOO

Ranma had gained the hidden palisade, standing on top of it with Ice hacking and slashing while Lord Royce and a few others stood on either side. Lord Royce's rune-encrusted weapon did almost as well as Ice against the wights, something the older man was thankful for. Though it made Ranma wonder in an odd moment between swings, if Royce should've brought along all of the runic weapons that his family was supposed to have in their vaults.

Just as quickly as he had gained the outer earthworks however, Ranma was forced to defend them against an attack from above. An undead dragon flew out of the sky, it's ice breath attack impacting one of the weakened areas of the southern flank, killing dozens of men and breaking the morale of those who remained.

Men began to run, throwing down their weapons and fleeing from the horror of fighting wights and the undead dragon, but before the rout could become total Ranma was there. "Direwolf's Claws!"

The vorpal blades sliced out, turning the undead dragon into so much slurry and Ranma stood there in the break, Ice whirling, cutting and slaying. "Rally to me, rally to me!"

Despite their best efforts however the battle was slowly turning against the defenders. There were just too many wights and if a human went down and wasn't stabbed with a Dragonglass dagger through the heart, he quickly rose and attacked his fellows. This had happened dozens of times that night and the morale of the Vale forces was close to breaking because of it and the sheer number of corpses coming at them.

Suddenly more than two-thirds of the wights shuddered in place, then collapsed. Seeing this Ranma howled his victory to the nighttime sky, joining his voice to practically every other soldier in the army. "Edd and Fenris did it!"

Then he heard Fenris's howl in the distance, and Ranma quickly turned to Lord Royce. "You're in charge here, I'll be back." With that Ranma raced off, hoping that that howl didn't mean that his friend had paid for his victory with his life.

OOOOOOO

The losses among the Vale army were heavy. Of the bare 10,000 or so Vale men that had taken part in this battle, fully a third were either dead or wounded. Worse, they just didn't have anyone to equal Merry and her helpers' ability to aid those badly injured. The best they could do was make them somewhat comfortable as they died. The numbers of dead would therefore go up over the next few days.

The Northerners had come through it relatively well. With the uneven terrain slowing the White Walkers attacking them down, the spear regiment had been able to withstand the constant pressing of the White Walkers, never breaking its line. They had lost 226 men, though half of those were wounded.

But despite the White Walkers concentrating what they saw as weaknesses in the defenses of the entire camp their flanks, particularly the section guarded by the wall for a portion of its length, had come under attack several times. Howland's men had paid a price for the victory, as had the Wull's. Of the men Howland had left the Neck with, he had barely a fourth remaining.

Sitting outside the tent housing Edd, Ranma shook his head at Howland. "You and your men have done enough my friend. I think we've destroyed the White Walker's presence in this area, and maybe even further North. You've done your part, take your men and head for home."

Howland gritted his teeth but nodded. Child mortality among the crannogmen was heavy, and the losses of so many men would be felt by every house in the Neck for decades to come. He had no choice if he was to retain enough hunters to keep the lizard lion population from growing but to retreat. "I am sorry we could not do more my Lord."

"More?" Ranma laughed, clapping the shorter man on both shoulders and shaking him lightly. "Howland, you just took part in two victories against the Great Enemy! Do you have any idea the numbers of wights they just through at us? I don't, they're still burning bodies, but the new ones, the ones they made from the former Bolton lands, number in the thousands! And that was a bare portion of the whole they through at us! Do not belittle yourself or your aid to this war my friend."

Howland stared into Ranma's face then nodded. "Thank you Ranma. May the Old Gods bless your way." With that he turned, heading off to find his men and begin the preparations to break camp.

Ranma leaned back on his camp chair set against the outside of Edd's tent, rubbing at his face wearily. The battle hadn't wearied him out so much as dealing with the dead and wounded, and organizing the pyres. Those were always emotionally exhausting for all concerned. "Lord Royce, how is morale among the men of the Vale?"

"The men are in shock your majesty." Royce answered bluntly. "The veterans are shocked by the sheer amount of carnage this one battle showed them, while the youngsters are appalled and afraid by the same. Fighting the White Walkers and wights is like fighting no human enemy. Wounds that would kill a man they just ignore and even hacked to pieces they simply come back! I saw at least four men go down when hands that had been cut off wights grabbed them around the ankles and pulled them down to make them easy meat for others. I thought we were prepared for this after that first clash, but the sheer scale of this battle and how many of them there were..."

"It **does** take some getting used to." Ranma said grimly. His lips twisted into a smirk but there was no humor in the expression. "I could wish we wouldn't have to. But this was only the second battle in this campaign my Lord. I have no information about where my wife is with the rest of the army, or what's going on at the Wall, but I fear the worst when it comes to the Wall. I mean to move on to Hornwood, then further north. Now tell me true, how many of you and your fellow lords have the stomach to come with me? I don't want men who will break, I want men who realize what they are facing and are willing to do what they must to beat back this enemy."

Lord Royce thought for a moment. "Lord Elesham and Lyn Corbray were both wounded in the battle. One had his leg amputated, the other took an arrow in the eye but lives. I would recommend that we send them and their men back with the wounded. That will leave us with somewhere a little over 6,000 men plus your own that'll give us something like six."

"How many able-bodied men will they have?"

"Around seven hundred or so."

"Not enough." Ranma said with a sharp shake of his head. "Which of your other lords was most shell-shocked by last night?"

Lord Royce didn't understand the word 'shell-shocked', but he understood the gist of it. "I think young Eustace Hunter and old Lord Redfort. One is feeling his mortality, the other was untried until this war began. I could wish his older brother had been sent to serve with us, but that was Old Eon's decision."

"Sent another 400 men back with the two of them, men of the young Lord's house I think. Have Lord Redfort transfer leadership of his men to you. After all," he smiled, and there was some humor in this one, "your houses will soon be joined in marriage anyway."

"So long as we survive this war, Your Majesty." Royce said with a barking laugh of his own. Then he looked at the tent behind Ranma. "Young Edd?"

"He'll pull through I got to him in time I think. But we might be leaving him at Hornwood. Until then, I've ordered the men to rig up palanquins for the wounded. We'll rest here for the rest of today and tomorrow, then march the day after."

With a nod Ranma dismissed the older man, leaning back in the tent chair and closing his eyes tiredly. They he turned to look at the tent. *You will pull through won't you, Edd? I don't want to become a liar, and I damn sure don't want to lose a friend. Pull through or I swear to the Old Gods I'm going to find a way to come after your ass in heaven or hell!*

OOOOOO

Surprisingly Kevan Lannister actually came out to meet the fleet which had anchored well out of range of Lannisport's defenses. He was a somewhat tall spare man, whose hair had obviously seen better days, quickly receding on his hairline due to recent worries.

As his people began to transfer the goods he had promised to the Royal Army from several barges Kevan asked Jon about his sons. "I realize that you hold two of my sons in Riverrun my Lord Hand, along with my cousin Daven. But my son Tyrek is still unaccounted for, he should've been with Cersei and Loras. Do you know aught of him?"

Jon and Margaery exchanged a glance, and Jon finally shrugged. "I'm afraid not my Lord. I was not with the Royal Army when they captured the Queen-Regent Cersei and her baseborn son. They didn't communicate any messages about any other special prisoners via raven did they?"

That last query was aimed at Margaery, who shook her head. "None of the ravens I've seen mentioned anything about another Lannister being captured, Jaime and Cersei were the only two in the army apparently. Jaime was sent to the Wall, though if he's arrived or can even reach it these days is beyond me. And Cersei... by all reports her mind broke when the truth about her oldest son's activities came out."

"What do you mean?" Kevan asked, his concern for his son derailed for a moment.

Margaery coughed delicately. Most of what she had heard about the Vile One did not come from ravens but from rumors and stories passed on by her grandmother's agents. Nevertheless, much of it was solid, and she knew for a fact that some bards in Highgarden were trying to compose a song about the fall of the false king. After exchanging a glance with Jon who nodded, Margaery replied telling Kevan about what had been found out about the Joffrey and how he had been executed for that and for kinslaying, which he had actually admitted to openly.

Kevan rubbed his eyes, frowning heavily. "I could wish I had some neutral confirmation of this, and yet, and yet it doesn't surprise me." *And I am going to stay silent about who Joffrey's father might be.* He thought grimly. *My family has suffered enough for their actions, I'll not drag our name through the mud even further.* "Yet that's still doesn't answer my question, where is Lancel?"

"My Lord, if he had been with the force out of King's Landing when the Royal Army captured Jaime and Cersei he would have been captured, and we would've heard of it. But there were two battles before that between the Lannister and forces, and Reach forces under my brother Loras. The king told us via raven that my brother had died." Margaery said, smiling sadly though calmly, having had time to grieve in Highgarden with her mother and grandmother after that news had reached them. "It's possible he might have escaped there, and simply gone to ground, or..."

"Or he's dead." Kevan said harshly, turning and glaring out to sea. "My son dead in an unnoticed, unmarked grave. Because of the perfidy of my niece and nephew, because of my nephew and his idiocy!"

Jon looked at the man, and decided that he had suffered enough. "My Lord, if you have parchment and ink on you, let me write out a message. I will fix the Royal seal to it, and I will send it to Riverrun." Further, Jon would add something that would tell his sister that it was definitely coming from him, some small secret that only family could've known.

"For your aid in supplying the army my Lord, I will order my sister to release one of your son's. It will still be some months before he can arrive at the Rock of course, but he will be released. Further, I will agree now to also have Sansa release your other son in five years' time. Daven will be released five years after that, unless he agrees to a deal in the future." Daven, Jon new could be sent north to serve with the Royal Army for a time, though he didn't know for certain just yet under what capacity.

"I thank you for that my Lord Hand." Kevan said bowing his head in thanks. "And for what it is worth, I was against this whole war in the first place. My brother could never really understand how any other lord could think differently than he himself, and that always colored his actions when dealing with other lords. The initial accusations against your father should never have gone as far as they did."

"On that we will agree my Lord," Jon said coldly. "My brother has said occasionally that the only true victors in war are the carrion birds. We might have won, but we paid for it in blood, and we may yet lose another war, costing not just the North but all humanity dear."

Kevan looked at him hard in the face then nodded not commenting on whether or not he believed that there was some threat beyond the Wall. He wasn't certain, and he never spoke up when he wasn't certain. "Then I wish you good luck my Lord." With that Kevan turned, and crossed the plank back over onto his own ship. Moments later, a clerk came out with the writing implements Jon had asked for, and he sat down on a crate and wrote out the message he wanted.

Margaery moved over to him quietly. "Don't you think you're being up bit precipitous?"

"Not really," Jon said with a faint smile. "Or are you worried he might act up once he has his sons?"

"His sons don't bother me, for all reports neither of them exactly covered themselves with glory, true?"

Jon nodded, that was very true indeed. Neither of the two youths had impressed anyone with their general intelligence let alone their martial ability. Margaery went on quickly. "No, I'm speaking about whether or not it will embolden him, make him think you're soft?"

"I don't think we have to worry about it. For one thing, I asked your grandmother to start investing more heavily in spies in Lannisport, which is the only remaining avenue of power for the Lannisters. Yes, the Rock is impressive, and their lands could raise a smallish force, but without the Golden Tooth it's the ports that can keep them rich. And for another, we'll release the younger brother first, which would mean we still hold his heir under our thumb for another five year." Jon didn't mention how most of those ideas had come from Alayaya and Daenerys who understood spying and commerce to a degree he couldn't match.

"A shrewd move." Margaery murmured. "Resentment of past wrongs can fester my lord, and while Kevan is a reasonable man who is to say the next lord of the Rock or the lord after that will be as reasonable? Best to keep an eye on them indeed, and to be ready to slap them down again."

"Of that you may be certain." Jon said with a faint smile. "Hence why House Tully controls the Golden Tooth directly."

To one side Garth and a few of the others had been checking over the goods being brought onto the ships, communicating with the other ships via small white flags, white for good, black for good that hadn't passed inspection. So far Garth hadn't seen a single black flag, and eventually he nodded over at Jon.

Jon nodded back, and turned to Margaery. "You know," he said rather whimsically, "This was the point I thought I'd need your diplomatic skills for, and you were definitely a help with Kevan, but we are going into a war zone from now on. The Iron Islands aren't exactly peaceful at the moment, the storms and seas are going to get much rougher, and that doesn't even consider what we might face on Bear Island or in the Bay of ice if we're very unlucky. You don't have to come with us Margaery."

He looked away blushing slightly. "I should not have to say that I care for your welfare, and would wish you safely home rather than seeing you risk yourself like some silly maiden out of a fairytale."

While he hadn't inherited much of his father's stern expression or cold nature, he had unfortunately gotten some of his father's inability to get himself across me emotionally, but thankfully Margaery was able to discern what he was really saying. She looked at him, then leaned up and kissed his cheek, smiling faintly. Jon kept a very neat trimmed goatee, which made him look somewhat more dashing and simply older than Ranma which she rather liked, though she had never enjoyed the full wild beards that so many men thought defined how manly they were. Jon was more than manly enough without such affectations. "Your sweet, but stupid. I have come this far, I'm going all the way."

Jon frowned, then sighed and turned to the captain of the ship, ordering him to weigh anchor.

OOOOOO

Several days after Ranma's victory against the second White Walker horde Daenerys and her small force had stopped their progress along the White Knife. Like Lord Manderly had said, the skate and wind driven river barges

Bran had developed were extremely fast. They moved as far in a single day upriver as a barge could have in two down river.

They were huge though, the normal ice barges were twice as large as normal river barges. They needed to be to house both goods and the oxen that powered the wipers which pushed the barge's sails, powering the barge forward. Daenerys' barge was even larger, and had two extra oxen on the wheels to power it forward at the same speed as its fellows.

Daenerys stared at Shireen Baratheon, who would be set ashore today to head to Winterfell. Daenerys had come to somewhat approve of the younger girl, there did seem to be some intelligence under that meek exterior. But frankly she had not responded well to Daenerys or even Merry's attempt to bring her out of her timidity. There were flashes like in that meeting with her after Merry had arrived by Maidenpool, but not enough.

*I hope that Eddard and Catelyn will have better luck than we did, hopefully she will be able to look past Ranna's marriage to me and remember the friendship between their houses. After all, they've done such a magnificent job with all of their children already, what is one more ward to that?*

In command of Shireen's defenders went Lord Blackwood's fourth son Hoster who seemed the most susceptible to colds among the Riverlands contingent, and who had come with them originally as second in command of the archers. He also took Cley Cerwyn with him, intent on returning the young page home.

But not, Lady Cerwyn would be pleased to find, young Bess. She had been sent to Riverrun after Lord Darry's attempted betrayal, and remained there still. The infatuation between the two of them had been based more on friendship with Arya than any real feelings between the two of them, and Cley and she had both been happy to part as merely friends.

"You will like Winterfell," Daenerys said at last, smiling at the younger girl. "Trust me, the Starks are some of the nicest people you'll ever meet. Even Lord Stark is rather warm underneath that stone exterior of his."

Shireen nodded, but even now she looked away as she spoke to Daenerys. *Is that because of my family's past, or that Ranna and I defeated and killed her father? The first could be overcome, the second that might be dangerous down the line if we install her in Storm's End as Lady Baratheon.*

That was a thought that had often come to Daenerys since this journey began, but at present it was just a thought, something to make a note of in the future not right now. Right now, Shireen was not a threat, merely a young woman who had been torn this way and that by the vagaries of other people's ambitions and hates.

"My father, he spoke well of Lord Stark, one of few people he did. I, I hope that he is not as cold as he is reputed to be, but I've never heard anything about lady Catelyn that speaks against her."

"Exactly, just keep an open mind and learn from the two of them, and you will find Winterfell a welcoming place." Daenerys smiled again encouragingly then bid her farewell, watching as she descended the ramp and joined her honor guard and Cley.

Moments later, Daenerys turned aside, making for the large cargo hold that contained her dragons. Dacey and Meera stood at the entrance, having left her alone as she bid farewell to Shireen. Dacey nodded at her, reaching forward to grasp the queen's shoulder and squeezing it hard. The Mormont woman knew that while this mission was necessary, it was taking a toll on Daenerys.

Her pregnancy was entering its third month, and she was showing clearly now. But that, the awkwardness this added to her normal controlled movements and her odd mood swings was just part of the problem. The other half was that Merry wasn't with them. She and Daenerys had argued about it, but Merry had eventually made the queen realize Merry could do more good with the larger portion of the army and in White Harbor than marching with the smaller force Daenerys currently led, a force of a little under 3000 in comparison to the main army's 14,000.

Nor was she the only one of Daenerys' normal entourage missing now. Alayaya and her two protégés-cum-prisoners had remained in White Harbor as well, to help set up a spy network there. Or rather, to make the city a gathering place for the spy networks that Nymeria had access to and which Alayaya had already created in the course of the war.

In response Daenerys smiled wanly at Dacey and Meera then entered the cargo hold. Her two dragons raised their heads to her, and Daenerys smiled, moving forward to scratch their eye ridges and whisper softly to them.



A few days after bidding farewell to Shireen Dacey opened the door to the hold abruptly. Daenerys looked up from where she was helping Rhaegon pull off bits and pieces of his shed scales scowling angrily. "I thought I said to keep that door closed! Before their scales re-harden is when my little ones are most vulnerable to cold." Luckily Sunfyre hadn't molted at the same time as Rhaegon, but even so it was still a threat.

Dacey shrugged off her queen's ill-temper, knowing it was only partly because of concern for Rhaegon, with the other part of it being her pregnancy messing with her mind. *Old Gods save me from ever getting pregnant, how did my sisters put up with it?*

"You wanted to be told when we start to recognize markers, well I just saw some I recognize, we're nearly to the Long Lake. I'll give it another hour and a half or so before we reach it at this speed."

Daenerys stood up purposefully and nodded. "Get Greatjon, I want to talk to him immediately."

Moments later Daenerys, covered in her lizard lion armor and a heavy fur coat, cloak and gloves stood next to Greatjon on the prow of the barge. "The Long Lake will be frozen solid by this point just like the river," Greatjon said authoritatively. "We can follow it and the canal to get closer to the Last Hearth. Once we're out on the lake there isn't any way we can be ambushed but the canal itself, that might be a little tricky if the White Walkers have really attacked my home and have enough men to send out patrols."

"How likely is it that your home still holds out Greatjon?" Daenerys asked softly.

"Against any normal enemy, I'd say my men could hope hold out for years! We've always been careful about stocking food and kept strong watch out. Last Hearth isn't nearly as strong as Winterfell, but its strong enough and the walls are thick such that even the strongest of catapults won't break them." Greatjon said proudly.

"We also kept a lot of older weapons, dragonglass weapons that will serve my men well against the White Walkers. And Hother is a dangerously sneaky sort of man. He'll have come up with something to irritate any attackers, trust me." At his own words Greatjon guffawed, but there was a certain brittle quality to it. Lord Manderly had been explicit about what Ranma had faced at Winterfell, and if a horde of similar magnitude had attacked the Last Hearth, then his home might well of fallen long before this.

"Do not worry my Lord," Daenerys said smoothly. "Remember, Winterfell heard from them several times after the siege began and as you yourself said, your men were prepared and your minor nobles pulled back from their holdfasts to your castle quickly. That would give your uncle enough men to man the defenses."

Greatjon nodded, then asked "how far away do you think you should fly your dragons my lady?"

"You said that the canal will be a dangerous place so Sunfyre and I will remain with the rest of the army until we clear the head of the canal. After that we will make for the Last Hearth."

From her position nearby Dacey frowned. "I still don't like that idea. You'll be unsupported, and neither of your little ones have proven that they can stand up against regular archers, let alone the fell magics that are seemingly imbued in the arrows of the White Walkers."

"True, however, their flames have grown much stronger. Why did you think I had them practicing it every day while we were at sea? We can shoot fire down farther then they'll be able to shoot arrows up. Unless they can shoot them far beyond human range, and we haven't heard anything about that, then my little ones will show that fire can always melt the toughest ice." Daenerys smiled, and it wasn't a nice expression.

OOOOOO

Andrew Willowtree stared over the wall, shaking his head. The castle of Last Hearth was on its last legs, and though the words might have seemed funny given the wording his mind had come up with, this had not been an amusing series of events. Though the White Walkers have been unable to breach the defenses, they had come close several dozen times, and there were still thousands of wights out there.

They were running low on dragonglass arrows, and the last time they used the coal trap, it hadn't worked. The coal in the trap, which they had been able to renew twice astonishingly enough, simply had no more fuel to give. The wood piled on top of it burned somewhat, but not nearly long enough. Now was only a matter of time, and even now he could see more spiders, far more haphazard ones than the originals being slowly assembled by what could only be the mages among the White Walkers.

"We gave them a good run, but I think we're coming to the end." He said sadly, Looking over at Hother.

"What would you have us do?" Hother scoffed, spitting to one side. "Run for it? They'll run us to earth no matter where we go. Wights don't need to rest, don't need to sleep, don't need to eat or crap! No, best to stay and fight, least that way our end will be worth a bard's tale or two."

"I know that, I'm just wishing there was something we could do for the womenfolk and the children!" The younger man barked back angrily. "The women, they'll share our fate, but the children? The ones that are too young to be of use?"

Both men had seen more than one example of women and children among the wights sent against the walls, but there was a definite cut off, 12 maybe 13, young teenage years at any rate, were useful anything below that was not.

Suddenly one of the men nearby shouted at them "My Lords, I think you need to see this."

Both men turned back to look out from the gatehouse and immediately spotted what had caused the man to shout. Half the army out there was marching off, heading to the southwest from the looks of it. "What the?" The rest however continued to form up for an attack, including the spiders. "What do you think is going on?"

The older man grinned suddenly. "I think that our prayers to the Old Gods have been answered, I think my Lord has returned, and now we just have to hold."

OOOOOO

Daenerys and her forces did indeed pass across the Long Lake without incident, but the canal which carried them from there to the Last River where it moved through Umber land was another matter entirely. The canal itself, about thirty feet across was clear, but this area of the North was dominated by an offshoot of the Wolfswood. In places despite the area of the canal being cleared that woodland came close enough to the canal to give archers good cover for ambushes.

This was proven quickly a bare few hours after the first barges entered the canal. Arrows flew from those woods, impacting several of the men on guard on the lead barge. "Ambush!" Greatjon bellowed. "Archers to the fore, Meera, Dacey, get your scouts lazy carcasses out there now!"

The archers quickly grabbed up their weapons, but the shadows beneath the trees was such few of them could see anything to aim at. They fired blindly, and several of them died from the White Walker arrows that came their way in turn.

But they had given Meera and Dacey enough cover to get over the side of the dragon barge and head into the woods along with Meera's scouts, a force of fifty men who she had trained to her exacting standard since Riverrun. All of them were armed with dragonglass knives, though their arrows were not.

Dacey was the first to encounter the White Walkers. Her claymore, a Valyrian blade she like the other Wolfsworn had taken from the wreckage of the Golden Company which she had named Kodiak hacked towards two White Walkers who were attacking the lead barge. One of them died, his side sliced open despite his plate armor, while the other scrambled backwards, dropping his bow and grabbing at a longsword at his side.

That White Walker stabbed forward, his sword smaller and much quicker than Kodiak. But for all of that, Dacey was just as fast, bringing Kodiak back into a guard position which blocked the first blow before turning the second.

The third nearly caught Dacey as she stumbled over a root, but before the White Walker could recover, Dacey's flailing fist caught him in the knee. The White Walker screamed, falling sideways as his leg gave out, before a stab from Kodiak ended his screaming.

More screams abounded throughout the woodland then as Meera and the others, who had ambushed several White Walkers, were ambushed in turn by wights. Dacey charged through the woods towards the nearest sounds of combat, and found several scouts facing three times their number of wights, which had come out of the woods to surround them.

"Fall back, fall back to the barges!" She shouted, moving forward to hack at a few of the wights. Others turned their attention to her, easing the pressure on this group of scouts, and they moved back, several of them lighting up fire arrows and firing them into the wights all around them. The snow and ice piled up here and there and the frigid weather kept the fires from spreading for now, and wights began to die even as the men around Dacey continued to fall back.

"Over the sides and at them lads! If ya can't kill 'em, hack 'em apart! If you've got the dragonglass weapons, stab the

undead fuckers through the heart of their Old God's damned brain!" Greatjon bellowed, leaping from the barge out onto the edge of the canal and into the woods. The men of his house followed, as the archers, no longer under fire from the White Walkers, began to fire into the forest once again.

Greatjon hammered into a large force of wights armed with farm equipment, howling and laughing as he bellowed his warcry. "The Giant's Fury, the Giant's Fury has come for you, you soulless fuckers! HAHAAAA!"

His Valyrian greatsword hacked and slashed to either side, as light in his hand as a longsword, sending the hacked bodies of wights this way and that. The sheer power of his assault and his own bellowing fury brought more wights down on him, giving the archers behind him cover fire.

While Greatjon and the others secured the area around the stalled barges, Daenerys closed her eyes, and then sent Sunfyre out into the air. As usual the takeoff was rather awkward but when Sunfyre was in the air he regained his kind's normal grace.

For a moment Daenerys was tempted to send Sunfyre down against the attackers all around them, but decided against it. *They are too close to my own men, I can't take the risk.* So instead Sunfyre began to circle the area, looking for any groups of wights or their masters to attack before they could come forward. He spotted some of them, and at the first sight of a White Walker Daenerys nearly lost control of their link thanks to the strength of the emotions they evoked in him.

*Rage, wrongness, vile, ancient evil, does not belong, does not belong!* While neither dragon could communicate with words, Daenerys had become very good at putting words to the emotions she felt through their link, and that was as close as she could get to explaining what Sunfyre felt at that moment.

Sunfyre dove, flame already boiling out of his mouth as the normally placid dragon attacked without being ordered to. His flame, far stronger and longer ranged than it had been in the past smashed down, igniting the White Walkers and several trees around them turning the snow and ice in the area to steam in a brief second. The White Walkers didn't even have time to scream before they were immolated, and Sunfyre pulled out of his dive, his voice raised into a scream of victory.

Despite her surprise, Daenerys got over her shock at Sunfyre's response to the things from the far North and quickly took command of the link once more, overriding Sunfyre's mind, which was trying to force the dragon down again to hunt more of them, sending a burst of deep love and approval through their link as well as orders. *You'll find more of those things where I direct you dear one, don't worry. Go east, fly east, and you will see.*

Rhaegon might have fought her despite his love for her at that point, being denied the kills in the area around them just then, but Sunfyre did not. Sunfyre turned obediently away leaving Greatjon and his men to face the wights, who had just lost the last bit of White Walker support they had as the dragon flew on.

It took a turn of the glass, or perhaps a little longer before Daenerys, gazing through Sunfyre's eyes, saw the Last Hearth. More importantly she saw it was under attack. Several giant things like giant spiders but not quite, they looked like ice and metal combined into a spider shape were attacking the castle, with several dozen White Walkers on their backs.

Several of them had reached the outer parapet of the castle and now an army of wights was climbing up them while the White Walkers on their backs rained down arrows on the defenders. Elsewhere on the battlefield several mages sat around a giant blue crystal, while some kind of creature began to rise out of the ice and snow around them.

The attackers were not having it all their own way. The White Walkers had lost hundreds of wights, their corpses burning everywhere around the castle. And several White Walkers had also been slain, both by dragonglass arrows and up close. But up close White Walkers were stronger and far faster than most humans, and even without the wights it was obvious the White Walkers were winning this battle.

*Or they were,* Daenerys thought grimly, then without another word, sent Sunfyre down at the army of undead and their masters, starting with the magic users. Not even a turn of the glass later, it was all over, and the way to the Last Hearth was clear.

OOOOOO

The fleet had made excellent time since leaving Lannisport. Yes there had been storms, but even the worst of winds from the storms seemed to be speeding them on their way. They hadn't lost any ships either. Several dozen men had died from storm related injuries, but even so they made excellent time into the Iron Islands. Jon had ordered the fleet

to remain near the shore, passing between the Cape of Storms shore and the Iron Islands. That wasn't the fastest way through, but it was the safest in terms of the sea, and would hopefully let them steer clear of the war going on in the Islands.

Even so, they saw a ship coming towards them. As it neared the lookout shouted down to the waiting commanders. "It's flying three flags my lords, can't make them out just yet!"

A few moments later he amended that statement. "One flags the Kraken, I can't recognize the other two." He shouted the descriptions down, and Garth and the others all looked at one another. "That is a very odd group, House Marbrand, House Banefort and House Greyjoy, all represented by one ship?"

Jon looked at Margaery. "I might have fought the man, but that didn't tell me much of how he acts. Will Addam Marbrand try to break the peace accords for his loyalty to House Lannister?"

"No," Margaery said shaking her head firmly. She looked over at Garth who frowned for a moment then nodded in agreement. "He's not a political animal at all, nor is he one to seek personal gain in terms of power my Lord, it is skill with the blade he cares most about, indeed, I've heard rumors that his Lord father was actually thinking of passing him over, because he's a complete incompetent at managing land. But he is an honorable fellow, by all reports."

"Jaime in miniature." Garth added bluntly. "A warrior through and through who cares nothing for aught but skill with the blade. If you beat him, he'll listen to you regardless of anything else."

"Then your recommendation?"

"If it was just House Marbrand's flag, I'd think that he might've heard rumors what's going on in the North, and wish to join us. The others though, it's evident that something odd has happened here in the Iron Islands, or at least unsuspected."

"Something that hadn't been reported back to Lannisport yet," Jon mused, causing Margaery to start in surprise and nod agreement quickly. "Kevan didn't warn us about it. I think then, we should wait for them. Signal *The Seven's Wind* to take over flagship position, we'll let the rest of the fleet keep going, while we remain here with three war galleys to await them."

Several hours later the ship was close enough to hail one another, and a small dinghy was sent across.

Addam Marbrand hadn't changed much since he'd crossed blades with Jon, a little older, a little thinner, with a rather neat scar running along one temple right before his ear, but that was all. He and Jon exchanged wary nods, but the others with him much more interesting.

Lord Banefort was a tall saturnine man, who looked much like Jon remembered Lord Bolton looking, only not nearly so sickly in appearance, or intelligent if Jon was blunt about it. Even his greatest detractors could never say that Lord Bolton was anything but intelligent and energetic. Lord Banefort had the look of him, but not the intensity.

The third man in the group however was just Jon had imagined him upon hearing about Rodrick the Reader. He looked a strange cross between a maester, and an Ironborn warrior. His face was lively with intelligent eyes behind wire rim glasses, but his hands showed the calluses of a warrior, and he carried himself like one too.

But it was the fourth person that came on board the flagship whose appearance startled Jon. He'd heard tales of Asha and her exploits from Olenna, and had built a picture of her in his mind. And while he'd gotten her general build correct, it was very obvious that Asha was sick at present. It looked as if she could barely stand, her eyes were bloodshot, she wavered on her feet, and her skin looked white clammy to the touch.

Yet it was Asha who spoke first. "You are going North, I will go with you."

Jon and Margaery looked at one another, that over at Garth who shrugged in comprehension. "Why?" Jon asked eloquently.

"Now comes the price," she said, her voice falling into a strange cadence. "All must stand together, or all will fall separate, gods and men, all fall into the Cold Times." She held up her hand, and only now did Jon notice that she was wearing a gauntlet on one hand, while the other was uncovered. Jon stared at it, seeing the gem and the intricate carving on its fingers and knuckles, while Asha went on in that same tone. "Thou who didst agree to be mine servant, to wield mine power, now must stand against the Great Enemy."

"Perhaps," Rodrick said quickly, stepping forward as Asha looked to almost collapse, overcome by the effort of raising

her gauntlet. "I should explain a little more. You see, it all started several thousand years ago, when the Storm God and the Drowned God were in contest for the souls of the Ironborn..."

That tale took some time, but Jon and Margaery were both interested, interrupting occasionally to ask questions or to clarify certain points which the Reader, who evidently had a bit of a bard in him, dealt with easily. Rodrick finished by saying "and almost ever since she used her gauntlet to see off that first feint against our shores, Asha's been having visions, which have grown more powerful over time. There is a price to be paid for using that weapon, and these visions of hers apparently are calling her to pay for that and for the finding of it as well."

Jon nodded. "That makes some sense I suppose, but why are all four of you. Why are you here Addam?"

"We've heard tell of your creation of duchies in the Westerlands" Addam said bluntly. "I have conquered the Iron Islands, every single one save Harlaw. And that one, in return for ensuring its independence, Harlaw surrendered to me.

"We agreed to not attack your ships, or to go to the aid of the other islands, that does not mean we surrendered to you." Rodrick mildly, though his eyes flashed at the younger man.

Addam smirked at him, and palmed his sword with one hand for a moment. Whatever the peace and between these forces might be, it was obvious that it wasn't very deep at the moment.

"My Lords," said Margaery quickly, "this is a parlay on neutral territory. Whatever your grievances with one another, please be mindful of how you speak or address one another. Is this a permanent thing? Your two forces together? Or is it something that will fall apart the moment Asha leaves the islands?"

"It is not entirely based upon her no." said Addam, frowning heavily. "While my forces brought along weapons for the thralls in our attempt to arm them, we did not bring along enough food to feed them, and we had not realized how dependent the other islands are on Harlaw for that food." He glared at Rodrick who simply smiled back affably.

"Apparently Harlaw is the only island that has significant farmland, and exports food to the other islands. But even that is failing thanks to the weather lately." He shivered, because it was quite cold out, not cold enough yet to make man in danger of frostbite during the day, but certainly cold enough to harden the ground and make any attempts at farming go from difficult to impossible.

"Which is where you come in my Lord?" Margaery asked looking over at Lord Banefort.

"Indeed milady, my House supplied the invasion army with food and other goods as was my duty to House Lannister. But since the House has fallen from its position as Lord Paramount, any agreements based on that are no longer viable. We are willing to do so, but we require more in the way of payment, which the Iron Islands alone cannot supply and which House Marbrand has refused to."

*Politics*, Jon groaned internally, nodding his head. He wasn't happy, he did not like the idea of the Iron Islands staying a single unit no matter who ruled it, but nor did he like the idea of their people starving to death. *Besides, at the moment I have bigger giants to slay.* "Perhaps my lords we should head to my cabin and get some water? I have a feeling this discussion is going to take a long time..."

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"To tell the truth Ranma if your army hadn't forced the White Walkers to bypass us I don't know if my castle would've held. As it is, we barely held the walls. The White Walkers strafed our walls with their cursed arrows near constantly for over a week, with us not seeing hide nor hair of any of their wights. Then they threw all of their men at us one night, it was the surprise of the sudden assault that nearly broke us."

Ranma nodded as he looked over at the courtyard of Hornwood, while Lord Hornwood's lady Donella directed her servants to bring out packs of supplies, mostly hard bread, jerky, leather strips for mending shoes and gloves, and some medical supplies. Though Ranma knew there wouldn't be near enough of that to replace a bare tithe of what the Vale army had already used.

*Not that Hornwood had it easy either.* The damage to the exterior of the castle wasn't much of course you couldn't really damage stone with arrows after all. But there were at least 230 covered bodies, possibly more lying along the stable wall, and smoke from the pyres that Lord Hornwood had set outside the Castle for the wights was visible from leagues around.

Lord Hornwood himself was sporting a gash across his face that hadn't been there before, and had a one of his arms

done up in a splint. Most of the armymen in Ranma's line of sight were injured as well. Yet despite that Hornwood had already pledged to add a further 1,530 men to Ranma's force. This included the cavalry force sent to Hornwood by Lord Manderly to guard the shipment of dragonglass. Their horses were surviving the winter well enough, and all of them brought along enough blankets for the horses at night as well.

"You're right about that Lord Hornwood. Judging from the force that struck us out in the woods I don't think you would've lasted very long, that's not even including the undead dragon I was forced to kill."

The older man shook his head. "How you did that I've no idea Ranma, I'm just grateful you did. Me and mine will do whatever we can to aid your army both now and on your way, never fear." His smile however went away quickly as he spotted Edd Karstark leaning heavily on a spear whose head had been removed. He was pale and weak looking, and was limping badly, but refused all offers from aid from those around him. "I heard young Edd was injured sore, will he recover fully?"

"He's lived this long." Ranma said with a laugh nodding at the man as everyone else made way for his slow plod towards the keep. "I'd originally intended to leave him here with the other walking wounded and then send him down to White Harbor to meet up with my queen and the main army when it arrives. But he cursed me so much when I brought it up I think he's faking it now."

"About that, I've had news you should hear." Gesturing Ranma to follow him, the older man made his way through the busy courtyard towards his keep, describing at the same time the news that the Royal Army had arrived but that most of it had been left in White Harbor due to not having enough dragonglass weapons. At that Ranma simply nodded, understanding why his wife had made that decision.

*And unless the White Walkers are willing to face us with their own numbers, I think we've turned the tide with the destruction of the army that would've attacked here. With my father's order of digging up and cremating all the major cemeteries and the numbers of wights we've faced so far I have to believe that they are sorely pressed in terms numbers of undead. If they aren't, our attempts to take the offensive might well fail, and with it any chance of reaching the Wall before it falls.*

"I agree with my wife's decision, but it does put us in a hard position." Ranma said aloud. "I'd hoped to rest my army here for a few weeks, but I'm not certain any longer. You say she and Greatjon moved up the White Knife to relieve the Last Hearth?"

"Indeed, it was a bold move, but with the dragons she might well succeed. I've had time to look at my House's old records, what few of them there are." He barked a short laugh shaking his head. "My family's never been the most well-read lot and our old records aren't very good. But I found one stone tablet with old tongue runes on it that I eventually deciphered. It mentions dragons being a force to be reckoned with against the White Walkers."

"I hope so, because if she has liberated the Last Hearth..." Ranma frowned, thinking hard, calculating travel times, going over a mental map of the North, and thinking about Daenerys. He pushed past his concern for her, his longing for her and Merry in order to analyze what she would do next. *Daenerys knows the strategic goal as well as I do, so...*

"I'm going to assume Daenerys'll keep on going up to the Wall to break the siege there. If that's the case, my Army and I might be needed more on the shore of the Bay of Seals then marching up to the Kingsroad. If I were the White Walkers, I'd be doing everything I could to throw another assault around the Wall right then directly at it." He said grimly, not even noticing that Lord Hornwood had guided the two of them through the keep up to the second floor as he was thinking.

"My son is with the force under Lord Karstark who was sent to liberate or reinforce Ramsgate and Widow's Watch." Lord Hornwood said, smiling at his daughter-in-law Alys, who was walking down the hallway towards them carrying a small bundle from which loud gurgles could be heard. "But on a happier thought, may I present my grandson, Torrhen."

Ranma laughed, moving forward and forgetting for a few moments that he was a king embroiled in possibly the deadliest war Westeros had seen in millennia. He put his arms gently around Alys and her babe, smiling down at them both. "Hello little cousin, you're looking well, as is your child."

"I would be even better if my husband were here with me Ranma." Alys said tartly, though she leaned against his shoulder for a moment. "Is there any chance of that happening anytime soon?"

"If we can leave lift the siege of the Wall, I'll send him back to you I promise." Ranma said placing one hand over his heart. "I promise. In fact, after nearly two years of war, I think all of the Wolfsworn and my northern forces deserve a

break. But we won't get it yet, because if we rest now, Torrhen here won't be able to grow up."

Alys stared at him for a moment, then nodded, holding her baby to her chest and smiling.

Thanks to Lord Hornwood and his lady's efficiency the army was resupplied. Some of its broken and damaged equipment repaired, and even some of its torn tents replaced within the four days Ranma allowed them to rest. Their medical supplies however simply could not be brought back up to the level they had been when the Vale army left White Harbor.

Ranma had taken that time to train with the Vale men more, forcing them to get used to his way of fighting and marching as well as working with the men from the White Harbor and Hornwood. Though they at least had heard reports of how he operated, and knew that discipline and organization was paramount in how Ranma led his men.

Because of this and because Ranma took nearly every horse, all northern bred, that Hornwood had, adding about eighty or so mounts to his supply train, they made much better time leaving Hornwood than they had going towards it. Within another week they had left Hornwood land, marching into the semi-unclaimed territory formerly ruled by House Bolton. Fenris, Ranma, and the remaining mountain clansmen continually scouted around the Army but they didn't see any more White Walkers.

After another two week's march they reached the Weeping Water, crossing the frozen river quickly. Here they began to come under attacks from scattered forces of wights. The scouts, all old hands at this now, dealt with the wights using fire arrows on the wights before the wights could use what limited intelligence they had to turn on them.

But despite the vast territory of House Bolton being completely open to them, there were no other White Walkers sightings. Not even Fenris could detect any hint of them, which told Ranma they really had concentrated in the forces which Ranma and his allies had already destroyed. *They really are susceptible to casualties*, Ranma thought as he stared to the west towards where the skeleton of the Dreadfort still stood. *That's good.*

Another week and a half's journey brought them to the Last River, the same river that was connected via a canal to the Long Lake and which past within a few days journey of the Last Hearth. Here Fenris began to smell the passage of another human army. With the local wolves help they began to trail that army, which Fenris could tell contained the Wolfsworn, discerning their familiar scents from the scents of the army even days after its passage.

Gathering Edd, the Wull and his remaining Vale lords to him Ranma explained matters, saying that the Wolfsworn had left behind tokens that he and Edd had noticed rather than trying to explain that Fenris had been the one to find out who they were trailing. "I think we're only a bare few days behind them, so I'm going ahead alone to see if I can find them. If I can we'll join together before marching on the Bay of Seals. I don't think we want to be strung out once we hit that shoreline."

Lord Royce frowned, fingering his runic encrusted longsword for moment. "You expect that we'll be hit again Your Majesty?"

"I think it'll be a minor miracle if we aren't. It's been more than three months since I arrived in Winterfell. That's more than enough for them to have sent forces from Starhold's Point across the water to Skagos, and then from there to the Bay of Seals."

"With normal ships for certain but I've never heard tell that the White Walkers can sail." The older man objected. "Stubborn sailors possibly, but would they be intelligent enough to keep such around, or would they have simply thrown them at us already?"

"And we hadn't heard anything from Hornwood or in White Harbor to explain how they got to Skagos in the first place." Ranma said with a shrug. "They could very well've done that, or done something else entirely, something we can't even imagine. Regardless, I am not willing to hope they'll be so stupid as to not reinforce their initial assault around the Wall. And that is the other matter my Lords: the Wall **must** be liberated!"

"But will taking Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and liberating it do much Your Majesty?" asked one of the other Vale lords, frowning not in censure but in thought. "The Bay of Seals is certain to be frozen solid, which would stop us from using ships to bring up supplies to the Wall, to say nothing of making it easier for the wights to send forces from Skagos into the North."

"I don't know," Ranma said honestly. "I just don't know. But I doubt it's frozen entirely... the Bay of Seals goes around the Wall, touching at the Haunted Forest's shoreline on the other side. If it was frozen entirely, then we would've already lost, the White Walkers could march their entire army around that way."

"Frightening thought," muttered Robar, a sentiment more than one man their shared. Up to this point, Ranma and his Northerners had faced far more of the White Walker's actual magics and beasts than the Vale army as a whole had, but even that little bit was enough. The Dragon alone had almost broken them in the brief seconds it had to attack them before Ranma arrived, and they had no wish to see the giant spiders, giants or enthralled beasts that the Northerners spoke of seeing in the battle at Winterfell.

Edd suddenly laughed, shaking his head. His face as still pale, and he complained of his side twinging occasionally, but he was well on the way to a full recovery. "You people are missing the forest for the trees, and it's rather amusing."

"Would you like to share with the group, oh sharp one?" Ranma said, smiling at his friend as he reached over to squeeze his shoulder.

"Well, the White Walkers have always come with winter correct? So it stands to reason that when the Wall was put in place, it was also winter. I don't think that Bran the Builder would have put such a magnificent defense in place if it wasn't up to the task of stopping them. So it stands to reason that the Bay of Seals won't be totally frozen, or at least won't be frozen enough to let them send armies around his Wall."

There was some murmuring about that and Lord Royce, who was a bit of a scholar of the Heroic Age, nodded. "Makes sense to me, though if that's natural or something based on magic could be a question."

"For now we're wasting daylight." Ranma said, though he inwardly agreed with Edd's observation. "I mean to head for the Bay's shore anyway, we'll see what conditions are when we get there. I'll see you in a few hours." Ranma said, nodding to Edd and then turning and racing off. The Lords all looked at one another, shrugged their shoulders and began to bellow commands to their men to get the army moving once again.

OOOOOO

The Karstark/Flint/Woolfield army had been marching for weeks now mostly dealing with small skirmishes here and there, most of which the Wolfsworn handled. There had only been one pitched battle at a small holdfast on the edge of House Karstark land, which several White Walkers had filled up with a force of new wights of all ages, young and old. Rickard had led his House's men in against him with the Wolfsworn and slaughtered them all, though had lost forty-three of his own men in the doing.

The Wolfsworn all knew that demons were riding Rickard at this point. Being so close to his fallen seat and the sight of his eldest son and heir's death was effecting him greatly. It took all of Daryn and Roger's diplomatic skills to convince Rickard not to march to Karhold, throwing off the plans he'd made when given command of this army. Now as they were a few days away from the woods that made up most of the House Karstark's land that need had subsided, but a brimming fury was visible in the older man, just waiting for a target.

Patrolling the army's back trail Smalljon was contemplating this and wondering if that anger would see them all doomed in the next large clash when he began to hear wolves howling. This wasn't exactly unusual, the wolves were constantly howling these days well out of sight of any of the scouts around the army, but an almost constant presence. This one however was from quite a bit closer and with an odd timbre to it. Frowning, Smalljon turned almost thinking he' be able to see the wolf in question, only to see a man racing towards him on foot from behind, a large greatsword slung over his back.

A few moments later the man was close enough for Smalljon to make out some of his features. An instant later Smalljon began to bellow with laughter, a sound that caused those men marching nearby to turn to him, then stare in the direction he did. Laughing and shouting however Smalljon ignored them, striding back down the muddy, icy path, his breath making great gusts in the cold air as he shouted and halloed in welcome to his kind and friend.

A bare turn of the glass later Ranma was reunited with the Wolfsworn along with Rickard and all of them had tales to tell. The liberation of Hornwood, the destruction of not one but two White Walker Army's, and Edd's valor all made the Wolfsworn and Rickard in particular smile proudly, while Ranma heard their own tales gleefully. Around them the Army began to throw up its nighttime entrenchments, larger this time by twice again for the Vale Army coming up behind them.

After the exchange ended, Rickard stared hard at Ranma. "What would you have us do Ranma?"

"Have you sent scouts forward to the shoreline yet?"

"No, I've been using the Wolfsworn as my main scouts, but even then I don't let them go more than six leagues in any



direction away from the army. I felt that their ability to spring traps would be wasted if they could also be pulled out of position." Rickard replied. He didn't mention that had been an idea he'd gotten from overhearing Roger and Daryn discuss that very possibility.

"Can you guarantee that none of the White Walkers you've seen were mages? Edd and I came up with the idea that it was their mages that allowed them to pass on information over long distances." The Wolfsworn nodded grimly, and Ranma smiled grimly.

"Good. If it is just their mages being able to pass messages or something to do with their main forces, then they won't know about the men that Lord Hornwood added to my army or about all of you. So we might have an advantage there. Our force composition is different from the army that faced the White Walkers near Hornwood, we're better trained now, better lead, and we have you my friends, an irregular infantry force that they cannot match.

As his friends smiled, with even Rickard assaying a wintry sort of smirk, Ranma went on. "If they've sent forces to reinforce Skagos, or have already sent forces from there to the shoreline, I mean to use those advantages if we have to. Until then, I'll want the Wolfsworn and I to head forward and scout the shoreline, just in case."

The two armies joined together that evening without much fanfare, though the Vale forces were particularly happy to note that they wouldn't have to work on that evening's entrenchments which was always hard work given the frozen nature of the ground. Noticing this, the men of the North responded to with ribald jeers.

Early the next morning their good humor continued, the men taking their cue from Ranma and his friends, who were all as boisterous as wolf cubs. Even while the now combined army more marched forward, with Ranma and the Wolfsworn going ahead, that good humor continued unabated.

Several days later however, when the wolfsworn came within sight of the shore all jokes and good humor died. The Wolfsworn went to ground, while Ranma pulled out Myrish glass, staring through it at the shoreline, though normally calling it a shoreline was sort of a misnomer, because like much of the Narrow Sea's shore here in the North, the Bay was mostly craggy hill or sheer cliff for most of its length.

But right here that was not the case. About two leagues in every direction from Ranma's position the shore was a gentle one, sea giving way to small rocks, clumps of bushes and sand. Of course the sea itself was also frozen to several dozen yards out to sea.

And it was crawling with White Walkers and their forces. There looked to be somewhere around 2000 wights down there. Most looked like long dead wildlings for the most part. Here and there were scattered forces of White Walkers, almost as much as Ranma had seen in the army that attacked Winterfell, and ten giant spiders spaced around the perimeter of what was obviously an army camp. These spiders were far larger and more complete looking than the ones Ranma had seen at Winterfell.

*That means there are mages down there, even if I can't see them from here,* Ranma thought frowning angrily as he pulled the spyglass down for a moment, careful that the faint sunlight didn't reflect the lands and give his position away. Behind the Army he could see three ships, and when Ranma trained his glass on them he could see several groups of men moving around them, their movements clumsy but seemingly sure. *Well it looks like Lord Royce was wrong, they are smart enough to keep some of their captured people alive.*

"I'm just glad that the Bay isn't totally frozen, if it was I doubt we'd be able to survive the army they could send at us." Hathan murmured from behind him. His horse, a Hornwood horse he'd commandeered, was several hundred feet behind their current position, grazing on a bit of grass sticking up from the rocks that dominated this area of the North.

"Would you think we should do?" Roger asked, whose own horse was back with Hathan's. "I don't know about you but that looks..."

He stopped talking as two of the ships turned away from the shoreline ponderously, pushed out into the water by several of the spiders leaning against the ships until they finally were beached no longer. The third ship moved in, taking the other two's place and began to disgorge more troop in the form of a few giants.

"That looks like a landing force securing a beachhead for a larger army." Ranma said grimly nodding his head sideways toward Roger. He frowned studying both the Army and the terrain. The terrain was rocky in the extreme away from the shoreline, and the snow of this area of the North was heavy and hard-packed stuff, easy to walk along. There were also several dozen large boulders ranging from human sized to four or even five stories here and there scattered randomly here and there.

He frowned scratching at his beard, making a note to shave it before either of his loves saw him with it, before turning to more immediate matters. "Daryn, Smalljon, spread out to either side, out of sight of those bastards. I want to know if this is the only landing point they're using, and what the rest of the Bay of Seals looks like."

"How far out you want us to go?" Smalljon asked his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"As far as you can and get back by tomorrow night. Hathan, head back to the army tell them to slow down. In fact tell them to camp where they are for now, and to send parties back along our trail to chop own any trees. The wood's to be saved for now, not added to our fire supplies."

Theon watched his friend carefully from a nearby hiding place near the roots of an ancient tree which had been struck by lightning sometime in the distant past. Ranma and Roger were sharing the top of a small boulder, out of sight from the shoreline by simply being too far away, with the other Wolfsworn clustered behind them on the ground. "What are you planning to do?"

"I don't know yet, that depends upon the terrain. And if we can convince the White Walkers to throw good money after bad." He frowned thoughtfully thinking debating, and finally nodding. "Theon, find a place where you and say the best dozen archers from among our men could hide and strike those ships out in the water where they anchored before You think that's possible from around here?"

"I could start picking them off from here for sure, though we'd have to move closer for the other archers."

"Do it." Ranma ordered, frowning intently as he went back to examining the army. Over the next few hours he continued to do so, waiting for Daryn and Smalljon's reports, while Hathan and Edd were able to convince Rickard not to charge ahead blindly to engage the force already present on the shoreline.

It soon became dark out, and Ranma put his spyglass away. Not even he was able to see that well in the dark, and the White Walkers of course didn't need torches for their army's movements. Instead he closed his eyes, seeing through Fenris' while the direwolf made his way forward, getting far closer to the enemy army than any human could have done unseen. Even Ranma would have had to resort to the Umi-Sen-Ken, which the White Walkers could see through.

Over the next two days the White Walker's ships, or more ships, Ranma couldn't tell, came out of the sea to add still more troops to the force already present. The first few times these were giants, adding about fifty giants with each ship, though counting them through Fenris' eyes was not an easy task. The third time was a force of White Walkers, making the total number with the army on the shoreline larger than the number which had been with the army that attacked Winterfell.

And the last time, each ship carried a single undead dragon. Seeing them Ranma groaned, or was that Fenris? At the moment they were so linked it was impossible to tell. *Not good, not good at all. The giants or the spiders or the dragons would be enough of a problem, all together, that's a major problem. Although, they haven't sent out any scouts, that sort of arrogance will cost them if I have anything to say about it.*

At that moment Theon came out of the night to join him in the small hideaway Ranma had commandeered each night since they had arrived on the shore. "Ranma, I think I found a place where we could hide about 12 or so good archers. But the moment we light fire arrows the smoke will tell them we're there. Sorry, but the closer you get to shore the fewer hiding places there are, and none of the one's I've looked at could hide the smoke."

"That's fine I think," Ranma replied after pulling back from his link with Fenris with more difficulty the normal. He'd been riding the direwolves senses so deeply over the past few days, trying to figure out if he could tell the mages from the regular warriors, trying to see if he could see where they had hidden the crystal or anything else useful that he had delved deeper into their link than ever before.

He spent a few moments simply shaking his head, rubbing at his temples as if he had a headache while Theon waited impatiently. "All right," Ranma said at last, shaking his head. "I think I've got the beginnings of a plan, but we'll have to wait until Smalljon and Daryn report back."

"Wait no longer," said a voice from out of the darkness, the whisper carrying to them easily. Moving through the rocky terrain around them and finally pushing into the small crevice where Ranma hid, Smalljon nodded at the two of them, his face grim despite his joke a moment ago. "The rest of the shore to the south and east of here isn't as clear as it is here, but there's a place I found right as I turned around where I think they could continue to land troops in the future."

"The future is one thing, right now is another. They've shown no signs of spreading their forces between two landing

spots and have continued to drop off forces since you left." Ranma said shaking his head.

"I don't think we'll be able to fight them in a straight up battle on the shore." Theon warned. "We could retreat straight east, drag them into the Gift."

"But then they may just ignore us and attack Eastwatch, that's what I'd do. Take Eastwatch, and you can sweep the Wall from there and if the Wall falls...Ranma shook his head. "No, we're going to have to fight sneaky..."

"Ranma, there aren't any forces we could call on to help us here, but if we lose..." Smalljon warned.

"If we lose we die. If we pull back, they'll just ignore us and march up north to the wall. Even if my wife's already broken the siege that won't matter if Eastwatch is attacked by that large a force from behind."

"So what are we going to do?" Theon snarled angrily. "Throw our lives away for nothing! All the good we've done so far we could lose here!"

"We fight." Smalljon said grimly. "We fight and pray for a miracle."

"We fight sneaky, like I said. Those spiders, if we can get them away from the rest of the Army I might be able to do something about them. And if they've learned about Winterfell and the other Army, they must know I'm public enemy number one."

"Maybe," Smalljon murmured, "but that will leave the dragons and giants to us. I'm not exactly happy with the idea of facing an enemy that can attack from the sky." He smirked slightly. "I've gotten used to thinking of the sky as belonging to your wife, not our enemies."

Throwing off his earlier skepticism Theon smiled evilly, tapping one of the dragonglass tipped arrowheads in his quiver. "I can take them out if they come within range and I'm lucky, and if we can somehow get them on the ground I think the Wolfsworn could deal with the others."

Ranma frowned thoughtfully, still staring out into the darkness.

At that point Daryn arrived, moving into the small hideaway, though now with the four of them in it, it was getting quite crowded. "About five leagues away the shoreline becomes a cliff face." He said, gasping a little. "I ran as far as I could along it, and I didn't see an end of it. I think, I think it stays a cliff until you get to that little port by Eastwatch, and Eastwatch has a lot of siege weapons that face the ocean, so I don't think they could land troops in that direction."

Ranma nodded, thinking hard. *That army isn't going anywhere just yet. And if Hathan and Roger got the army working like I told them to, we might just have a chance here, a thin one but a chance.* "All right, here's what we're going to do..."

OOOOOO

The first the White Walkers knew that they were being observed was Ranma's shout of "Direwolf's claw!" coming from near point-blank range a few turns of the glass before dawn. The vorpal blades shot from his hiding place directly outside the White Walker's camp, smashing into and through one of the giant spiders standing at the far end of it. The construction of ice and steel crashed to the ground, its steel parts slicing through or embedding themselves in White Walkers and wights alike and he howled, "Winter is Coming!"

With that he ran forward, hacking and slashing with Ice at a few White Walkers on guard at the edge of their camp. At the same time several thousand archers, pushed forward from the rest of the Army the night before, fired blindly into the camp. Unable to see in the dark they simply fired their arrows, dragonglass tipped of course since fires would have let them be seen and they'd had enough trouble moving quietly, as quickly as they could emptying their quivers within a few moments.

At the same moment the Wolfsworn charged in from different directions, spread out slightly in teams of two, Smalljon with Hathan and Roger, and Theon with Edd. Daryn was missing from their force, as was Fenris. Both of them had another job to do.

By the time the archers had emptied their quivers the White Walkers had gotten themselves under control again from the shock of being attacked like this. After all, they were the ones supposed to ambush others, not be ambushed in turn, particularly like this. But despite this shock the Wolfsworn were soon in danger of being overrun.

Realizing this, Ranma howled again his voice a primal snarl of fury. "Now, away!"

The Wolfsworn quickly broke off fading back into the night. They raced away, while Ranma pulled back slowly northeast, making him an obvious target for any kind of attempt to follow them.

The dragons of in the White Walkers camp flew up, searching down at the ground, but their eyesight wasn't as good as that of real dragons, especially at night. After a moment they were recalled, and the giant spiders were sent out instead, racing after Ranma. On their backs each of them carried a complement of twenty archers, more than enough, in the White Walker's minds, to bring Ranma to heel.

Theon looked at Edd, the two of them now racing from where they had hidden as the dragons were in the sky. Both of them were covered from head to toe in cold, hard snow at the moment, which Theon was not exactly happy about. Despite his heavy winter coat it was damn cold. "I hope this works."

"If it doesn't, we're dead, nothing we can do about that." Edd shrugged philosophically. "Besides, do you want to live forever?"

"Hells yes, I want to live to see my great-great-grandchildren grow up, and still be hale and hearty enough to fuck when I do." Theon replied. Edd simply shook his head at the other young man's humor, and he used that word lightly.

After their initial assault the archers had all retreated, going to ground the moment the wolfsworn signaled via howls that the dragons had taken to the air. Now they raced away through the darkness, daring broken ankles and feet to get away from the hornet's nest they had poked with a long stick.

The snow hindered them somewhat of course, but thankfully the White Walkers were not as interested in them, the army slowly folding out of its camp to come after them. But their initial response, the spiders which could have ridden the archers to earth and then gone on to slaughter the army scattered three leagues away did not go after them. Every single giant spider in the army went after Ranma.

Elsewhere in the dark Ranma continued to run, dodging through the rocky landscape with ease, while behind him he heard the heavy trump, trump, trump of the giant spiders. *Joy, it worked. Now I just have to make certain that I get out of this alive.*

The spiders chased after him, getting closer with each passing moment, their long legs and big bodies carrying them over obstacles Ranma had to go around and with a speed that was inedible. But that didn't matter, Ranma just wanted them concentrating on him.

As they came closer he dodged this way and that, not bothered overmuch by the spider's attempts to crush him. They weren't agile enough to bring their mouths and fangs down to bite him. Rather they served as walking mobile platforms for the White Walker archers, making them very dangerous against normal targets. Luckily, Ranma wasn't normal. *If they had just kept a few of those beasts back this plan would never have worked. Heh, whatever powers they seem to possess, the White Walkers definitely have tunnel vision when it comes to tactics!*

He bit off that thought when an arrow from one of the archers above nearly smacked into the back of his head, forcing him into a diving roll. Instead of retaining his forward momentum however, Ranma kicked off a boulder at the start of his roll, leaping up onto another one and then onto a third before jumping up into the air. Once there the White Walkers of course fired on him, as they had been doing all along but now Ranma was able to dodge their arrows in midair, smacking them aside with his hands and using those brief bits of force to remain in the air.

Humans would've gaped in astonishment at this feat but the White Walkers simply kept on firing. One of the spiders moved forward quickly, trying to bite him with its massive fangs. But Ranma grabbed it, flipping himself onto its back and pulling out Ice from its sheath, slicing two White Walkers into pieces. That he was in among them, the other White Walkers still firing on him but not hitting him thanks to their own fellows, as he killed several more before thrusting Ice down into the spider's body right where it's brain should be. It immediately began to convulse, falling to the side and he leaped off, hurling Ice forward like a spear to slam into and through the face of another spider.

That spider fell forward dead as well. Whatever powers they used to create and give life to the spiders they couldn't empower them with no brain to work with. Yet those White Walkers on its back survived the tumble for the most part, going to ground in the rocky field around them, shooting at Ranma whenever they had the chance, not retreating but working with their fellows, shouting orders to one another and generally trying to encircle him.

Ranma however was still in the air, using the White Walkers own arrows momentum to stay there for a moment, slicing out a "Direwolf's claw!" at another spider. It hit, slicing the spider into pieces along with its crew, and then

Ranma was on the ground again, rolling behind another large boulder.

He huffed or a moment shaking his head, feeling the exhaustion of that technique hit him. "Dammit I can only do two of them now?!" Whatever the hell was feeding on his ki got worse the further north he went. It hadn't had an effect his body however, and Ranma raced forward towards Ice.

An arrow found his side, a weak point in the lizard lion armor at one of the joints. Ranma could feel the spell on it trying to feed on his ki and he pulled it out quickly, tossing it aside and holding a hand there as he rolled to avoid more arrows. Two White Walkers closed with Ranma their blades drawn, but Ranma dodged the first one's sword thrust, hammering his leg into the second throwing it back with its chest armor and the ribs beneath it broken.

The other lived for a brief moment as Ranma flipped himself over his sword. Landing on his other side Ranma pulled him off balance for a palm thrust to the side of the face which, rather than breaking his jaw actually made his entire head explode in a welter of yellow blood and ichor.

With the crews of the spiders above him still firing down at him, and the crew of the downed spider still trying to find him, Ranma dodged and ducked, using the cloaking technique so that the spiders at least couldn't see him. The cruise seemed to direct them somehow with that grating tongue of theirs. But it gave him a few seconds, putting a few of them out of position as he raced for Ice. *Note to self Ranma, don't throw your weapon again, better to think things through than be without one.*

He grimaced as an arrow gouged his cheek, but because it didn't stick in his flesh Ranma didn't feel the spell in it pull at his life force which was a blessing. Dodging and diving through the boulder field towards Ice Ranma was grazed several more times by arrows, but the lizard lion armor was equal to the task of deflecting most of them. Weak points existed in it of course, or else Ranma wouldn't be able to move, but aiming for those weak points was an order of magnitude harder than aiming for Ranma in the first place.

In response Ranma routinely picked up small pebbles and hurled them at any White Walker he could see, both on the large spiders moving around still trying to step on him, or the downed crew of the spider around where Ice lay. With his strength behind them the small pebbles hit with as much force as a musket ball, smashing through plate armor and skin alike.

Then Ranma was on the crew of the downed spider, smashing and kicking them aside before he reached for Ice. Another arrow smacked into his back right near where his hips began and he winced before reaching back and pulling it out. Another nearly found his eye, leaving a furrow right above it. In response Ranma ducked, pulling one of the White Walker's bodies over him for a moment as he dashed the blood out of his eye. He couldn't afford to be half blind now.

Thankfully because it was just a graze his healing ability kicked in almost immediately, closing the wound within moments. But by that point Ranma was already moving on.

The spiders were still moving around him haphazardly, try to keep their distance now their crews realizing that the spiders themselves weren't quick enough or agile enough to catch Ranma. Arrows fell like hail all around him yet despite this Ranma closed with one of them, Ice flashing out in a wicked arc.

"LKGHRAAA!" The spider let out a squealing sort of sound, one of its massive ice and steel legs cut straight through. Whatever magic had given the homunculi life they couldn't repair themselves with the surrounding ice or snow. And unlike most spiders, these didn't have enough legs to deal with the loss of one very easily. It remained upright, but it's movement was harshly curtailed.

And then before it could move away, Ranma had sliced the second leg. While the spider began to fall towards the ground, Ranma grinned evilly, dodging yet more arrows as in the distance the sun began to rise. *You brought the wrong tools to this party! I just hope the rest of the armies doing as well.*

OOOOOO

By this point the wights, the remaining White Walkers, the giants, and the dragons had all moved out of this small encampment by the frozen shoreline. Moving through the rocky terrain they raced after the retreating archers as dawn began.

This pursuit was rudely interrupted when Hathar and Roger lead the Vale and White Harbor cavalry in slashing attacks against their front, which was mainly White Walkers and wights, the giants not able to keep up with them. Instead of closing to use their lances at point blank range, the cavalrymen would throw their spears overhead at the

enemy, not doing much damage with them, but inhibiting their charge after the retreating archers.

The two groups of around 640 men each did this three times before Hathan, who was in overall command being much more levelheaded and less impetuous than Roger, blew his horn four times. The archers had reached the first entrenchment, the safety of it full quivers and the infantrymen.

As they retreated back the way they came, the two cavalry groups merged once more, showing the enemy their tails. Hathan and Roger now raced their horses along next to one another through the terrain, going as quickly as they could without worrying about their horse's legs breaking in the uneven terrain.

They nodded to Theon who stood calmly halfway between the first defensive position and the oncoming horde. Yet he wasn't there to attack the horde. No, he was staring up at the dragons.

Those dragons dove down towards the retreating cavalry, intent on using their ice breath on them before they could retreat into the protection of the archers. Not that the White Walkers were anything but confident, they didn't know anything about the human's army but surely they were outnumbered here, and of course there were the Giants to consider.

But when they dived down they met Theon Bowsinger, newly made lord of the new House Bowsinger by Royal decree, and his warcry was a scream of pure fury. "For Torrhen Karstark! Our bows sing!" With that he pulled his bow up, pulling back the powerful bow to its full extent and let fly within a bare second.

The arrow sliced up into the air as straight as he could make it moving with all the speed of a shooting star. It impacted his target, the first dragon's eyeball. Piercing it the arrow kept going, splashing out the back of the dragon's skull at the same time destroying its brain. Without even a death cry the dragon plummeted to earth, slamming into the ground right before the oncoming horde of undead and White Walkers, but they didn't stop their racing advance.

Before a second dragon could turn away, another arrow is in the air. But this one only impacted its eye ridge, it didn't penetrate, and it squalled with fury as it beat its wings moving higher into the air to join its fellows, seven in all.

Roger had wheeled his horse back around, coming up behind Theon and he shouted now, "Theon grab on!"

Theon turned, putting his bow over his shoulder for a moment and reaching out with one arm to grab Roger's own, letting the other man pull him into the saddle as Roger raced on. "How many times do you think you can do that?" Roger asked, staring at the trail ahead of them, directing his horse around some of the more obvious obstacles.

"As many times as I have to." Theon replied coldly. "I owe them a debt of blood."

"All the North owes them that." Roger said grimly. He shouted now at his men forcing them on. "Ride you horse humpers! Ride!"

Rather than presenting the White Walkers a single solid target, Ranma had decided to spread his army out, but not in a conventional way. He had devised a scattered defense in depth, creating earthworks which ranged from trenches to several large boulders pushed together to create raised positions for archers. These hard points were scattered over several leagues in every direction six or seven leagues away from where the White Walkers had been encamped on the shore.

He had also spread out his commanders, with Lord Rickard in charge of the Center, the Wull the right flank and Lord Royce the left, with orders to do precisely what his father had ordered the entire North to do at the beginning of the winter war: trade land for lives. Only a few of the archers' positions were such that a retreat would be impossible. The rest, the infantryman and archer commanders were all under orders to pull back from the moment they felt their position was untenable.

Such maneuvers would've been impossible for nearly any other human army, but Ranma had worked the Vale Lords and his previous commanders hard, instilling in them and their men a discipline that was as dangerous as any weapon. And he had the Wolfsworn, as he had said, a force of irregular infantry whose quality the other side simply could not come close to matching. Even the giants couldn't match the Wolfsworn, as evidenced by the first clash the giants had with the first of the human entrenchments.

This entrenchment was several dozen small trees hacked to pieces and stacked together between two large boulders. Over 100 archers from the initial attack had retreated to these boulders, with another 320 infantrymen waiting to defend them.

The wights struck it first and were repulsed, fire arrows and dragonglass arrows, dragonglass spearheads and

daggers doing for them all. White Walkers too fell, killed by dragonglass arrows or simply falling back to trade fire with the archers while the rest of the horde slowed down somewhat, their forward momentum stymied here and elsewhere.

Then the giants struck, smashing aside a few of the men on top of the barricade, hacking and smashing at the wood of the barricade itself with massive cleavers. They killed over 20 men in as many seconds, but then Smalljon was there. He roared and hacked down with his greatsword from the position on the parapet. "The Giant's Fury!"

Like the wights and the other undead creatures dragonglass weapons hurt the Giants, but they could not kill them without it actually being a kill shot. Unlike the White Walkers themselves, where even a graze from a dragonglass weapon would at best paralyze them, at worst kill them painfully. And regular weapons couldn't do much against the giant's hide, even fire arrows couldn't hurt them much before they could put the fire out.

But Valyrian steel did not have that issue which was proven now when Smalljon's sword sliced cleanly through the head of one creature, cutting its brain in half before going on to amputate an arm. A quick return swing caught another giant, cutting its head entirely off in a show of strength that would not be the last Smalljon evinced in this battle.

He howled with laughter, roaring out "The Giants Fury, the Giants Fury for the King and Queen!" Smashing and stabbing, Smalljon killed every giant that came within range of his sword.

The giants actually recoiled from his fury. Quickly however the wights and White Walkers began to spread out to either side, trying to envelop the position. One of Lord Rickard's men, the commander of this position saw this and bellowed "Retreat! Archers first then the armsmen!"

The men complied, the archers from one side of the position retreating first, then stopping about 40 yards away to rain fire arrows down on the pursuing wights and giants as another hard point took them under fire as they came around the former position. The giants didn't seem to mind fire as much as the wights, they feared it in large quantities, but could put it out if it hit them quickly enough to not take any damage.

The other archers came next, racing past their fellows position to take up another point and laying down their own fire, as Smalljon and the infantry pulled back just in time as the first of the wights came around their previous defensive position despite all the archers could do.

All along the front this pattern was repeated, the humans trading their defensive positions and ground for causing casualties among their attackers. Sometimes it didn't work. Sometimes a commander didn't retreat quickly enough and sometimes the White Walkers came up to quickly, taking a specific position under too much fire with their ice arrows to let it retreat.

Yet even with the dead quickly rising to support them the White Walker army took far more casualties than the Royal Army. The battle became a grinding sort of combat, becoming general quickly as both flanks of the army's central position came under attack quickly.

Hathan and Roger quickly brought their men back and around, rearming with more dragonglass tipped spears, and they rode out hitting the attackers here and there as they tried to encircle this or that defensive position, protecting the infantry as they retreated, though the cavalry paid for it in lives themselves occasionally.

At one point however the dragons got involved again. They had been cautious for a time, Theon's easy dispatch of one of their number and wounding of a second had made them skittish, and their masters knew that the dragons were the easiest way to break castles in the future which made them precious now. But they sent them in again and despite the best the scattered groups of archers could do they wreaked havoc wherever they struck.

Theon killed one more from a position on top of a giant craggy rock which he had climbed with difficulty it being several stories high, drawing the attention of two more. They both turned to him and dove down from either side of him. Their angles of attack were such that Theon knew he would only be able to get off one shot before the other dragon was on him, either with its breath attack or with talon and fang.

Despite this Theon stayed where he was, waiting to get the first dragon in his sight. The dragon seemed to realize that it was his target, and began to veer off, its wings beating slowly to stop its swooping descent. Yet even so, it wasn't quick enough. "For the honored dead and for my king!" Theon shouted, letting loose the arrow.

It was a shot out of legend. The dragon had turned its head almost entirely away, pulling its vulnerable eyes and open mouth away from a clear shot. But even so the arrow hit its nearest eye, smashing through it and out the other side

with all the force of a ballista bolt. The dragon plummeted sideways down into the ground, kicking up rocks and snow, smashing several wights to pieces at the same moment.

Theon had just enough time to turn and try to pull out his Valyrian dagger before the other dragon was on him, its breath trying to freeze his body cold. But before it could, there was a shout from below.

"The Sun of Winter!" And suddenly Edd was there, leaping up with all the force his legs could handle, thrusting a dragonglass tipped spear up and into the dragon's stomach.

Theon ducked aside screaming in agony as the breath attack hit his arm, smashing at the ice that grew there and wincing as both his coat and vambrace shattered from the cold of it as he rolled away. Even the skin had peeled away in places, but he was still alive. At the same time the dragon smashed into the boulder, knocking it on its side and causing Theon to fall to the ground with it.

Even with Edd's spear in its guts the undead dragon raised itself on its hind legs, breathing in deeply. But before it could use its breath weapon again Theo jumped forward, his Valyrian dagger stabbing it in the eye. For a moment he thought that the dagger wasn't long enough to find the thing's brain, and he thrust harder, Ichor and puss bursting out onto his hands. Then after a brief second it finally collapsed and went still.

Theon fell to one side gasping and grasping his wounded arm, staring in horror at the bleeding places where his skin had been pulled away by the shattering ice that had previously been his vambrace and clothing. Then he was pulled to his feet by Edd, who laughed at him. "A few scratches for not one but four dragons dead and one injured? That's a trade I'd make any day, Bowsinger!"

Theon would've smiled but he stared past Edd's shoulder up into the air, where there were still three dragons circling. Then he looked over at the mess they had made of some of the entrenchments and the men that had been there. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to pay that trade yourself would you?"

"I might have to," Edd replied seriously, before starting to pull Theon away as he saw White Walkers making their way through the boulder field towards them. "Come on! Fall back, let's get that arm some cover, and you some more arrows. This battle isn't over yet."

OOOOOO

Hidden in the same hideaway Ranma had used to observe the White Walker army Daryn waited. He waited as the sounds of battle hit him and Fenris. Waited while Fenris moved off as quiet as a shadow, almost invisible even in daylight. Waited while the sounds of battle grew further away, gripping his longsword with both hands as he stilled himself to calm. *Calm I need to do my part, let the Wolfsworn and our allies do theirs.*

He remained even as the cold of his hiding space began to permeate his body despite his woolen coat and plate armor. He waited, until Fenris returned tugging at his sleeve. Then Daryn stood up, brown eyes flickering with berserk fire, the same fire that had befallen Edd a time or two as he nodded at the Wolf. "Let's **go**."

Fenris stared at the human, then showed his teeth in an answering wolfish grin.

With that the two of them made their way through the semi-abandoned shoreline, the entirety of the White Walker's army having moved off just as Ranma had predicted. The White Walkers didn't understand the concept of or need for a reserve force. They had thrown their spiders and other troops against Ranma, and then the rest of the army against the archers that had attacked them. Now all of that force was embroiled in the battle several leagues away.

But a small group had remained behind: the mages. Ranma had hoped that they had to be hidden somewhere nearby, the number of cadavers among the wights showed that they had to have some local source to amplify their influence. And Fenris had found it just as he had done previously. It was hidden in a small cave by the shoreline. It's entrance almost entirely frozen over by ice, but the interior was big enough for four White Walker mages to sit around a crystal much like the ones Ranma and Edd had smashed previously.

They didn't have any White Walker guards, instead this group had a giant defending it. A single giant was standing guard outside the cave now, a massive club in his hand, and an equally massive shield on one arm, something that Daryn hadn't seen before. Staring at the giant from over a small rise, Daryn cocked his head at Fenris. "If you take that thing out, I'll take the mages."

Fenris didn't bother to replied verbally, simply smacking him with its tail as he moved by before racing over the rise howling as he raced forward. The giant turned, bellowing its own fury at seeing a direwolf, lumbering towards the



massive beast.

Daryn let Fenris to it, knowing that even if that giant was five or six times a normal giant's strength it wouldn't have any luck against the direwolf, which outweighed it probably 2 to 1, and was stronger besides. Instead he raced on, the giant actually ignoring him as he raced towards the entrance to the cave.

The ice underfoot came alive, spikes coming up at him but Daryn struck at them with his longsword and shield, blasting his way through, until he smashed his shield into the ice rising to cover the entrance to the cave. It took several blows to break, but when it did, he was able to leap inside just as his boots had begun to freeze to the ground beneath them. He rolled as he landed, avoiding several other ice spikes suddenly growing down towards him impacting the ground where he had been standing.

In response Daryn's longsword flashed out, catching one of the mages in the leg and cutting it almost entirely off. Whatever durability they had against regular weapons mattered not at all against Valyrian steel and that White Walker mage went down screaming as he clutched at the stump of his leg.

Two others turned quickly, moving away from the crystal, their metal cloaks glinting in the dull light of the cave as they pulled out swords.

One of them was older than the others, taller too, resembling the White Walker general that Edd had mentioned, something Daryn realized and he flicked his sword up in a mock salute, circling them both as they did the same, eyeing him warily. "Your friend down in Hornwood made ill-use of my brother-in-law Edd I heard. I'm afraid however he isn't a swordsman, while I, with all due modesty, **am**. Let's see how well you do here."

With that he charged, his looked longsword flicking here, there and everywhere as he roared, his voice echoing and re-echoing in the cave. "Righteous in Wrath!"

The two White Walkers fell backwards, one of them trying to move around Daryn but he quickly charged the other, pinning him and his blade against the side of the cave with his shield. Swiftly Daryn turned, dueling with the other sword to sword. Three clashes went by quickly, then a fourth, a fifth, and suddenly the White Walker's blade shattered under the Valyrian steel.

Daryn turned, ducking underneath as the one he had pinned to the side of the cave at last pushed his shield away, thrusting up with his sword. That White Walker died with the Valyrian steel cutting through his plate armor easily.

Then Daryn was forced to raise his shield which shattered at a blow from the White Walker's weapon, and Daryn winced as the metal fragments of his shield cut into his arm and face slightly. But they didn't have enough speed to do too much damage.

The White Walker general or whatever he was pressed forward quickly, trying to take advantage of Daryn's wounded state, but Daryn met him blow for blow, his lips a thin, cold smile. The White Walker soon became almost desperate, shouting something in the grating language of his kind to the other man.

Stalactites and stalactites suddenly grew, thrusting towards Daryn, but Daryn, dodged backwards, his sword coming up in a sweep that bisected some of them, then he kicked out sending the pieces at the warrior trying to engage him. Dodging around him he moved towards the mage, having to dodge several times again as the ice below his feet came alive trying to grow to impale him, and he winced as one spike of ice went through his foot.

Desperately the mage wielding the sword tried to engage him, but Daryn knew he was coming, and dodged to one side, coming around with his sword flashing out quickly. The White Walker couldn't get his feet under him after his desperate lunge, and Daryn's slice took him high in the neck, nearly cutting his head off.

The last mage turned to him, raising its hands and summoning up a cone of cold, but it wasn't powerful enough to do much but slow Daryn down. He winced as the cone impacted his wounded foot, but even so his sword came up and he thrust forward quickly, gutting the last mage.

Then he moved back over to the injured White Walker, who had been pulling himself towards the cave's opening surprisingly, only to stop as Fenris looked inside and chomped down, biting the White Walker's head off entirely before spitting it to one side. The direwolf made a face, and Daryn actually laughed, much of his fury leaving him. "Tastes foul, hmm? Doesn't surprise me, I don't think they are made of the same stuff as we are, and I don't mean mentally either."

Fenris nodded his heavy head then looked past Daryn at the large crystal. Daryn turned to look at it too, then

shrugged his shoulders. "Longswords, come, longswords go." he said philosophically. "Even Valyrian swords."

He moved past Fenris, motioning him to one side then turned, changing his grip on his sword so that he was holding it as if it was a throwing spear. Then he threw back his arm and hurled it forward shouting "For the Wolf King!" Then he dove to one side as Fenris followed, covering Daryn with his own massive bulk.

The Valyrian blade smashed into the crystal, and there was an explosion of magical power which nearly buried the cave, shattering the crystal into countless pieces which flew in every direction with deadly power. When Daryn looked inside however he was astonished to see Woodhart sticking up out of the ground on the other side of the crystal.

It looked mangled, the blade warped and twisted, but intact. Daryn whistled shaking his head. "Those Valyrian's certainly knew what they were doing when it came to swords."

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere Ranma had finished de-legging the last spider and had been moving through the downed White Walker troops like a direwolf among chicken. The last few of them actually turned and ran, but Ranma was on them in an instant, cutting them down mercilessly. The last one died with Ice smashing into its back and through its chest pinning it to the ground like it was a butterfly on a wall.

At the same moment Ranma felt his bonded's exultation at a deed well done, and he howled in victory. He raised Ice into the air, connecting the Fenris for a moment. *Now we join the main battle, and end this!*

OOOOOOO

Hathan found himself unhorsed, his horse dying under him to a giant's blow. But he had thrown himself forward, smashing his dragonglass tipped spear into the thing's face, then whipping out his blade and slicing into its chest as he fell. He rolled on the stony earth for a moment, coming to rest and thrusting forward with his blade, destroying another giant's kneecap before turning away, bringing up his sword to block a battle ax a wight swung towards his face as another mounted armmen's spear slammed into the giant's chest.

Nearby another armmen had been unhorsed, the horse rising, the man lying where he fell. Hathan quickly made his way over and pulled himself into that saddle, hacking to either side of him as Roger sounded the retreat.

Suddenly the wights all around them fell, the magic in them unable to sustain them. The last three dragons and the giants however kept going, and there were still hundreds of White Walkers around.

Then there was they howl as loud as the loudest of horns and Fenris and Ranma struck the back of the army with Daryn, hacking and slaying dozens of White Walkers who had remained at the back of their army shooting arrows at the human fortifications as they advanced.

One of the remaining undead dragons turned and dove toward them, only to die as Ranma boosted Fenris into the air. The dragon tried to use its breath weapon on the direwolf, but the wolf dove through it, his fur glistening in the sunlight with the ice covering it, smashing into the dragon's face and ripping through from one side and out the other.

That left only two undead dragons in the sky. They both dove down, doing still more damage, but most of their intelligence seemed to have left them with the mages, and they got too close to the positions they were attacking. They did untold damage, but the arrows of the defenders did enough damage to their wings to force them to the ground, where Roger and Hathan met them, charging them from behind.

Smalljon saw the wights collapse to the ground and howled his own warcry. "The Giants Rage! The Giant's Rage for the king!"

He lost his sword then, the blade of it getting caught in a giant's club even as it knocked the club out of the giant's hand. The giant reached for him with both arms, but Smalljon roared in reply, gripping the thing's wrists right behind its massive fists.

The two of them held there for a moment, strength against strength, but then Smalljon roared again and ripped to either side, the giant's arms popping out of its shoulders. The giant had a moment to roar in pain and lean forward to bring its teeth to bare before Smalljon hammered it with a shield from one of the fallen armmen, shattering its skull before picking up his blade and thrusting it deep into the giant's chest.

Across the field of battle the giants were the last to fall. The White Walkers, those that could, faded away, here and there in ones and twos trying to go to ground, trying to retreat, but there would be no retreat for them now. Fenris was

on them hunting them down one after another, calling his lesser brethren to the hunt. The Giants however took quite a bit more killing until the last one fell to a massive overhand blow from Roger, which cut through most of its neck, at the same time another cavalryman lanced it from behind.

For a moment for several leagues all was silent save for the cries of the wounded and dying, and then there was a roar from thousands of throats as it dawned on the army that they had won. It would sink in soon however what this victory had cost them.

Casualties, despite Ranma's plan, were bad as they always were after a battle against the White Walkers. Of the remaining Vale forces, there remained 9,000 men, a horrible total considering the might that had marched out from the Bloody Gate. Two lords had also died, Tollett and Elesham.

The Northerners had fared somewhat better, but even they had been battered bloody. Rickard Karstark had nearly died, both of his arms shattered when he went toe to toe with a giant, killing the beast as its club smashed his arms to flinders. It would be a minor miracle if both arms didn't have to be amputated. Dozens of knights from House Manderly were dead, dozens of horsemen from White Harbor and Hornwood, and the Karstark, Woolfield, and Flint men had paid a price for the victory.

Yet because of Ranma's strategy, most of those losses were in wounded rather than dead, the wounded, the men retreating when they could rather than fighting to the death. Now with the battle over Ranma delved into the job of caring for those wounded, putting everything he had learned from watching Merry and his own knowledge to work in organizing the efforts, thankful for beyond words that Rickard had brought along several dozen of Merry's more experienced helpers with his forces. But even so he knew they would lose hundreds of the wounded in the next few days, and he began to set up a brutal triage to conserve their limited medical supplies.

As the sun was beginning to fall however Ranma was interrupted by Daryn coming into the tent he was working in, limping slightly on his foot, which he had personally seen to earlier. "Ships incoming," Daryn said with a grin. "Allies!"

Ranma left the tent, moving forward towards the frozen shoreline as he pulled out his Myrish glass. He lifted it to his eye and after a moment smiled. The ships coming towards the shoreline, slowly oh so slowly, were flying the flags of House Manderly, Blackwood, Mallister and several others while above them all flew the Royal standard. He then noticed on the lead ship a small, yellow haired figure. Seeing that figure Ranma let his spyglass drop for a moment, and sighed, thanking the old gods for this deliverance for his wounded.

OOOOOO

Ranma and Merry stole a brief moment together later that night, hidden in a small out of the section of the camp with Fenris hidden nearby to smell anyone coming towards them. Merry started to explain she had remained in White Harbor, then came forward with the army which left the city the moment Saan had returned from his second run from Dragonstone. But she didn't even get halfway through before Ranma's arms were around her, pulling her into a hug and a kiss so ardent that it took her breath away.

He leaned back after a few moments putting his forehead against hers as he stared into her Jade eyes. "I don't care why you stayed back Merry, I'm just damned glad to see you. You and your helpers, you'll be the difference between life and death for hundreds, maybe thousands of men here, and **that** is a gift beyond price."

Merry blushed, leaning up to kiss him gently on the chin, then smirked, leaning back somewhat in his arms. "By the way, congratulations."

"Congratulations, for what?" Ranma asked, knowing full well that Merry wouldn't congratulate him for just his victory here. She all knew all too well the cost of such victories.

"I'd have thought that the messages from White Harbor to Hornwood would've told you." Merry said looking at him a little askance now. "Daenerys is pregnant, she stopped taking moon tea that night the three of us spent together in Maidenpool. She's about five months into her pregnancy, and she was showing the last time I saw her. I had to practically order Daenerys to stop flying with her little ones when she reaches her sixth month, just in case. She said that dragons were gentler to ride than horses, but..."

She trailed off as she noticed that Ranma looked as if someone had struck him in the head with a Warhammer. "What, really, I mean I knew Dae was going to stop taking moon tea, but, I, I am, I'm going to be a father?" He looked so ludicrously shocked and worried that Merry burst into laughter.

She shook her head after a few moments, smacking her hand on his chest and moving out of his unresisting arms.

"I'd love to stay and chat, but I still have a lot of work to do." With a laugh she left him there, still staring at nothing, his eyes wide and unseeing as a feeling of profound joy rose within him.

OOOOOO

"Strike while the iron is hot." Ranma said as he looked around at the gathered Lords, commanders, Wolfsworn of his army and Davos and a few captains of the Royal Navy. Time enough to think about being a father later, right now he had a war to win. "Your arrival Jason, Tytos, gave us enough men to not only leave enough of the army here to see to our wounded, but to also press the attack."

Both the River lords nodded, and so did Rickard fingering the stitches on his forehead where he had taken a glancing blow from a giant's club. "Agreed, and thy brought enough stores as well. But what happens after you take Skagos?"

"That is the question, " Ranma sighed. "If I have to, I'll leave the assaulting force in place as a garrison, but that'll be hard, dangerous work if the White Walkers are still able to send troops around the Wall."

"It can't be something that's easy for them," Jason said thoughtfully. "It has to be something that takes a lot of time, or the force that you destroyed here would've arrived long before you reached the Bay of Seals, and they wouldn't bother besieging the Wall at all."

"True, and it's obvious they weren't able to take whatever ship or whatever they did to Skagos to the shore here." Daven said thoughtfully. He nodded his head over at the three ships his fleet had captured. "Those are White Harbor galleys, and Theon said that they're the ones that he and his men took to Skagos. They didn't need to use our own ships and our own men to transfer their troops like that if they could've used their original transportation."

"None of the old records I've ever seen mentioned the White Walkers being able to put to sea at all, so that makes sense. And it give your idea about the Bay of Seals some weight as well, Robar." Ranma replied, nodding over at the old man. "But we're getting distracted. I want to leave within the hour." He held up a hand as many of the Lords made to protest.

"I told you, strike while the iron is hot! If they can't get more troops to Skagos, we might be able to take it without a fight, or we might find them trying to re-create their magical constructions there, and halt it before they can build up another army! Either way speed is of the essence. Davos, Jason, Tytos, get the fleet ready to move, leave as much of the supplies as you and Merry think is necessary for the rest of the Army, then we'll leave with the tide."

Knowing they were dismissed all three men nodded, bowed and left the tent. Ranma turned to Rickard, Edd and Lord Royce. "Lord Royce, I formally give you command of the Vale forces remaining to us. Once Merry is certain that all of the wounded can be safely moved, you'll take the Vale, Hornwood, Manderly, and Woolfield forces on a march up to the Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. Don't push the men too hard, considering that my wife's probably already broken the siege your men might not be needed immediately there. Merry will stay with you to deal with your wounded."

One of the Vale Lords harrumphed shaking his head. "Tis unseemly, her and some of her helpers are all women! Our men are not all true knights my Lord, and they been on the road for months, you cannot..."

His voice trailed off, as every Northerner and Riverlander there simply stared at him. They weren't particularly threatening stares, but there was a certain penetrating quality to them that froze his marrow.

"I realized that we haven't been campaigning in areas where this was necessary my Lord." Ranma said softly. "But perhaps I should make you aware of my policy against rape and molestation: execution. The penalty will be carried out no matter the perpetrator's identity or rank. I executed my own men for it, I executed Westerlanders lords and men for it, and if ought happens to Merry or any of her helpers, her bodyguard has full permission to do the same."

*And it would still be kinder than what I'd do to you if aught happens to Merry while I'm away.* Ranma growled, mentally shaking his head. *I know leaving her behind, again, makes sense given the wounded, but I hate being apart from her and Dae. Hell, the two of them and the rest of my family! I am so damn tired of this war.*

There were some grumblings about that, but not many. Though she'd been at work for only about a half a day by this point, Myrcella and her helpers had saved hundreds of lives and were set to save more from here on. And even the dullest Vale soldier (or lord) had seen the love and respect the Northerners and Riverlands men paid to the Maiden of Healing.

After that Robar grabbed his fellow Lord by the shoulder, and quickly ushered him out remonstrating with him in a loud tone that carried back into the tent for several moments, causing Ranma and the others remaining within to

chuckle. That left Ranma with Rickard, Edd and the Wolfsworn. "Rickard, you'll take command of your own Houses forces and those from Flint and Cerwyn."

This would give the Rickard a little under 3500 men, each of those forces having taken a pummeling in the last battle despite Ranma's strategy. The spearmen in particular had taken losses, as had the armsmen of House Flint, nearly a fifth of which had died under the undead dragon's breath assaults.

"I want you to march down and retake Karhold, I only ask that you send the Cerwyn and Flint forces home afterward. They've paid enough in blood and lives for this war already, as have you."

Ranma sighed, reaching over to grab the older man's shoulder and staring him in the eyes intently. "I know that nothing material can make up for Torren's death, or the losses you sustained in Karhold. But I mean to at least try."

He let go of the man's shoulder and reached into a pouch, pulling out three scrolls he'd prepared long before this. Each of them bore the signet of the royal family. "This is a promissory note declaring that the royal family will pay for any repairs necessary to Karhold, Last Hearth, and Hornwood, and House Mormont's longhouse."

He frowned briefly, wondering what was happening on the other side of the North before shaking it off. "Those Houses, and your House in particular Rickard paid a heavy price for your loyalty to me and mine, and for your loyalty to humanity as a whole. It's only right that you get some recompense for that."

"This, is an order for a survey to be done of your lands." Ranma went on holding up the second scroll. "Any resources will be found, and further the royal family will pay to start such project up, though," he said smiling thinly "they will be taxed somewhat in the future if anything comes from it."

Rickard nodded, smirking a little at that phrase before Ranma went on picking up third. "And this, is part and parcel of the second. If a sufficient harbor can be found to start up a small port somewhere along the Bay of Seals, or where the Sun Stream reaches the sea, you will have Royal aid in paying for it."

Rickard took the three scrolls, tucking them into a pouch of his own. He knew intellectually that with these scrolls the future of his House would be all the greater than its present, and that in the long term the price in blood, death and dishonor would seem worth it. But right now, Rickard was simply tired of it all, and just wanted to go home.

"Thank you your Majesty, and thank you for your understanding. Will my son be coming with me?" He asked, looking over at Edd.

"Definitely," Ranma replied quickly looking over at Edd. "Edd, you've done your part and more since coming back to the North. And you're wounded, again." he said smiling thinly at Edd, who coughed and looked away, knowing how close he had come to death after the battle in Homewood from his wounds against that White Walker general. Something he had not shared with his father or brothers-in-arms.

"Go home, set your House in order, bury your dead, then do what you can to survive this winter." He gestured outside the tent, where it was snowing once again, and blisteringly cold too. Most of the guards and workers out there had to be bundled up in two or even three cloaks, with every extremity covered just as the men on the Wall had been doing for weeks or months, which made the loading and unloading of the ships a much slower affair. "Even if we beat off the White Walkers, it's going to be a bad one."

Despite Ranma's desire to move immediately, the fleet took the rest of the day and well into the next to unload enough supplies for those remaining behind. Still the ships eventually were able to pull up anchor and head out to sea.

But the army's delays did not stop there. What good fortune they had at sea with wave and wind coming up from the Bite left them and what should've taken a bare four days took them eight. This was thanks to the amount of ice floating in the Bay of Seals, and the snow storms that racked them occasionally. They didn't lose any ships thankfully, though several of them had come close a time or two of being capsized in a particularly hard storm that hit them about halfway to their destination.

Nonetheless, all the ships arrived, and with Fenris and Ranma going before them the Royal Army disembarked on Skagos.

To surprisingly nothing. Whatever the White Walkers had here, they weren't willing to try to contest the landing. Ranma frowned heavily, scratching at the stubble on his chin. Theon stood beside him, eyes narrowed and a dragonglass tipped arrow on his bow.

"This is the same spot you came ashore right?" Smalljon asked, coming up beside them, letting loose a hawser that he had been using to pull one of the dinghies into the shoreline.

"Yes," Theon said crisply. "The ice hasn't moved much further out to sea since then. Surprising, I would've thought it would."

"Whatever the case, let's get on actual ground, and quickly." Ranma decided. "We'll head into the woods and hold there while Jason and Tytos land the troops. I want to make certain that they can't somehow reverse their own powers or something."

"Er what? You really need help in communicating my friend, use your words." Daryn laughed, smacking him on the shoulder.

Ranma gave him the finger but nodded. "I mean, we know that their mages can make an area colder if they concentrate on it. If they can do the reverse they might be able to start melting that ice out there just as our troops are disembarking."

Roger nodded, and gestured his wife and the others forward, while Ranma began to bellow orders behind them to the men, slowing down the disembarkation so that the troops were spread out, not enough of them on the ice at any one time to either weaken the ice or provide a target.

But despite his concerns no magical assault revealed itself. The disembarkation went smoothly, and several hours later the men went to work on a large fort cut out of the woods nearest the shoreline.

Fenris and Ranma did not join this work however. Instead Ranma and Fenris headed into the woods scouting around trying to find anything they could about what kind of force the White Walkers had here. Twice they were attacked by small spiders but that was all.

Ranma was elated clenching his fist hard. *Yes! I knew it, that force we smashed on the shoreline of the Bay of Seals, that must've been all they could muster up.*

A few periods of the glass later however, Fenris found something else to explain away the lack of defenses. He found a dead direwolf and several dozen dead White Walkers. The direwolf in question was young for the breed, younger by at least a year and a half than the direwolves bonded to the Starks. The area around the dead direwolf and the White Walkers' corpses was shredded and mangled as if a battle had taken place.

Fenris nudged the dead direwolf rumbling sadly under his breath, then looked up at Ranma whining a little. Ranma understood, and nodded his head. Moving to a nearby dead branch then set it alight before moving to each body of the White Walkers in turn setting them on fire as Fenris let loose a howl.

It was a howl of victory and grief, unending as the tides, unyielding as the mountains. It reached every corner of Skagos, and was reverberated back to them in the throats of **dozens** of direwolves. Looking at his human even as he continued to howl Fenris opened up their bond, sharing the information the direwolves of the island shared with him.

The direwolves had felt the White Walkers arriving and had retreated everywhere they could, hiding here and there in the deepest, darkest places of the island, in the deepest, densest parts of the forest, where even the Skagosi never went or couldn't. They waited there, hunting only seldom, drawing no attention to themselves hiding in such a way that no human alive could've found them.

And even the White Walkers did not even realize they were still there. They thought the few that they had found and killed had been the totality of the direwolves on the island. Instead they had been sacrificed by the packs, those too old and infirm or infertile females.

Then at some unseen call when the massive force that had assembled here as part of the White Walkers second echelon was off, they attacked. They came out of their hiding places, stalking through the woods that they owned, more than any human could ever own them led by a female, a massive creature for the breed larger even than Nymeria, and they slaughtered every White Walker they could find.

Now the remaining White Walkers on the island, a bare two dozen or so, had retreated to the same village that Theon had found the Skagosi in, and were held up there, trying to send out messages. But any reinforcements from further north could not arrive here in time, and Ranma had destroyed the force that had been sent out already.

Ranma came out of their link with a gasp, and stood there a minute getting his breath back, shaking his head. "Avatars of the Old Gods, that was what you and yours were called ones Fenris, it looks like there might be more

truth in that than most old sayings. And I think that's truer now than it has ever been."

He laughed suddenly, rubbing Fenris' ears occasionally as he felt his direwolf's interest in the female direwolf that led the packs against the White Walkers. "Leave it be for now you horny dog, I think we need to finish off that little pack of White Walkers first don't you? Then you can go courting."

Fenris huffed, knocking his head against Ranma's head nearly hard enough to knock him over, but nodded all the same. With that, the two returned to the rest of the army. When Ranma explained what he had learned the rest of the Wolfsworn simply nodded and muttered that it made sense, while the Riverlands lords and their men looked very disturbed by save for Lord Blackwood. Followers of the Old Gods, they were much more at home with the ideas of the direwolves being that intelligent even in the wild.

"What would you have us do Your Majesty?" Lord Blackwood asked formally.

"Send out scouts during the day, but not at night, forces of 10 just in case, and not too far out. The direwolves don't seem to be hungry, but they aren't pampered pets either. Fenris can control them to a certain extent, but I'd rather not have him push that too far."

"Not pampered pets he says!" Patek laughed, pointing at Fenris. "And what you have to say about that, my four-legged friend?"

Fenris looked at the finger pointing at him, then bared his teeth and Patek quickly pulled his hand back which caused Fenris to huff in laughter.

"Exactly," Patek muttered, shaking his head the little. They all laughed, and Patek made a mock salute to the direwolf, who simply nodded his head like a king getting his just do.

The next day as the rest of the army continued to make Camp Adamant, the name Tytos and Jason had decided on for the large fort, into something more permanent, Daryn and the rest of the Wolfsworn led a large force of Blackwood and Wull men through the woods. They quickly made their way through the island with Theon guiding them towards the village up into the mountains.

Occasionally they would see movement in the woods, flashes of fur and knew that it was the direwolves who had reclaimed the island for the animal kind. But none of them had a problem with it, indeed most of the men preyed on a nightly basis to the Old Gods, thanking them for their aid in this war. Each night the direwolves howled in response, moving through the woods around them almost like an honor guard now rather than sentries.

After weeks of hard travel Theon stared out at the village where his men and he had been seduced by the White Walker's womenfolk, his eyes and face bleak. "Feels like I've come full circle, sort of. I honestly never expected to see this place again."

"Is it just as ya remembered it?" The Wull asked, standing next to the Wolfsworn and staring hard out of the woods toward the palisade.

"They repaired the walls a bit, though I can't tell if they did the same thing to any of the houses on the other side. More importantly I'm counting an even dozen White Walkers on patrol along the parapet. Half of them look like those women of theirs too."

Nearby one of the Blackwood man whistled appreciatively as he stared, his jaw gaping open for a moment. "Damn me, they're gorgeous! Almost as sexy as the Queen."

"They'll turn you to their creature through your cock if you keep thinking with it!" Theon said sharply, turning it to the man, not noticing how his friends all exchanged amused glances behind him. The cost might have been high, but Theon had at last learned there were some prices too high to pay for wenching. "I only survived because of Ranma's training me for so long. Don't be fooled, that trick of theirs is probably their most effective. I'm just glad they didn't think to keep using it in the rest of the North."

"Arrogant of them." Daryn said, cracking his neck explosively. "Though personally I prefer a much more earthy sort of beauty, like my lady wife." He smiled, thinking fondly of Alys. Ranma had told him of his son, of how the toddler was seemingly a healthy child with a good set of the lungs, and it had made him yearn all the more for home. *One more battle*, he thought. *One more battle, then I can go home. Rickard was not the only one who is weary of war.*

Smalljon clapped Theon on the shoulder, while Hathon simply nodded, moving over to his horse and the front of around 600 cavalry. "Start the party Theon," Hathon Shieldarm said grimly. "Let's end this."

Theon nodded and the order was passed along the line. A second later more than a thousand archers began to set their fire arrows alight from small fires. Those fires warned the White Walkers that they were out there, and several dozen more raced to positions along the outer wall, while the cold air began to turn even colder, so cold that it started to hamper people's movements, but it wasn't enough.

Moments later, the archers fired, not at the White Walkers themselves but at the palisade. The wood was slick and frozen with ice and snow, piled halfway up the palisade itself, but there was still wood to be seen, and the arrows struck it here there and everywhere lighting the palisade, slowly but surely burning away the ice.

This attack continued throughout the day, the archers unceasingly firing not at the defenders who fired back at them with scant success thanks to the woodland. The snow melted, the ice melted, the palisade began to burn, and the White Walkers howled in their tongue with bitter anger and impotent rage as their defense began to crumble.

Then Smalljon roared out of the woods, covered by a few hundred all their archers, all of them now aiming with dragonglass arrows at the White Walkers around the gate of the palisade. Smalljon was not carrying his greatsword, instead he was carrying a huge hunk of wood, longer and thicker around than he was under one arm, racing forward like he was a one-man battering ram.

Which he was. He struck the door like one, shattering it off its hinges and then diving aside as the cavalry which had roared out of the woods behind him galloped in, longsword's out and seeking White Walker blood. "The Riverlands, the Riverlands for the king and queen! Honor's Shield!"

By the time Theon and the rest of the archers raised in after, the battle for the village itself was over. Hathan pushed his visor up, pointing his longsword with his other hand, it's blade streaked with yellow ichor, at the single longhouse in the center of the village. "They're hold up in there." He reported grimly. "Six or seven of them, all females."

He shook his head then, staring around at a few of the Riverlands men, who shuffled sheepishly in their saddles, the horses shying away in reply. "They seem to be able to cast some sort of allure spell, it affected our men before they could kill them. It got stronger where any of the women were together, hence why they were able to retreat at all."

"I'll handle this." Theon said grimly, shaking his head. "Daryn if you think you're up for it you can come with me as well."

Daryn nodded grimly. He fixed the image of Alys, brown haired, brown eyed, freckled, laughing, human Alys in his mind, his desire to see her, his delight in their courtship, their marriage, and their child. "I'm ready my friend."

Hathan saluted them with his blade, while Smalljon simply nodded. He knew himself far too well to have any illusions that he would be immune to the White Walker female's spells, and Roger wasn't there, remaining behind to command the construction of the fort.

Theon nodded, and Daryn and he strode forward, entering the broken shattered ruins of the doorway into the longhouse, pushing it to one side and entering the long hallway that made up the main room of the place. None of the White Walker females were there. "There are rooms in the back" Theon said calmly, pointing them out. "Set a fire somewhere in the supports, I'll be back."

Daryn nodded, moving over to a torch which looked to have been unlit for months, lighting it up with his flint and tender before moving on, while Theon stalked through the hallway towards the back and the rooms there.

Theon heard the female White Walker's before he saw them, screeching to one another in the harsh tongue of their kind. They were evidently having an argument, and Theon wondered for a moment if they were trying to place blame for this disaster, or trying to figure out what to do. *Not that they have any options left but to die.*

Stalking down the hallway Theon found the women all together in the chieftain's quarters. Moving next to the doorway, he chanced a quick look inside.

The White Walker female's carefully groomed good looks were gone now, and they stood snarling at one another. If Ranma had seen them then, their raging eyes, their wild unkempt hair along with their voices and skin color would have reminded him of banshees. Westeros didn't have any legends of such however, though they might start after this day's work.

Looking at them though, Theon still felt a faint stirring before he clamped down on it. *No, no matter how tight their pussies, the price for sampling these bitches is too high by far. Time to make them pay instead for what they did to me and to my men here.* With that, Theon girded himself and moved into the doorway.



Theon's first arrow took one of them in the eye, silencing her forever. Three more arrows left his bow before he passed the threshold of the door, and four more females died. One of them had been nicked by a dragonglass arrow meant for one of her fellows behind her, and she fell, screaming in agony as the dragonglass tortured her soul.

Out of arrows, Theon drew his stiletto, moving forward quickly his eyes bleak. In his mind Theon wasn't killing women now, he was exterminating so many rabid animals, and he meant to be done with it quickly.

One of the two surviving women however had different ideas. She spoke up in common, moving forward as her hands flashed. Suddenly her unkempt appearance seemed to fade slowly, leaving the beautiful woman who had seduced him in this very room so many months ago. "So, the conquering hero returns! You lived through something none of your race ever has before. You, you Theon Greyjoy, are destined for great things. I see that now, and I am sorry I had to test you so."

Theon stared at her, seemingly entranced, and the other female slowly made her way around the two of them, making for the doorway. The female in front of Theon moved towards him, sweeping her hair back to reveal her chest, barely covered by a thin white chemise. "I could guide you, you know Theon. I've dreamt of that night we spent together, you were magnificent, better than any of those so-called males of my own race. We could do great things together you and I, forge our own kingdom... Why should you or I bow to the whims of others, be it your king, or those who rule my own race?"

She held up a hand to the still and silent Theon, placing it over his chest plate while her other hand moved up to twin in his hair. She pulled his head down toward her for a kiss then gasped as something hard and sharp was thrust under her ribs.

"Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me." Theon said softly as the woman gasped and grunted as her life's blood, or whatever equivalent the White Walkers used, flowed out onto his hand. "Die bitch."

While the temptress fell to the stone floor staring up at him incredulously, Theon turned to chase after the last female. He stopped though when he saw Daryn in the doorway, the last female dead at his feet. The two men nodded at one another grimly and a few moments later Daryn and Theon left the longhouse. Several turns of the glass after that, the Army left while the village burned behind them.

OOOOOO

At the same time that Theon was dealing with the last of the White Walkers, Ranma and Fenris made their way to the shore of Skagos facing northward. Fenris kept on looking around, his snout wriggling as if he was trying to analyze a scent, and more than once he went entirely rigid, staring out into the woodlands. But whatever it was that was bothering him, Fenris refused to answer any of Ranma's questions about it.

After two days travel Ranma and his bonded at last reached the shoreline. There they found how the White Walkers had gotten to the island in the first place, a massive iceberg at least five maybe even seven leagues in size. And there was another, even larger iceberg set end to end beyond that one.

As he and Fenris moved over the ice Ranma frowned, wondering if he could somehow burn the things. *Maybe if I used wildfire or got Daenerys and her two dragons here... But even then it'd be a slow process, there's too much ice here.*

*That doesn't even consider the last problem, how the hell do I secure Skagos? I'd have to leave the entire army and the Wolfsworn here, and even then, if the White Walkers can swing enough of their main army around and out to sea they might not be able to hold.*

As he was thinking that Ranma and Fenris made their way back off the ice and into the gigantic forest which dominated Skagos from one end to the other. He was still worrying about the problem and not coming up with any solution when a low growl came from his left.

Ranma and Fenris turned in that direction, and watched as out of the woodlands came a direwolf. It was a massive female, nearly as large as Nymeria and suddenly knowledge flowed down their link quicker than Fenris could control it. Ranma suddenly realized why Fenris had been so itchy the past few days: she was in heat, nearing the end of her heat cycle actually, and she hadn't been bred yet. The fact that, like wolves, direwolves mated for life and that she had never found a male worthy of her, also carried over in her scent somehow.

Frowning Ranma shook off Fenris' interest in the female, wondering if the heat was the only reason the female had

sought them out. But the look in the direwolf's eyes carried far more intelligence than any non-bonded of the species should be able to convey. *And then there's the way the direwolves of the island acted after the White Walker's second assault force left...*

After a moment Ranma smiled thinly. "I think you're a messenger or perhaps a guide, is that right?"

The female direwolf nodded its head, and then turned twitching its tail in a way indicating then to follow. Ranma shrugged and followed, while Fenris eagerly hustled ahead, before pausing and moving slower, his mind overcoming his instincts. The direwolf female turned its head to look at Fenris, and again nodded its head before moving off, as if Fenris had somehow passed a test, which might've been the case, or might not.

It was obvious the female was interested in Fenris, or at least it was if Ranma allowed their link to open far enough to tell, but it was equally obvious it had a job to do. The female would do that job before having any fun, and appreciated that Fenris wasn't going to push his suit just yet.

They traveled for hours not because they crossed so much ground, but because the trees became so dense that going forward was difficult in the extreme even for Ranma who could take to the treetops. Here were pines and other types of trees which kept her leaves year-round. Here were weirwood trees, hundreds of them with their branches interconnected, drawing so close together that Ranma could barely squeeze between them.

Suddenly the going got easier. At the same time around them Ranma felt dozens of direwolves through Fenris' senses, moving through the trees as silently as only the apex predators that they were could. *An honor guard*, Ranma realized, just as Theon had on his march towards the village. *Or perhaps witnesses?* A few minutes later Ranma spotted several of them and noted idly that the female who had come to get him and Fenris was head and shoulders bigger than any of the others, marking her out as pack leader.

A few moments after Ranma realized that he stopped and stared. Ahead of them was a giant weirwood tree, nine stories tall if it was an inch, and longer around than most holdfasts. It was ancient, its boughs drooping, yet its sheer power could almost be felt like a physical thing, and suddenly Ranma knew something. This was possibly the oldest weirwood tree in existence, untouched by man for thousands upon thousands of years, as powerful alone in its ability to convey a message from the Old Gods as the entire Isle of Faces.

Ranma moved forward, noting in passing that while it had dozens of faces on it they didn't look to have been made by someone's hand. Rather they seemed to have grown out of the bark of the tree like the one in Winterfell. But these faces weren't as humanlike as that one was. They were mere shadows, their features indistinguishable but their presence undeniable.

When he was within reach Ranma stopped, then stretched forward to place his hands on the weirwood tree below two of the faces trying not to touch any of the faces directly feeling it would be disrespectful. Closing his eyes Ranma began to search out his senses for the Old Gods. *How, how can I secure Skagos against further incursions, how can I do it to Bear Island?*

The answer came to him quickly, a blast of knowledge: A scene of Ranma, Jon and Arya, kneeling on the shoreline, placing seeds along the edge facing North, then of his sending his energy into one, the power moving from one to another. Then he saw his force leaving, the island losing any sign of human habitation, being left to the beasts of the forest. Then he saw another scene, of Ranma, older than he was now, kneeling with several young children in front of the weirwood tree of Winterfell. Both the aid, and the price for that aid in one.

With this Ranma knew what he had to do, and smiled grimly. *I accept.* With that oath given Ranma felt himself back out of the link. Almost immediately the weirwood trees all around him began to drop acorns.

At the same time the power which had compelled the female direwolf broke. She immediately launched herself at Fenris, and the two of them went down snarling and yipping, rubbing each other's scents all along their bodies before the female raced off, Fenris in hot pursuit.

Shaking his head at that little bit of drama Ranma moved around the woodlands, grabbing as many acorns as he could find among the loam. Hours later Fenris hadn't returned, and with a sigh Ranma made his way back out of the woodlands.

The journey took him until the moon was high in the sky, and by the time Ranma made it back to the shore, he knew it was past midnight. Still, Ranma was determined, and retraced his steps all the way to the shoreline, where he picked up speed, surveying the entire shore before stopping at one place which faced out to the Shivering Sea.

From there, Ranma made his way westward, stopping and planting a seed every few hundred feet. It took him the rest of the night, but by the time the sun was rising, he had finished. His hands, despite his ki-toughening them, were red and painful, his knife, which he had been using at first having been dulled and then broken on the hard ground.

After a moment of simply standing and blowing on his hand, Ranma knelt down as he had seen in his vision. He touched the ground directly over the seed he'd just planted, then began to funnel his ki down into the ground. He had to do so for several minutes before he found the seed, yet when he did it was as if a dam in his head, a dam he hadn't even known was there, suddenly came down.

*Oh you bastards!* Just as fast as Ranma had realized what the Old Gods wanted him to do he realized that the Old Gods had been planning this for years. They had placed some kind of block on his mind, keeping Ranma from accessing his full life force so adroitly he hadn't even realized it, just chalking it up to his normal problems with projecting ki. It was a cold, harsh move which had cost Ranma hundreds possibly thousands of lives he could have saved through use of his ki techniques.

*Yet it might just be worth it right now, even how much I hate it.* All of his energy which had previously been dammed up inside of him, built up for years yet which he'd been unable to use now came out of him in a torrent. And somehow all of the seeds he'd planted seemed to be connected, taking of his energy to grow far, **far** faster than they ever should have in nature.

The process continued for hours, draining Ranma of all the hoarded energy of his body, then began to take even further, as the seedlings sprouted into trees all along the shoreline. It took and took until Ranma's vision began to fade, and he slumped to one knee. He tried to break it off, but the connection he'd forged, or possibly the will of the Old Gods, kept him there, kneeling next to the weirwood tree as it grew.

Ranma had no idea how long he slumped there unconscious, but when he awoke it was to Fenris lightly licking his face. "Gerroff," Ranma muttered, trying to raise a hand to push his bonded away only to realize he was too exhausted to raise his arm.

Even so Fenris moved away, dragging a carcass of an elk into view. The sight of the uncooked meat made Ranma's stomach roar louder than he had ever heard it, and he grimaced, before letting Fenris drag him away from the shore, deeper into the woods where the direwolf gathered enough fallen wood to build a fire. Ranma weakly set flint to tinder, then watched rather bemused as Fenris hurled the elk carcass onto the fire.

After a few moments the direwolf ripped off a chunk and brought it to him. As hungry as he was the meat was possibly the tastiest thing Ranma had ever eaten, and he practically devoured the whole carcass himself, not that Fenris seemed to care, having hunted for his own food with his new mate. As Ranma finished eating the female direwolf, who Ranma decided to name Lyanna if he could get her to respond to it, came out of the woodlands, curling up next to Fenris proprietorially.

Ranma smirked at the two of them, chuckling and sending a feeling of congratulations through his link with Fenris. Then sighing he pushed himself to his feet, moving through the woods on weary feet towards the shore once more. Everywhere he looked weirwood trees, young but strong, grew along the shoreline, and he smiled grimly. *Now it's up to the Old Gods to keep the White Walkers from landing here again. More power to them say I, so long as they don't fucking take mine again!*

The trip back to the main army took Ranma nearly a week exhausted as he was, but eventually he arrived back to the hails of his friends and lords. Explaining they were done on Skagos and that furthermore they had to pull Camp Adamant apart took some doing despite all the evidence of the Old Gods and magic his men had seen, and another few days went by while the army obeyed his odd order and Ranma recovered.

Then they put out to sea once more, heading to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea with a new passenger. The female direwolf refused to be parted from Fenris and Ranma hadn't the heart to argue. Getting her onto the flagship took some doing but eventually she and Fenris were ensconced in his quarters, and the fleet was on its way to the Wall.

OOOOOO

In comparison to Ranma's march and the battle on the shoreline, Daenerys and her forces had it easy marching up to the Wall. They weren't even attacked often because Daenerys had one dragon on patrol at all times, along with Meera and a few men she had trained to move almost as unseen over the lands as she could.

Whichever dragon was not in the air would rest in a massive specially made covered sled, made in the Last Hearth to a design that Bran had created after he learned that dragons needed heat on a daily basis to deal with the cold. It

was pulled by five teams of trained reindeer, who handled the cold of the journey with an ease that made Daenerys rather jealous at times.

But with the reindeer and the way the road up to the Wall had been enlarged in the months before the winter war began, they made very good time despite the number of sleds with the army now. Most of the men with her were also on horseback with several remounts and sometimes they even tied themselves into the saddle to keep going at night.

Both Daenerys and Greatjon were consumed by worry about the siege of the Wall, and they knew they had to break it as quickly as possible. That was why Greatjon hadn't objected to the army taking nearly everything edible in the Last Hearth with them and hadn't even tried to suggest he should remain behind. Instead, he had left Willowtree behind and in charge of the defenses of his seat, a sign of his trust in the man who had taken over command of the defenses when Hother was killed during the White Walker's final push to take the castle.

Five times on their trip the dragon on patrol found and destroyed parties of wights. But not once did Meera or her guards see a hint of White Walkers. Not at night, not during the day. Daenerys and Dacey felt this meant they had pulled back up to reinforce the siege on the Wall, while Greatjon felt they might not have had enough White Walkers to spread them out around the more uninhabited areas of the North.

They marched for a little over two months from the Last Hearth up to Castle Black, so much time Daenerys was now into her third trimester of her pregnancy and could no longer ride her dragons let alone a horse. Yet despite their fears, the battle to relieve Castle Black was anti-climactic.

Sitting on the driver's seat of the dragon sled, Daenerys closed her eyes, concentrating on her link to Sunfyre and Rhaegon. She watched as they wallowed into the air, then rode their minds as they rode the wind, sending them forward from the rest of the army as Greatjon, Elia and Dacey prepared the army. With so few dragonglass spears and daggers to go around, they would have to rely on fire arrows and dragonglass arrowheads rather than hand weapons to do any real damage.

Daenerys watched as Sunfyre and Rhaegon fell upon the attackers from behind, burning several dozen wights and White Walkers, swiftly creating a massive dead zone around the makeshift defenses of the beleaguered defenders. Then at her mental urging Rhaegon moved further abroad hunting any signs of movement in the surrounding area while Sunfyre circled the castle that really wasn't one.

Looking at Castle Black Daenerys shook her head, ignoring the odd look she got from the Stark drover sitting beside her.

*How odd, it really is designed more as a barracks and training area than a castle, just like Ranma said it was. That lack of defenses facing south makes sense if you fear another Night's Watch King rising, but it nearly bit us in the ass here. If they had concentrated on attacking the Wall from behind, this war would already be over, and the Wall taken. That is a very scary thought, and something we might need to think about in the future if Ranma can't find a way to secure Skagos and Bear Island.*

By the time the army was in sight of the battlefield, the battle was over and the siege broken by the dragon's sudden and seemingly unexpected assault.

When they arrived Daenerys and the army were greeted by shouts and cheers from people who looked as if they had been through sheer hell. She stared around at them, raising her hand with a faint, aloof smile, trying to let none of her shock or horror show on her face. Every man and woman there was gaunt to the point of emaciation having lived in starvation conditions, their eyes wide and desperate in their dirty, gaunt faces.

Daenerys spent a moment to order her two dragons into a manger that was currently empty, and then set several Stark men to cover the open entrances to the manger to keep in the heat before following Dacey as she and Greatjon cleared the cheering, boisterous crowd out of the way, making for the tower. Inside she was not met by Lord Commander Mormont, but Tyrion Giantslayer.

The Imp nodded at her, holding out his hand to shake the Queen's. Daenerys shook it gravely and said simply, "My army is laden with as much food as the Last Hearth could spare, along with fresh meat taken on the hunt in the past two days. You'll need to set up plan to distribute them, and order as many hunters as you can out to augment it now."

Tyrion was a ghost of the man he once was. His normal finery hung loose on his small spare frame, his face, which had once been lively and intelligent, looked almost like that of a ghost with sunken cheeks and skull almost visible through his skin. He nodded his eyes lighting up with something well beyond eagerness, an almost desperate hunger in them, his shoulders slumping in a relief so strong it was almost palpable. "You're a Seven-sent miracle Your

Majesty, I swear it's enough to make a believer out of even a sinner like me."

He laughed, and Daenerys allowed him to do so as he led them through the tower, though she noted how brittle, almost manic his mirth sounded. *Almost as manic as the cheers outside.*

Eventually Tyrion stopped laughing, shaking his head, and when he looked at her, some of the edge of hunger and exhaustion had receded in his eyes. "The entire wall was possibly another week, possibly two weeks from running out of food entirely. And for over a month that food's been mostly bowl's o' brown that reminded me all too well of what the smallfolk served to one another in the poorer portions of Kings Landing."

Daenerys nodded. "We'd feared that, which was why I decided to start marching up here after liberating the Last Hearth rather than try to link up with my husband and his army. Tell me, what's been going on here? Other than the siege, how have they been attacking you?"

"Other than keeping us from refilling our larders after an initial hard push the siege became small-scale attacks here and there for a time. Then they learned where the weakest points of the Wall was, and began to hammer them. But we responded to that and they were forced to spread out once more."

"Weaker parts?" Dacey asked skeptically from where she was walking next to Daenerys, ready to aid her if the pregnant queen overbalanced on the stairwell they were currently walking up.

Tyrion shrugged, waving his stump in the air. "The Wall is magical, not just an engineering feat but a magical marvel, ancient runes of power are embedded along its entire length, but some of them have failed over time. Those places let their creations the dragons on the Others come within contact of the Wall, where elsewhere they wouldn't be able to."

"Your losses?" Daenerys asked softly.

"As our men weakened from hunger, our losses mounted whenever they sent a serious attack in. Our losses haven't been bad, we've lost more men to famine and disease than outright attack. Still, the Night's Watch is a shell of the force it was. My own order's lost a bare two hundred men or so, and the other Houses are pretty much the same."

Tyrion frowned heavily, his eyes darkening. "The losses among the smallfolk has been much worse. We had to execute several dozen people for resorting to cannibalism, and there have been several food riots here in Castle Black, which I had to put down harshly which caused several hundred deaths among the smallfolk that retreated here."

"But they haven't reached the Wall." He gripped Daenerys' arm, his eyes feverish and his hand shaking a little. "And that is the main thing Your Majesty! They have an army out there, the size and power of which you can't believe without seeing it. If they had gotten on the Wall with even a 10th of it, they could've swept us aside. But we've held, by the Old Gods and the New, we've held, and with your arrival we'll keep on holding!"

"You have my Lord," Daenerys said with a nod. "And you and every man who served here will be rewarded accordingly. You will be paid as the Royal Army is paid per day, with an extra gold dragon for every man and woman for every week of the siege."

Later that day Dacey and Daenerys made their respects to Lord Commander Mormont while Greatjon organized another convoy back down to the Last Hearth to start bringing up coal. The old man had survived but was too weak to get out of bed at this point the lack of food hitting his old body hard. Others however had simply died of starvation, including the former maester of Castle Black, which caused Daenerys a bit of grief when she heard about it. She had so looked forward to speaking to him, and now that time was gone.

Nonetheless, more food quickly came in as hunters denuded the nearby forests of every animal they could find, with more being shared out along the Wall with the other castles quickly. The next day Daenerys began to move from one castle to another with her little ones, destroying the besieging force here and there and everywhere on the southern side of the wall, but she never let them fly further north, fearing they could be overwhelmed by the undead dragons out there.

When she first saw those things through their eyes Daenerys nearly lost control of both her dragons, even the normally well-tempered Sunfyre, when pure rage ripped through their minds. It was on an order of magnitude greater than their initial reaction to the White Walkers attacking the Last Hearth, as if that anger had been more a mental thing, this was an emotional response, a reaction to this bastardized version of their own might and glory.

Twice as she made her way along the Wall those dragons attacked the Wall, and her little ones ambushed them in turn, slaying two of the undead dragons by overwhelming the larger magical constructions before retreating back over the Wall to those areas of the Wall where their enemies could not travel. This seemed to send the White Walkers into disarray, the entire army falling back, into the Whispering Wood, only their siege engines and a few guards remaining visible.

Soon enough Daenerys and her retinue arrived at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, which was placed under Greatjon's command now the men he had brought up with from his House joining their brethren. Daenerys ensconced her dragons there, in a large stone stable, while she herself was given the commander's suite for her own use. There she waited with baited breath for news of her husband and his army and from White Harbor as well.

OOOOOO

While the siege of the Wall had broken and the war to the east was seemingly winding down, the siege of Bear Island was also coming to an end, but it looked to be an ending in favor of the attackers. The reinforcements of the White Walkers had arrived, and almost immediately began to attack the keep. Lady Maege immediately ceded the palisade around the longhouse to them, retreating in good order to the longhouse's roof.

While doing so she had fired the palisade, catching 4 of the 10 giant spiders leading the assault, as well as a few of the Giants. But the two dragons cost her dearly on the retreat, her archers simply unable to do anything about them. Even fire arrows only seemed to annoy them like so many bee stings, and their breath attacks and claws had slain several hundred men as they retreated from the palisade.

Now they circled up above the longhouse, waiting until the fire of the palisade died down. Behind that fire the remaining giant spiders served as raised platforms for their archers, which began to duel with her own at long-range. They caused few casualties however, and led a very uneasy life thanks to the ballista on the roof aiming for the spiders. Two spiders had 'died' to its fire before their riders realized the danger. This left only four of them moving around out there, serving as mobile archers platforms for their riders.

Luckily the palisade's fire wasn't going to die down anytime soon. The palisade had been made of wood, both green and not, and had been kept relatively clear of both ice and snow since Maege and her men had fallen back to it. Its feet had also been liberally lathered with fish oil.

Even so, Maege and every surviving defender knew it was only a matter of time. The dragons could attack now, but for some reason the White Walkers were keeping them back, waiting until they could support the giants and the rest of their land-based forces. She watched as several of her archers tried to fire arrows up at the dragons only for one of them to veer off avoiding them easily. The other simply ignored them, the arrows smacking into its underbelly and wings before bouncing away without any effect.

Maege shook her head, thinking of her grandchildren and the other children especially the youths who had stayed to fight, and knew that they would never see another sunrise. That her House would die here, only for all of them to be rise up once again to serve their enemy. *If I had a single dragonglass dagger to me, I'd start killing my own people right now to save them from that* she thought grimly. *Simple death is one thing, serving the White Walkers after death is entirely another.*

Shaking her head Maege ordered half of her men down below to get some rest, pulling her cloak and hood around her as she chose a corner of the longhouse's balustrades, leaning against it and closing her eyes. She idly thought about the dead drop that guarded the front door, thinking it ironic that he would probably split stand everything the White Walkers could throw at it, only for the longhouse's roof to fall above it to those damn spiders, which could easily just drop White Walkers or giants onto the roof.

Thinking about that and other, even odder thoughts mostly of what might have been Maege fell into an uneasy dream while the fires of the palisade slowly died down throughout the day and night. The dragons kept circling, and the White Walkers kept sniping, but nothing happened throughout the night save for another spider losing a leg to a ballista bolt. The sound of its screeches didn't rouse Maeve, though they did affect her dreams.

The next morning Maege was woken by a roar from the scrubland behind the wall barricade, which had burned down to nothing through the day and night. There stood the giants, the White Walkers and a few hundred or so wights, along with the remaining giant spiders which would along with the dragons be the true doom of her longhouse.

As men began to race up onto the roof all around her Maege spoke in a deceptively calm tone. "I want half of you archers with fire arrows on those spiders, maybe enough fire will deter them just like it did with the palisade. The rest, fire arrows on the giants, ignore the wights! Armsmen hack at anything you see coming over the balustrade, but

beware of elf shot!"

She stared up at the dragons, wondering what kind of plan she could make for them then shouted. "A hundred men stay with me in the center here, your job will be to aim at those dragons which come within range, maybe enough fire arrows will deter them. Aim for the head and the eyes if you can!"

That was as far as Maege got before the White Walkers attacked. The White Walker's spiders led the way, stepping over the giants and wights, while the archers on top of them fired over at the longhouse roof. Men fell screaming as the elf shot hit. Then the two dragons came in from the east and west and Maeve knew that she and her house were about to die.

Deliverance came suddenly and without warning from the south, the area of the woodland nearest the shoreline. It was segued by a bolt of lightning coming out of a clear sky to slam into the face of one of the dragons, which exploded in a blast of gore.

From the woodlands to the south of the longhouse came a shout from thousands of throats. "Honor above all, the Reach and for the king and queen! For the Iron in our blood!"

An army suddenly appeared there coming out of the woodlands and forming up in the scrubland around the longhouse with Jon Stark at their head. He raced forward with Ghost, Arya, Nymeria and surprisingly Eddric beside him howling the battle cry of House Stark. "Winter is coming!"

OOOOOO

Jon howled as the last remaining Dragon drove down towards them, while behind them Asha pointed her mighty finger again. *All jokes aside, that glove and the blessing of her god make Asha a very scary woman.*

In emphasis to his thoughts another bolt of lightning lanced out, striking one of the giant spiders. Unlike the dragon which simply lost its head, the spider's entire body imploded like a giant overheated steam kettle, slaying its crew instantly and painfully. While the snow and ice that made up its body dissipated in that broiling heat the metal shattered, flung every which way like a catapult stone breaking upon impact, sending shards of stone every which way.

Only this time it was steel not stone. Another spider collapsed to one side its legs and body riddled with the shrapnel, its crew dead along with several dozen wights and White Walkers on the ground. Even a few giants collapsed to the ground, their hearts and head gone.

Jon had no time to marvel at the efficacy of that one shot. He simply pointed one of his blades ahead shouting, "Concentrate on the giants! I'll take the dragon!"

He was answered by a laugh from Arya, who suddenly cut to one side, racing towards where the dragon was turning around to bring its breath to bear on the approaching army. "I think not brother, you just stay here on the ground where you like it, I'll handle this!"

Eddric looked at her aghast and made to follow but Jon shook his head, and Nymeria quickly cut him off. "Leave her to it lad, she's the best we've got for fighting an airborne enemy, we've got other things to attend to." Above them another lightning bolt lanced out, killing the last giant spider. But Jon knew that was the last time Asha would be able to use her magic for a while. Now the army was on its own against the rest of the White Walkers' magical forces.

The dragon flew low, strafing the side of the army with its ice breath, not heading deeper into it for the moment, while its masters analyzed the weaponry of that army, trying to determine if it had dragonglass. After a moment seeing through the dragons eyes they saw no dragonglass among the regular troops and pushed their undead minions and creations forward accordingly.

This dragon however would not have any time to benefit from that knowledge because it had flown low enough for Arya to jump up and grab one of its trailing back legs. Not being alive the dragon didn't feel it, and Arya pulled herself up until she was standing on its large back then began to stab down into its back with Fang. "Die creature!"

But Fang was no Valyrian blade, nor was it made of dragonglass. It couldn't do much damage until Arya found the thing's spine which took a few precious seconds, during which the dragon had used its breath weapon again.

As men died below them Arya hacked into the thing once more and suddenly the dragon felt **pain!** It had lost feeling in its hind legs, and it roared, turning its head around to stare at whatever had caused the pain. It saw Arya and began to open its mouth, but then Arya lunged forward, her feet leaving the dragons back as she did so, her arms at

full extension with Fang held in both hands before her. "Winter is Coming!"

The dragon reared back automatically and rather than the open mouth Fang cut into the outer edge of its maw, and up into the mouth from there. It reared back, pulling Arya with it but she refused to let go. It whiplashed from side to side trying to loosen the blade in its mouth, but Arya didn't let it. Latching her legs around the dragon's neck she ignored the scales cutting into her leggings, pushing forward with all her might even as the dragon continued to spiral upwards.

The dragon lifted up its arms, reaching at Arya and slashing at her. But Arya moved this way and that around its neck avoiding the claws, wincing as the scales cut further into her legs and the cold of the air around them began to penetrate. Even so she still thrust Fang upwards, trying to drive the blade up through the thing's mouth and into its brain.

One of the claws caught her back, and Arya grimaced in pain as it opened up the lizard lion armor. But it didn't penetrate deeply enough to cripple her and a moment later she had thrust Fang up to its hilt finally finding the thing's brain. It immediately began to fall like a rock.

Turning Arya got onto the things back as it continued to drop downwards, and she frowned, speaking to herself for a moment, her words whipped away by the wind. "Perhaps I didn't think this all the way through..." A second later the dragon crashed into the snow and earth below.

Arya was flung free, and she cursed luridly as she slammed once, twice, five times like a skipping stone over water before she came to a bumpy landing against a tree. Groaning she pushed herself up, shaking her head as she stared at the battle, and then decided that just this once, she could sit this one out and leaned back against the tree again.

With Jon and the wolves disrupting the giants, the glaives went to work both on them and on the White Walkers. Hundreds of men fell to the White Walkers, their speed and strength beyond normal men, but the glaives ability to slice off limbs, a few Valyrian blades, and Dawn proved effective enough. By the time midday arrived, the battle for Bear Island was over.

Jon leaned heavily against the carcass a downed giant, staring down at one of his twin swords both of which were covered with yellow Ichor. "Note to self, White Walker bodies may be immune to regular blades, but their eyes are not."

He looked up as cheers and shouts of "Stark, Stark! The North!" Abounded from the longhouse. He waved his twin swords in the air for a moment, which caused the roars to double in volume.

He was about to move in that direction when Arya limped were over towards him. "You think you have problems?"

She was leaning heavily on Eddic, who was bearing up easily under her slight weight. He nodded at Jon, who nodded back, raising one of his blades in a swift salute.

Dawn and Eddic had both proven their worth here. White Walkers might die from Valyrian blades, but the moment Eddic had pulled out Dawn, any White Walkers who saw it had actually recoiled in fear. Valyrian daggers and swords could kill them, but dragonglass could kill them painfully and apparently so could Dawn, only even more so. Several times during the battle Eddic had injured a White Walker only to watch as it died screaming. Even the giants weren't immune to it, and his presence had possibly kept the casualties among the regular armymen down to a somewhat manageable level.

Arya held up the broken hilt of Fang, shaking her head. "That damn dragon bit my sword in half!" Jon stared at her, then around at the battlefield as he thought about all the politics crap he'd had to deal with, and how much easier the actual battle was. Then he began to laugh and he only stopped when Arya smacked him upside the head several minutes later.

OOOOOO

About a week after leaving Skagos, Ranma and the rest of his army arrived at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. He was greeted there by fanfares and trumpets, but more importantly by both Merry and his wife, who was very visibly pregnant. Ranma carefully hugged Daenerys to him, laying his hands gently on her distended stomach, staring into her violet eyes. "Daenerys."

He packed her name with as much emotion and love as he could and Daenerys actually shivered in his arm for a moment in response while Merry laughed quietly nearby. She had gotten her own such response from Ranma weeks



back, and then again from Daenerys when she arrived here in Eastwatch a bare few days ago.

"Ranma. I missed you sorely my love." Daenerys said, and Ranma laughed nodding. She kissed the side of his face lovingly before whispering. "You got here in good time, Merry and her female aids believe that I'm four weeks at best away from giving birth."

"Then I arrived at the perfect time." Ranma said smiling. "Now, I'd actually like to get out of this wind if it's all the same to you two, I presume we've been given quarters." Later on in their room Ranma and Daenerys pulled Merry into a three-way hug and then Ranma gave both his loves a tongue lashing, toe curling kiss. He pulled back with a sigh, chuckling at how Merry looked so wobbly on her feet as Daenerys simply leaned against his shoulder breathing deeply. "I missed you both so much!"

"And we missed you, but we had to part, you are right about that back in Maidenpool. We all did more good separate then we could have done if we stayed together." Daenerys replied, before turning to make certain the door to their room had locked behind them.

Their Lords let Ranma have some time with his wife and Merry, assuming that since the queen was too far along her pregnancy for their reunion to become physical and that Merry was close enough to both that her remaining with them was simply a sign of that friendship. They exchanged tales, with Ranma being particularly interested in how Daenerys broke the siege of Castle Black and what happened afterwards with the White Walker's army while Ranma absolutely astonished his listeners when explaining what it happened on Skagos.

"I don't like it that the White Walkers pulled back so quickly." He mused. "That disturbs me."

"You mentioned several times in your own tales that they were susceptible to casualties. Could they simply realize now they'll never get past the Wall? Could they be looking for other ways around the Wall?" Daenerys asked.

"No, they're not done yet. Have we heard from Bear Island?" Ranma replied.

"We have a brief raven message from them. It appears that rather than stay in the south as our Hand, Jon came north with a significant sized force from the Reach. Including Arya, her betrothed Edric Dayne, and Margaery Tyrell, who, in Jon's words, he has an 'agreement' with." Daenerys smirked while Ranma laughed, glad that bit of conniving had played itself out as they expected.

But when Daenerys went on her voice was serious. "There were some other things he mentioned, including a mention about the Iron Islands and Asha Greyjoy coming with them, and an Archmaester Martyn who wishes to put himself at our service. Garth Hightower is leading a decent sized force of Hightower men from Deepwood Motte up to the Wall as an honor guard for him, though how quickly they'll move through the mountains and the Wolfswood, or even if they can, is anyone's guess."

"But Jon's already stated he'll remain on Bear Island with his main force against any further invasion attempts from the Frozen Shore. We'll get word to him about what you did on Skagos, and see if he and Arya can reproduce it." Daenerys finished.

"Agreed, but for now, I think we'll need to be prepared for another push here." Later that day Ranma made that point to his lords, though many of them weren't convinced. After, of course, giving his condolences to Harrion Karstark, along with Greatjon and meeting with Tyrion briefly.

"Surely my lord the White Walker's won't wish to lose any more men in a battle they can't win. If the force here on the Wall know that the siege is broken and more aid has arrived, will they really through good gold after bad? I would think with the regular physical defenses of the Wall any such idea would be insane." Tytos said.

"I don't think the White Walkers are actually insane, but they are determined. They'll come after us again, especially now the magic in the Wall has weaknesses. Has something been found about that?"

Lord Commander Mormont and Tyrion both shrugged. "We've been searching all the castles for any information we could find about them, but we haven't had any luck. None of the surviving records mention anything about them, and only Castle Black has any records at all."

Ranma frowned. "I hate to suggest this, but when I was passing through the Neck, Howland's son Jojen mentioned a vision he had. Apparently the boy's been a sort of seer most of his life, only as events piled on one another before the war his visions began to get more and more imprecise. Still, he mentioned a stone in Castle Black, and the dragons, not certain what the connection is there, but it's something at least."

"We'll concentrate our search in Castle Black, but we haven't found anything yet." Tyrion said despondently.

Ranma nodded, but went on. "Just try your best. In the meantime, I want the Royal Army spread out along the Wall, rotate as much of the defenders off as you can, get the castles that you were previously using and the lands around them built back up." Many of those castles had to be cut off entirely from the ground below, in order to keep the White Walkers from getting up onto the Wall due to too few defenders. "But I want every commander to know that at least two-thirds of his force is to be ready to defend the Wall at all times."

That very evening, as portions of the royal army were dispersed along the Wall Ranma's prediction was proven correct. In the dark of night, with the moon blocked entirely by clouds, the White Walkers made their move.

Whatever else could be said about them, the White Walkers were not stupid. They learned and they knew tactics if not strategy. And they had magic, which is what they began the battle with. The snow slowly falling from the sky suddenly became ice as a wave of fear and cold hit the Wall.

These physical representations of the White Walkers magic represented the massive thrust of their magical power hitting the weakened Wall with everything the White Walkers could muster. Knowing that their new tricks had failed to allow them around the Wall, the White Walkers had become desperate. Hundreds, thousands of magic users from the most powerful to those who had been sent forward with the army, most of whom were mere journeymen, joined together in small groups scattered everywhere along the wild North Beyond the Wall.

The runes, which had been too long without their power being renewed, began to fade here and there at this sudden and overpowering assault. Not all of them, and not all at once, those runes on either side of runes which had been damaged or lost all their powers over the years faded most quickly, while others faded slowly, if at all.

It didn't matter however, the White Walker warriors and the army had their orders. Out of the Haunted Forest came practically their entire land based army, thrown directly at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. This sudden and overwhelming attack pulled the entire remaining Royal Army up onto the wall directly in front of Eastwatch and to the west of it for three castles, along with all of the nearby forces which had already been on the wall.

The siege weapons on both sides fired, and the undead dragons began to attack wherever they could. The White Walkers wights and spiders moved forward, and men, undead, and a few White Walkers began to die.

The dragons were the most dangerous threat. They slaughtered many of the defenders, now able to land in scattered areas cleared of the magic that had kept them back. But they were met by the Wolfsworn. Theon Bowsinger killed several before they could land, and when they did, the Wolfsworn Greatjon and the others who wielded Valyrian blades met them head on.

The sight of this fearlessness rallied the men, and those with spears quickly got into the habit of rushing forward if it looked as if a dragon would actually come within their range. The undead dragons were not actually very intelligent and often would come within range of the humans' spears even if they were just trying to use their breath weapons. Many an undead dragon died that night on a dragonglass spear-tip wielded by a common-born infantryman.

The giant spiders also were a major threat now because now they were able to climb up the Wall's northern face. Wildfire and siege weapons killed hundreds of them, but those that lived to get up the Wall deposited White Walkers directly onto the Wall's massive parapet. And again it was proven that White Walkers were simply faster and stronger than normal men. They lacked the defenders organization however, and could not match the Wolfsworn, Fenris or his mate up close and personal.

Hundreds of men died in that fight, and more broke, but the Wall so attacked held thanks to the Royal army and the Wolfsworn. But this attack, for all its force, was but a feint, designed to pin the human reinforcements in place to allow the true attack to hit the humans where they were already weak.

Several dozen dragons, their backs heavily laden with White Walkers, flew up so high into the air over the Wall that they were practically out of sight from the Wall below them, then, several turns of the glass they dove down like raptors seeking prey on Castle Black.

The first sign their plan might fail came in dragonfire. Five of them died as the others scattered, fear of the fire of the real dragons which burned both undead dragon and passengers alike filling them before their masters could regain control and force them down.

Six of them turned heading toward the two living dragons, which quickly ascended into the sky, knowing as Daenerys did that height meant life in air combat. Linked to their queen's mind as they were, Sunfyre and Rhaegon danced in

the air, working in tandem a linked team their opponents could not match.

Rhaegon and Sunfyre had originally come out of the sky to the south having flown out from Castle Black the moment the drums had warned of the attack. Daenerys had originally intended to use them to both make certain there weren't any more White Walkers south of the Wall waiting for this attack, but at Ranma's behest she had kept them in the area after that rather than send them east towards the attack.

Ranma had studied the White Walkers, and knew that misdirection came naturally to them, and so would be the tactic they would use if given the chance. Every time they tried to fight humans straight up they lost, at least in this war. Misdirection, feints, and ambushes were where the White Walkers were strongest, and while the Wall made ambushes practically impossible, and they could no longer go around the Wall, misdirection was still possible.

This was why Ranma was at Castle Black too. He stood by Tyrion and Lord Commander Mormont, staring up at the dragons. *And this time fuckers, I've got enough ki to use my attacks as often as I want.* "Ready yourselves my lords. The Wall stands, tonight and every night after the Wall Stands!"

His cry was answered by a roar from several thousand throats and arrows arched into the sky at the descending dragons. Many of those arrows didn't actually have arrowheads, instead they carried small pouches of wildfire. When they hit, naturally the wildfire ignited, and the undead dragons burned.

"Direwolf's Claw!" Ranma shouted, again and again, slaying more than a dozen undead dragons and their riders before they could land on the parapet. Only nine of the undead beasts landed successfully, but that was enough to bring more than 270 White Walkers onto the Wall. Men began to die all around Ranma and he nodded at Tyrion grimly. "Good luck Imp, see you at dawn!"

"Aye your grace, I've already got a wench picked out to celebrate seeing another day!" Tyrion laughed, and he raced forward with Bronn a shadow in the dark following as Ranma made for the nearest dragon, Ice out and ready.

With the last of the dragons facing them dead, Daenerys called back Rhaegon to the small prepared stable while she, Elia, Meera, and several dozen wounded searched the castle. Daenerys, concentrating as she was on her two little ones, was next to no help, and indeed had to be led along by Meera. Daenerys had no idea why she thought they would find something Tyrion, Jeor and all their searching hadn't before, but she also knew they were in dire straits right now, and needed a miracle.

Indeed, the battle to the east had become vicious by this point. The sheer number of White Walkers and wights assailing the Wall, the spiders and their ability to climb it now, and the dragons were taking a bloody toll on the defenders.

The defenders organization and the Wolfsworn were now able to keep the White Walkers coming across from the giant spiders at bay, and indeed more of them were dying well short of the parapet now, rocks and rubble tossed over the side did for those. The defender's catapults and wildfire were also taking a horrible toll on the attacking horde.

But the mages controlling the dragons had learned to keep them away from the Wolfsworn, and were slowly learning to keep them out of spear range. Giants too had begun to appear, being up to the parapet by the giant spiders. And whenever a group of White Walkers made it onto the parapet, the death toll among the defenders was horrendous, made worse when those they slew rose to serve them.

If not for the Royal Army being there the Wall would soon have been lost, which would become a mystery in the future: why didn't the White Walkers attack en-masse earlier than this, before the full Royal Army could arrive? Many historians came up with different answers, but none could really come up with an understandable answer. The best guess was they didn't really understand or care about the humans being reinforced, or they had hoped to take the wall without a full frontal assault, since even without its magical defenses, the Wall gave its defenders an almost overwhelming advantage if they had the numbers to man it.

None would ever know the real reason: that to the White Walkers, the Wall was a mere beginning. They wanted to crush the Ancient Foe, the Starks and their allies in one battle, break their morale, and regain that feeling of fear and awe that was as important a weapon to them as the magic which allowed them to raise the dead.

That fear and awe had taken a major hit with every victory the humans had won, but it all centered on Ranma, Daenerys and the Wolfsworn. Killing them would allow the white Walkers to regain that fear and behead the human resistance at the same time. And it wasn't like those in command of the White Walkers cared about the warriors dying in their hundred this day, or about any of their creatures.

Cutting down another White Walker, Ranma grounded Ice between two stones of the parapet, leaping up onto its pommel then into the air, bringing his hands forward. "Direwolf Claw!"

Another dragon died, and Ranma remained in the air for a moment to shoot off another ki attack at an undead wyvern, for that was what Daenerys called the undead dragons having noticed how different they were from her own 'little ones', that was trying to get behind Sunfyre. He wondered where Rhaegon was, but decided Dae must have decided to rotate the dragons.

Ranma approved, since this fight looked to be a battle of attrition rather than shock. Thinking that and feeling a faint lull in the battle around him, Ranma landed by Tyrion and his second-in-command, whose name Ranma could never remember. "Tyrion, pull half of your archers back, rest them for now we'll go with resting a fourth of our men every hour for your own men, and every four for my own. Then I want two squads of ten sent out in both directions along the Wall."

Tyrion nodded, pulling out his sword from a White Walker who had been unable to dodge his attack, its leg having been impaled right under its strange black armor by another warrior's spear. "You want to know where else we're being hit? We heard the drums from the east but they could have thrown some more attacks like this elsewhere."

"Yeah, but I also want to know where the magic of the Wall is still active. If we can pull men from those sectors to where the Wall's magic is weakest, we might be able to start getting some force parity here." Tyrion didn't know the words force parity, but he understood their meaning, and simply nodded, moving off quickly.

Ranma turned to Jeor, frowning at the old man who really should have sat out this battle. Despite a few weeks of good food, the old man hadn't recovered his strength from the siege he and his men had faced, and he was gasping now, the Valyrian bastard sword Longclaw dipping down to ground itself on the stone of the parapet.

"Jeor, I want you to pull back around two-hundred of your men who're most tired, we'll keep them back for now as an emergency reserve."

"Your Majesty, that will leave you badly understrength on this section of the Wall, and the runes here are failing even now!" Jeor said, gesturing to one side. The light of the runes could be seen here and there moving along the Wall, but here in front of castle Black itself they had gone dark quickly after the drums had warned of the attack further east.

"I know, but the White Walkers seem to've realized their attempt at a feint failed, that means they'll keep pounding us with smaller forces, try to wear us down here and to the east as well, so we might need those men later on more than we do now. Besides, I hope to bring in more forces from the west if possible." Ranma had not met Val, but had heard good things about her from Tyrion and Daenerys, who had, and if her part of the Wall wasn't under attack, the wildlings could certainly be of help here.

Just then a hail of arrows soared up onto the parapet, killing several down men as the crews of four giant spiders fired up onto the parapet from where they had been unseen far below the light of the torches. The defenders, even Ranma, had concentrated so much on the undead wyverns they hadn't even seen the giant spiders climbing up the Wall until they were in position.

At the same time the dragons which had been circling and trying to draw Sunfyre away from the Wall north turned and raced down. Even while Sunfyre slipped in behind them and flamed two of them out of the sky the others landed wherever they could along the wall, disgorging White Walkers and a few of the undead giants.

"Shit! Tyrion grab your fucking archers and push them to the parapet. Patrek grab a few of your men and start heaving rubble over the side. Lord Jeor, looks like...Jeor?" Ranma frowned turning back to Jeor and stopped speaking as he saw the Old Bear, his body slumped around an arrow that had caught him in the gorget, punching through his armor.

As the battle raged outside, Daenerys took a moment to come out of her trance partway, having just ordered Sunfyre to switch off with Rhaegon. Rhaegon had far better combat instincts than Sunfyre, and she had become an expert at riding the rage and fury both dragons felt fighting the White Walkers and their creations.

Looking around she shook her head at Meera and Elia and the men of House Cerwyn, who had served under Kyle Conton before their injuries took them off the Wall. "We're running out of time I think. Whatever magical attack the White Walkers have used is spreading. If the magic of the Wall falls completely, the White Walkers have the forces to spread us thin, then break us."

The queen who had faced more battles than any woman of her line had ever faced before shivered, her hands going

to her belly and the life within. "We could very well lose this war unless we find this damn stone Jojen Reed saw in his so-called visions."

Meera nodded while the men grumbled and muttered among themselves. Most of them were missing limbs, or had fared even worse than most under the siege conditions, and so couldn't really do much in combat, but even so being sidelined like this was hard for all of them.

Elia watched them all carefully, very wary about three women being alone with so many men, regardless of how honorable they were supposed to be or the ladies station.

But Meera had her mind on other things, staring around at the deep basement the group had been trying to explore, with somewhat limited success. "You know, I think we might have been going about this the wrong way." As Daenerys raised an eyebrow the younger girl went on. "I mean, Ranna said Jojen's vision showed one of your dragons breathing on the stone? Well, can your picture even Sunfyre being able to fit down here, even if you could convince them to try?"

"I can't believe I didn't think of that." Daenerys scowled angry at herself, not Meera. "So what we're looking for is either part of the keep itself, somewhere high up, or on the first floor of the basement area."

Elia frowned, turning back to the conversation. "Someplace hidden in plain sight perhaps? Yet I have no idea where that would be."

"The King's Tower." Daenerys said, definitively. "It makes the most sense, either there or in the Lord Commander's tower, but that tower's been in use for decades, the King's Tower hasn't been. Even when I arrived I didn't move into it, though I could have. We'll restart the search there."

Meera and Elia both nodded, and raced out of the vaults through the Shieldhall and out into the snow covered ground, using the tunnels dug through the snow to move through the courtyard. They had to wait until the men with them broke open the door which was frozen solid. The gate and lock had also rusted in the centuries since the tower had last been used.

Eventually, as the battle on the wall became more desperate however they broke through. The men spread out quickly, while the three women stayed together, heading up to the top. They found their way blocked at several points, but eventually they were able to get up to the small chamber that visiting kings must have used to hold court in.

A large oaken chair sat on a small dais at the end facing several large murder holes, set rather closer together than most Daenerys had seen before, while the frayed remains of a carpet could still be seen on the ground covering the area between the doorway and the 'throne.' Several piles of dust and remains could be seen here and there along the walls on either side showing where four large tapestries had previously hung.

On the hard stone of the walls were carved several direwolves and dragons, along with lions, roses, and other heraldic symbols taken from the powerful Houses of Westeros. The carvings had survived the centuries far better than the rest of the finery in the room had, though given how many centuries it had been Daenerys thought that should have been obvious.

"It's here," Daenerys murmured. "Somewhere in this room, I just know it! Spread out, look for any kind of stone that seems out of place."

Meera shook her head moving forward quickly. "Remember what Elia said, hiding in plain sight?" She pushed the oaken throne backwards, and underneath it was a large stone of purest black, so black it seemed to suck at the torches she, Elia and the few men who had followed them held.

"That's it then," Daenerys murmured, closing her eyes. "I think those murder holes are large enough, so..." She reached out for Sunfyre, leaving Rhaegon to his own devices entirely for now.

The larger of her two dragons was having fun, dancing and slashing in and out of the undead wyverns. His fire and mobility gave Rhaegon an edge over their numbers, while his greater strength allowed him to both retain and regain the height advantage that was life or death in midair combat. None of the undead wyverns could match his ability to come out of dives or move as fast.

Sunfyre came out of the shed, and instead of joining the battle high up over the looming Wall made for the far smaller Royal Tower. His claws allowed him to actually hang onto the side of the tower as he put an eye to one of the murder

holes. Seeing Daenerys inside, he stared at the large black stone she gestured at. Then he waited while Daenerys, unwilling to risk her unborn child to dragonfire, joined Meera, Elia and their men in the hallway. Once they were all in place, Sunfyre breathed in deeply then let loose a torrent of fire through the murder hole he had previously been looking through.

The fire seared through the murder hole and across the small throne room, impacting the black stone and moving over it, but something odd happened. Instead of hitting and splashing as fire normally would when impacting stone, the fire that actually hit the stone vanished, sucked into the black stone. Then runes of red, gold and blue began to appear all along the stone, intertwining and then disappearing into the stone of the tower, which, though no one had ever thought about it for centuries, backed up against the Wall.

In the battle more than one White Walker warrior frowned, feeling something on the edge of their senses. But they didn't have the training necessary to understand what it was. Nor did they or their opponents, pressed hard now as more giants were brought up by the monstrous spiders, notice how the blood of those who had fallen began to be somehow sucked into the cracks between the stones of the Wall.

But they definitely noticed when the wards, which had been losing power as the magical pressure on them continued, began to flare back into life. The warriors cried out and those that could began to retreat, while those that could not, died. All along the Wall the wards reactivated slowly but surely. Here and there those runes that had been damaged flared up darkly, not complete by any means but still powerful enough to join the chain of the magical defense.

Powered and renewed by the blood of those who defended it and the fire of the dragons they flared up for those with eyes to see, cutting off the White Walkers influence from further north. Those surviving wights south of the Wall collapsed where they stood, dead for real this time. Yet they died without pain, the magic in them simply cutting off, like those undead creations stuck on the Wall. Not so the White Walkers caught on the Wall. The White Walkers died where they stood, screaming in anguish until they collapsed into fine ash.

The White Walkers lords were not fools. They stared through the eyes of their fellows nearest the Wall, and seeing that brimming energy decided. At some unseen signal the entire army began to retreat from the Wall, leaving behind their dead and undead creatures alike.

Ranma saw this, and laughed loud and long, raising Ice high in the air. All around him the men began to cheer, as they realized that the Winter War was all finally over.

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Of course, life was never as clean as that. Plans had to be made for the Royal family to head back to Winterfell and the disbursement of the army. With the Wall once more empowered as it was, it no longer needed as large a defensive force. "I think we've earned a few months of simple family time." Ranma said, later that evening, as he held his wife to him in their giant bed in Castle Black.

Her belly was such that she could only sleep on her back, and even that was rather uncomfortable, but there was nothing wrong with her mind even so. "I think everyone else in the army could use the same my love. I've already sent orders to Eastwatch and Ser Davos to prepare the Royal Navy. They'll be taking the Vale Lords and the Riverlands lords' home. The Vale Lords have proven themselves in this war, and..."

"And the Riverlands forces have been almost as true to us and our cause as the northern forces. And have much further to travel to go home." Ranma finished. "But we'll retain the Dornish and Reach forces on the Wall and Bear Island. Just in case, and they have the most to prove I feel. Though with Jeor gone Tyrion will be in charge of the Wall's defenses.

Bear Island though is still vulnerable until we hear that my siblings have been able to somehow do what I did on Skagos there. We should also leave the Wolfsworn, or at least those Wolfsworn who aren't needed at home by their wives. Roger needs something to do after the death of his wife, and Hathar can stay with him, though Smalljon will have to go home with his father to help rebuild their lands."

Roger's wildling wife had died in the final few moments of the battle on the Wall, unwilling to retreat despite having been wounded early on. Roger was crushed by it, and desperately needed something important to concentrate on. He was also a good organizer and tracker, and would serve the defenders here well.

"Yes, House Umber, Mormont and House Karstark. I heard you rewarded House Karstark for their loyalty, and I know your mother plans to arrange a marriage between a Mormont girl and Bran, just like Rickon and Katarina Cerwyn. But we'll have to think of something to do for House Umber."

"Not really," he said with a shake of his head. "Give them control of the Long Knife and the canal, give them a percentage of the taxes from the goods traveling down it, and a new title, defender of the Gift say, and House Umber will be happy."

"And of course paying for the repairs to their seat," Daenerys murmured, nuzzling into his shoulder.

The door opened then and Merry walked in, smiling at the two of them before closing the door behind her and quickly moving to the bed. Getting underneath the covers she began to pull off her clothing one piece at a time tossing them to the floor by the bed, laughing as she noticed Ranma's rising excitement. "You two have been thinking somber thoughts for too long, I think it's time you concentrated on something more important don't you?"

Daenerys smiled at the two of them, she was too far along to join in of course, but that didn't mean she wouldn't like to watch the two of them. "I quite agree my love."

Later that night Ranma slept with his two ladies asleep against his shoulders, smiling. The Winter War had ended, humanity was victorious and so lived on, and a new life was on the way for the new royal house.

There would be other songs to sing of the royal family and their allies, other problems, other wars. Not only against the White Walkers, but Essos as well, since winter would soon hit that continent as well, and just because Skagos and Bear Island were protected from the White Walkers new and surprising tactics of using icebergs, did not mean that Essos was. And Westeros of course had other issues, other problems that would rear their heads occasionally.

But for now, as Ranma said, they had won some time for themselves and for their families. And really, what else could anyone ask for?

### **The End**

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Woot. Just woot. I had a devil of a time coming up with ways to make all the battles in this chapter different enough to not make them the equivalent of rinse/repeat. I realize that I could have gone into detail, put in a lot more scenes here and there of character interaction or about logistics or about travel in winter or any number of things. But I wanted to show war and how this war was different from the ones Ranma and the others fought before, and how alike it was in other ways and felt that I had done enough character interactions before this chapter.

I also know some people will think I should keep going, showing the rest of winter, the problems it causes, the news of the Golden Tooth running out of gold, the Essossi issues, the last Greyjoy brother being hunted down like a dog and possibly his horrible, horrible death. But I am just burned out on this world. Too much war/politics is not a good thing, and this, when the main reason Ranma was brought to this world has been dealt with, was the right place to stop. And indeed this was where I wanted to end it when I began this story, before I realized how many other plots I'd have to introduce over time. I hope you all enjoyed it even if this ending doesn't tie things up in a pretty bow.